

Citizens evacuated from Sudan arrive in Jeddah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has evacuated its citizens from strife-torn Sudan in a Saudi Arabian ship that reached Jeddah on Wednesday.

Mass evacuation of foreign civilians from Sudan continued on Wednesday - the second day of a ceasefire agreed between the country's warring military factions.

The latest US-brokered ceasefire in Sudan has allowed several countries to evacuate their nationals.

A statement issued by the Omani consulate in Jeddah said, 'Deputy Consul General Saif al Amri and First Secretary Awad Raafit received some Omani families and Sudanese residents of the sultanate, who arrived in Jeddah after they were evacuated from Sudan.'

According to the Saudi foreign ministry, a ship carrying nearly 1,700 civilians from more than 50 countries fleeing violence in Sudan docked in Jeddah, as part of the largest evacuation effort by the kingdom so far.

The evacuees were 'transported by one of Saudi Arabia's ships, and the kingdom was keen to provide all the basic needs of



'Deputy Consul General Saif al Amri and First Secretary Awad Raafit received some Omani families and Sudanese residents of the sultanate, who arrived in Jeddah after they were evacuated from Sudan'

foreign nationals in preparation for their departure', the ministry said in a statement.

The conflict - which began on April 15 - arose from a bitter power struggle between the leaders of Sudan's regular army and a rival paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

A French chartered flight arrived in Paris Charles-de-Gaulle airport on Wednesday morning with 245 people aboard.

Britain said on Wednesday it had evacuated between 200 to 300 citizens as part of an 'extensive operation'.

Germany said it had ended its

evacuation operations, with over 700 people flown out of the country.

The latest 72-hour ceasefire began at midnight on Monday and, while fragile, appeared to be holding. Volker Perthes, the UN special envoy to Sudan, said the ceasefire is still being observed in some parts of the country.

But witnesses late on Tuesday reported gunfire and explosions in Khartoum and the nearby town of Omdurman.

"The pause was not fully upheld, with attacks on headquarters, attempts to gain ground, air

strikes, and explosions in different areas of the capital," Perthes told the Security Council.

"There is yet no unequivocal sign that either is ready to seriously negotiate, suggesting that both think that securing a military victory over the other is possible."

Security fears were compounded when the World Health Organization warned on Tuesday of a 'huge biological risk' after fighters occupied a Khartoum laboratory holding samples of cholera, measles, polio and other infectious diseases.

Naabi treks to North Pole, scales its highest peak

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani adventurer Suleiman bin Hamoud al Naabi has realised his dream of the Explorer's Grand Slam - climbing the world's seven highest peaks and trekking to the North and South poles.

The latest of his feats in completing the Explorer's Grand Slam - reaching the North Pole - was accomplished on April 12. However, he didn't stop there and went on to climb the highest mountain in the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic - Mount Newtontoppen - which is 1,713m above sea level.

Speaking to Muscat Daily from Oslo, Norway Naabi said, "I managed to reach the North Pole on April 12. I completed the trip by climbing Mount Newtontoppen on April 23. I raised the picture of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the flag of the sultanate on the highest peak of the North Pole."

About the challenges he faced, Naabi said adjusting to low temperatures "dropping to -40°C is one thing, but tackling sudden snowfall accompanied by strong winds took the difficulty to extreme levels".

The conditions often led to hazy vision, requiring special glasses covering the entire face.



He described this as one of the most difficult aspects of this feat. He also faced the imminent danger of encountering polar bears and arctic wolves. "This is one of the toughest challenges possible for a person to test mental and physical abilities."

The Explorer's Grand Slam comprises climbing the seven highest peaks (Everest, Aconcagua, Denali, Kilimanjaro, Elbrus, Vinson, and Puncak Jaya or Kosciuszko) on every continent and reaching the two poles.

Besides the seven summits, Naabi has also scaled the 4,807.81m Mount Blanc in France, the highest mountain in the Alps and western Europe.

"I have achieved this feat to prove to the world that Omanis are capable of great achievements and overcoming challenges, in addition to sending a message to the world that Oman is a country of peace."

Municipality plans summer festival

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following the success of festivals like Muscat Nights and Muscat Eats, Muscat Municipality is planning to hold a month-long summer fiesta starting June 28.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, a Muscat Municipality official said, "The municipality will hold a series of summer events from June 28 to July 28. The festival aims to stimulate commercial movement, create recreational activities for families and children, and provide job opportunities."

With the festival, the municipality also wants to promote domestic tourism and support local industries by providing a space for social and cultural interaction, the official stated.

As a first step, the municipality has floated tenders inviting bids from interested parties for various events and entertainment activities, including decoration and designing of the festival site. "The events will be

focused on children and families."

According to the official, the festival site has not been finalised. "One site will be chosen from among Azaiba Beach, North al Hail or Sur al Hadid in Seeb."

The summer festival is intended to encourage people to visit beaches and be close to nature, he added. "Our aim is to give an incentive to people to come out from their homes and engage in recreational activities on beaches. We are hoping that people will throng the venue and enjoy the games and other activities planned for the event."

About the municipality's work, he said the civic body is exerting efforts to provide avenues for public entertainment and to support domestic tourism.

The municipality held Muscat Festival, re-branded as Muscat Nights, after a gap of three years from January 19 to February 4, held at Qurum Park, Naseem Garden, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and Oman Automobile Association.

MUSANDAM ZIP LINE CERTIFIED BY GUINNESS AS LONGEST OVER WATER



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Operators of Oman Adventure Centre have stated that its 1,800m zip line has been officially certified by Guinness World Records as the longest zip wire over water.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism announced on Wednesday that the Oman Adventure Centre and the zip line are now officially open.

Riders travel 1,800m from Jebel Fitt reaching speeds of up to 80kmph. The ride ends on a platform connected to Atana Khasab Hotel.

The zip line offers breathtaking views of Khor Qadi and the Mokhi area along the coast of Khasab, providing tourists a truly unique experience that seamlessly combines adventure and exploration. Cost of a single ride is RO18 and RO25 for two..

The ministry allocated the land and budget for the zip line project, which was implemented by Omran in partnership with Musandam Governor's Office.

Iran appreciates Oman's constructive role in lifting sanctions

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian appreciated Oman's role in lifting sanctions on Iran, describing it as "constructive and fruitful".

In a statement to ONA, he said that the sultanate has serious initiatives for the Iranian nuclear deal that will contribute to returning to the negotiations.

Amir-Abdollahian made the remarks in his meeting with Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi,



Foreign Minister, in Muscat, on Tuesday night.

During the meeting, they discussed several issues on enhancing cooperation between the two countries, in addition to regional and international issues, especially Palestine, the Yemeni-Yemeni reconciliation, and the situation in Sudan.

"We discussed bilateral cooperation, and our shared commitment to fostering regional security, stability and constructive dialogue among all countries," Sayyid Badr tweeted.

Amir-Abdollahian informed that following the visit of Iranian President Dr Ebrahim Raisi to Muscat last year, relations between the two countries have further grown.

According to news agency IRNA, Amir-Abdollahian said that the two sides agreed to hold the 20th Joint Economic Committee meeting soon.

The two ministers also discussed the date of His Majesty Haitham bin Tarik's visit to Iran based on an official invitation extended by President Raisi.

12 people rescued from wadis in Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Four people were rescued in South Sharqiyah on Tuesday night and two in North Sharqiyah on Wednesday afternoon during heavy rains caused by a low-pressure trough, which is likely to continue to affect the country's weather till the weekend.

The weather is expected to be cloudy in most governorates, the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre stated.



On Wednesday night, the Department of Civil Defence and Ambulance in South Sharqiyah stated, 'Three vehicles carrying nine people were washed away in Wadi al Batha in Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, of which six have been rescued. Search is on for the others.'

MATT DAMON BEN AFFLECK JASON BATEMAN MARLON WAYANS

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Project launched to protect Qurum beach from erosion

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality is implementing slope protection works at Al Qurum Al Sarooj in Muscat in efforts to protect the beach from erosion.

The beach along Grand Hyatt Muscat bore the brunt of Cyclone Shaheen in October 2021, when large chunks of grass pavements were swept away. Although earth was dumped on the slopes after the cyclone, waves continue to slowly erode the loose embankment.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality said, 'The municipality is implementing a coastal erosion protection project to safeguard the slopes at Al Qurum Al Sarooj beach in the wilayat of Bausher, over a length of 1,400m, using metal panels, reinforced concrete and gravel lined with cement. A 1.5km walkway will also be constructed besides the reinforced stretch.'

The work is expected to be completed by the end of 2023, it stated.

Musallam al Shukairi, a resident of Shatti al Qurum, writing to *Muscat Daily* following erosion of beaches in his area, said that there was an attempt to fill the eroded land with soil to prevent further deterioration, but it did not help much. "There is urgent need to refill lost soil and construct a solid pavement or wave breakers to prevent further soil erosion."



'At the national scale, nearly 400sqkm of land area is projected to be inundated under the smallest sea level rise scenario, while under the highest SLR scenario, over 900sqkm will be potentially inundated'

He also said that there was need of proper steps for people to access the beach instead of the current situation "where people walk to the beach from anywhere, resulting in more soil

erosion".

Rising sea levels create stress not only on the physical coastline, but also on coastal ecosystems. Saltwater intrusions lead to contamination of freshwater

aquifers, many of which sustain municipal and agricultural water supplies and natural ecosystems.

A study conducted by Sultan Qaboos University in 2014 - titled 'GIS-based framework for the simulation of the impacts of sea level rise and coastal flooding on Oman' - found that the sultanate is highly vulnerable to climate change-induced sea level rise (SLR).

'At the national scale, nearly 400sqkm of land area is projected to be inundated under the smallest SLR scenario, while

under the highest SLR scenario, over 900sqkm will be potentially inundated. An assessment of the vulnerability of productive land use showed that the governorates of Batinah and Muscat are the most vulnerable under all SLR scenarios,' the study stated.

The Environment Authority is currently coordinating with concerned authorities to develop solutions, including wave breakers and depositing sand on the beaches undergoing rapid erosion.



MoL announces over 3,000 job rotation opportunities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has announced that employees in government units can now start applying for 3,233 job rotation opportunities.

Job rotation is a management strategy in which employees are shifted at regular intervals on assignments between departments to make them versatile within an organisation. It helps in testing employee skills to assign them tasks in line with their competencies as well as reduces monotony of job.

MoL stated that the initiative

has several benefits, including improving the quality of government services by raising efficiency of human capital, achieving administrative reforms, preparing empowered leaders, and raising institutional performance.

A statement issued by MoL said that the job rotation scheme is open till May 6 for workers in government units through the Ejada platform.

'Dear Employee, you must complete your profile and include an updated CV in order to be able to apply for the offered opportunities. For support and assistance, log on to www.ejada.om'

Oman to participate in ATM 2023

Muscat - The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, will take part in Arabian Travel Market (ATM) from May 1 to 4 in Dubai.

Twenty establishments from Oman related to the tourism sector will participate in the event.

The sultanate's participation will focus on introducing its tourism attractions and showcasing its facilities.

Oman will have a dedicated area of 250sqm at ATM 2023, including a tourism information centre, a hospitality tent and an exhibition of traditional crafts. The 20 Omani tourism establishments at the event will have separate exhibition booths.

ATM 2023 will highlight the future of sustainable tourism in line with the event's theme of 'Working towards net zero.'

480 Dhofar SMEs benefit from tourism initiatives

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Over 480 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) benefited from tourism initiatives in Dhofar in 2022.

A statement issued by Dhofar Municipality said that the total value of contracts awarded to these SMEs in 2022 was RO3.5mn, signaling the significant impact of the initiatives on the local economy.

The municipality also offered lease and rental contracts for 84 sites on its land, with 51 sites being allocated through usufruct contracts and 33 sites through rental contracts.

Of the 84 sites, 60 are located in the Uptown Salalah project and ten in the Muqshin Rest Area. In addition, the Nawafeth site in the Atteen plain was allocated, equipped and prepared with all operational requirements so that SMEs registered with the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) could showcase their



products and provide their services to visitors.

Dhofar Municipality, in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, appointed nearly 500 young men and women on temporary as well as permanent work contracts, and prepared temporary sites for entrepreneurs.

The municipality confirmed that SMEs set up several traditional and non-traditional activities at these locations, including retail activities, amusement centres and games, cafes and busi-

nesses offering digital solutions and modern technologies.

SMEs have stood out in the last few years as the key driver behind economic development in the sultanate with the sector contributing about 25 per cent or RO8bn to the GDP, according to ASMED.

The latest statistics show that the total number of SMEs registered in the country till September 2022 was 210,877, while the number of SMEs registered with the ASMED till December 2022 was 104,141.

Municipality calls on residents, citizens to combat mosquito menace

Muscat - Muscat Municipality has urged citizens and residents to cooperate with fieldwork teams spraying insecticides in homes and residential neighbourhoods to prevent the spread of mosquitoes.

Muscat Municipality launched a vector control campaign recently with an aim to combat mosquitoes, creating a healthier environment for citizens and residents, in several parts of Muscat.

A statement issued by the municipality on Wednesday said, 'Muscat Municipality urges citizens and residents to cooperate with fieldwork teams and allow them to investigate breeding sites of mosquitoes.'

'We continue our mosquito control campaigns targeting breeding sites, and call on members of the community to adopt hygienic practices to eliminate breeding environments.'

Mosquitoes are usually found in industrial areas and in places where water collects due to improper drainage.

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TAKAFUL OMAN INSURANCE SAOG

The Directors' Report to the Shareholders on condensed consolidated interim financial information

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors and myself, I am pleased to present the financial results of Takaful Oman Insurance Company SAOG for its first quarter ended March 31, 2023. The company has continued its journey of recovery from the legacy losses and I am happy to inform you that the participants' fund has reported a surplus of RO 51,565. In addition, the company has also reported a profit of RO 144,038 in the shareholders' fund. The Company has established a business strategy that continues in implementing to improve & carry the company into growth.

Macro Economics Outlook

Global economic activity is experiencing a broad-based and sharper than expected slowdown, with inflation higher than seen in several decades. The cost-of-living crisis tightened financial conditions in most regions. In contrast, in Oman, the economy is projected to continue its recovery and strengthen over the medium term, driven by robust energy prices, expansion of oil and gas production, and wide-ranging structural reforms. The higher oil prices and the government's fiscal reforms have paid back, and the country's fiscal position has improved. The sultanate reported a budget surplus of RO1.146bn for 2022. The sultanate's sovereign credit ratings were upgraded twice by S&P to BB+ in 2022.

The outlook for Oman's economy for the year 2023 is promising with an expected growth of real GDP by 4.3 percent.

Performance in Brief

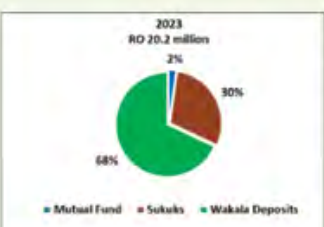
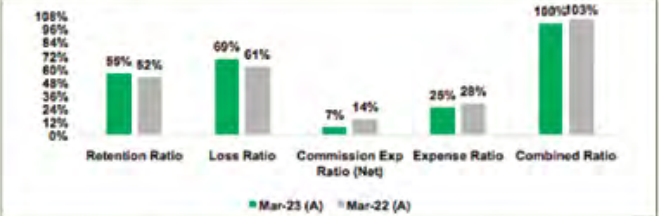
Participants Funds

The participant funds have reported a surplus of RO 51,565 for the quarter ended March 31, 2023. During the three months period ended March 31, 2023, the Company's top line has slightly contracted by 1% and reported Gross written contributions of RO 9.8 million (2022: 9.9 million). For the quarter ended March 31, 2023, General & Family Takaful was the main contributor to the top line by 26% & 50% respectively. The health takaful portfolio shrank by 48% in line with the business strategy of rejecting the loss-making portfolios. The Company has recorded a growth of 6% in the Net written contributions while retention ratios have increased to 55% (2022: 52%) during the period. Overall, the participants' fund registered an impressive turnaround by posting a surplus of RO 51,565 from takaful operations as compared to a deficit of RO 56,777 in the prior period.

Shareholders' Fund

The Shareholders' fund top line is driven by the Wakala fees. During the three months period ended March 31, 2023, the shareholders' fund recorded Wakala fees of RO 1.38 million (2022: 1.46 million), registering a decline of 11% on the backdrop of the reduction of Wakala fees rate w.e.f. February 11, 2022, from 18% to 13% following compliance with CMA guidelines. The General & Admin expenses on an absolute basis increased by 2%, while Expense Ratios improved to 25% from 28% as compared to the prior period. The Shareholders' fund has reported a profit after finance cost, tax & OCI of RO 152,056 (2022: RO 90,314). Furthermore, EPS stands at RO 0.0006 (2022: EPS RO 0.0005). It merits highlighting that the Company has improved all key financial metrics.

Financial Ratios:



Investment Position & Performance:

The Company has a sound and stable investment portfolio of RO 20.2 million. 68% of the total combined investment portfolio is placed as Bank deposits with reputed, dedicated Islamic banks and Islamic windows of commercial banks. The Company has generated an investment income of RO 0.21 million from the Shareholders' fund and 0.07 million from the Participants' fund in 2023. The total investment income increased to RO 0.28 million in 2023 compared to RO 0.17 million in 2022, thereby registering an increase of 67% YoY. There has been an increase in the Sukuk portfolio allocation over the periods, which reflects the Company's strategy to add high-quality Sukuk to the investment portfolio, which will help augment the investment income.

Changes in the Board Composition

After the completion of the tenure by the previous board, an election happened during the annual general meeting of the company on March 29, 2023. During the election, the 3 new board members have been elected as follows:

- Mr. Khalid Ahmed Al Huthi
- Mr. Al Saif Nauth Al Musai
- Mr. Waleed Nasser Sulaiman Al Yousif

On behalf of the board of directors, I would like to thank the outgoing board members for their dedication and contribution to the company.

Shariah Compliance is the topmost priority

Takaful Oman Insurance has shown a commitment to being transparent and accountable in enhancing its portfolio while adhering to the Shariah law.

The Shariah Supervisory Committee (SSC) perform the supervisory role to make sure that the company operation is in compliance with Islamic Shariah rule and principle. The Financial statements for the period ended March 31, 2023, are reviewed and approved by Shariah Supervisory Committee.

High Performing Leadership Team with Excellent Omatisation Ratio

Employees are the backbone of any organization. To achieve sustainable & profitable growth an experienced and motivated team is imperative. The company has continued its journey, which was started in 2021, to develop a leadership team having the capability to turn around the company.

Transparency, high ethical and moral standards, diversity, and equal opportunity are the fundamental pillars of HR policy. The company provides a healthy working environment, to utilize the best potential of the employees. In line with government policy, the company provides training and learning opportunities in the insurance sector to the youth.

Takaful Oman is proud to achieve over and above the Omatisation ratio requirement at each level of management. The overall Omatisation ratio is 85% as against the required ratio of 75%. The company staff is the main source of achievement. In order for the company to stay competitive in the industry, it continues to invest in the training and development of its human resources.

Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG)

At Takaful Oman Insurance SAOG, we are committed to conducting our business in a socially responsible and sustainable manner. Our ESG charter outlines our commitment to ethical and responsible business practices, community development, environmental protection, employee engagement, stakeholder engagement, and ESG integration. The Company believes that our CSR activities and ESG considerations will not only benefit society and the environment but will also contribute to long-term success as a responsible business.

Acknowledgement:

The Board wishes to sincerely thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said for his exceptional leadership and vision.

The Board would like to express their deep appreciation to the shareholders who have shown continued confidence in the Company and its management team. They also like to thank the Capital Markets Authority (CMA), Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), the Re-Takaful operators, and all the Participants for their continued guidance and support.

In addition, The Board wishes to record their sincere appreciation and gratitude for the commitment, dedication, and innovative thinking put in by every member of our Takaful Oman family, with complete confidence that they will continue to do so.

On behalf of the Board of Directors
Mr. Sulaiman Hamed Hamed Al Harthi
Chairman

Condensed consolidated interim statement of shareholders' comprehensive income for the period ended 31 March 2023 (Unaudited)

	2023 RO	2022 RO
Wakala fees income	1,302,434	1,463,094
Investment income	207,385	128,744
Mudarabah Share	35,747	-
	<u>1,545,566</u>	<u>1,591,838</u>
General and administrative expenses	(917,587)	(903,767)
Ijarah financing expenses	(16,492)	(14,170)
Wakala financing expenses	(82,264)	(81,144)
Policy Acquisition costs	(385,185)	(544,345)

Profit before taxation	144,038	48,412
Taxation	-	1,255

Profit after taxation	144,038	49,667
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Note: The complete accounts will be delivered or sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them, in either Arabic or English as requested, within seven days of receipt of the request. Requests to be sent to the following address:

Takaful Oman Insurance SAOG,
P.O. BOX 207, Postal Code 134, Bareeq Al Shatti, Sultanate of Oman
Tel.: 00968 22303000, Fax: 00968 24699511

Condensed consolidated interim statement of financial position as at 31 March 2023 (Unaudited)

	Shareholders RO	General Takaful RO	Participants 2023 Family Takaful RO	Total RO
ASSETS				
Cash and bank balances	170,902	1,839,449	1,163,384	3,002,833
Financial asset at fair value through equity	458,852	-	-	-
Receivable from participants' fund	4,398,701	-	-	-
Takaful balance receivables	-	5,429,590	3,183,734	8,613,324
Retakaful balance receivables	-	5,184,591	886,196	6,070,787
Other receivables and prepayments	1,697,653	534,306	112,148	646,454
Retakaful contract assets	-	3,119,457	10,960,325	14,079,782
Deferred policy acquisition costs	630,592	-	-	-
Wakala bank deposits	10,769,000	1,500,000	1,500,000	3,000,000
Investment carried at amortised cost	3,500,000	-	2,490,565	2,490,565
Property and equipment	547,941	-	-	-
Right of use assets	1,588,122	-	-	-
Intangible assets	385,075	-	-	-
Deferred tax assets	1,305,172	-	-	-
Total assets	25,452,010	17,607,393	20,296,352	37,903,745
Liabilities				
Takaful contract liabilities	-	16,076,915	14,023,872	30,100,787
Payable to shareholders' fund	-	872,625	3,526,077	4,398,702
Payable to Retakaful	-	249,773	5,938,792	6,188,565
Accounts and other payables	511,107	5,139,756	975,737	6,115,493
Wakala financing	5,727,010	-	-	-
Deferred income from retakaful contracts	-	18,834	-	18,834
Employees' end of service benefits	64,562	-	-	-
Ijarah liabilities	975,012	-	-	-
Total liabilities	7,277,691	22,357,903	24,464,478	46,822,381
Participants' fund				
Deficit in participant's fund	-	(4,750,510)	(4,168,126)	(8,918,636)
Equity				
Capital and reserves				
Share capital	16,000,000	-	-	-
Legal reserve	1,436,739	-	-	-
Investment fair value reserve	27,221	-	-	-
Retained earnings	(5,289,640)	-	-	-
Total equity attributable to Shareholders	12,174,320			
Perpetual Sukuk eligible as additional capital	6,000,000	-	-	-
Shareholders' equity	18,174,320			
Total liabilities, participants' fund and equity	25,452,010	17,607,393	20,296,352	37,903,745
Net assets per share attributable to shareholders	0.0487			

Consolidated statement of financial position as at 31 December 2022 (Audited)

	Shareholders RO	General Takaful RO	Participants 2022 Family Takaful RO	Total RO
ASSETS				
Cash and bank balances	440,756	1,861,088	1,288,383	3,149,471
Financial asset at fair value through equity	450,835	-	-	-
Receivable from participants' fund	4,638,835	-	-	-
Takaful balance receivables	-	4,584,655	3,106,698	7,691,353
Retakaful balance receivables	-	5,858,014	1,202,434	7,060,448
Other receivables and prepayments	1,656,233	514,842	140,282	655,124
Retakaful contract assets	-	9,859,987	9,834,967	19,694,954
Deferred policy acquisition costs	455,328	-	-	-
Wakala bank deposits	10,769,000	1,500,000	1,500,000	3,000,000
Investment carried at amortised cost	3,500,000	-	2,464,107	2,464,107
Property and equipment	582,599	-	-	-
Right of use assets	1,621,737	-	-	-
Intangible assets	372,081	-	-	-
Deferred tax asset	1,305,172	-	-	-
Total assets	25,792,576	24,178,586	19,536,871	43,715,457
LIABILITIES, PARTICIPANTS' FUND AND EQUITY				
Liabilities				
Takaful contract liabilities	-	21,018,773	12,415,272	33,434,045
Payable to shareholders' fund	-	1,043,154	3,595,681	4,638,835
Payable to Retakaful	-	2,496,234	5,853,105	8,349,339
Accounts and other payables	743,444	4,564,894	1,656,478	6,221,372
Wakala financing	5,644,746	-	-	-
Deferred income from retakaful contracts	-	41,727	340	42,067
Employees' end of service benefits	49,749	-	-	-
Ijarah liabilities	1,077,373	-	-	-
Total liabilities	7,515,312	29,164,782	23,520,876	52,685,658
Participants' fund				
Deficit in participant's fund	-	(4,986,196)	(3,984,005)	(8,970,201)
Equity				
Capital and reserves				
Share capital	16,000,000	-	-	-
Legal reserve	1,436,739	-	-	-
Investment fair value reserve	19,203	-	-	-
Retained earnings	(5,178,678)	-	-	-
Total equity attributable to Shareholders	12,277,264			
Perpetual Sukuk eligible as additional capital	6,000,000	-	-	-
Shareholders' equity	18,277,264			
Total liabilities, participants' fund and equity	25,792,576	24,178,586	19,536,871	43,715,457
Net assets per share attributable to shareholders	0.049			

Condensed consolidated interim statement of participants' revenues and expenses for the period ended 31 March 2023(Unaudited)

	General Takaful RO	2023 Family Takaful RO	Total RO
Takaful revenue			
Gross contributions	4,928,556	4,903,010	9,831,566
Contributions ceded to retakaful	(545,340)	(3,841,355)	(4,386,695)
Net retained contributions	4,383,216	1,061,655	5,444,871
Movement in unearned contribution reserve - net	(1,578,033)	(162,092)	(1,740,125)
Income from retakaful contracts	72,785	56,333	129,118
Total takaful revenue	2,877,968	955,896	3,833,864
Takaful expenses			
Gross claims settled	(7,736,261)	(1,013,465)	(8,749,726)
Retakaful share in claim settled	5,949,424	797,850	6,747,274
Net claims settled	(1,786,837)	(215,615)	(2,002,452)
Movement in outstanding claims reserve - net	(402,254)	(290,813)	(693,067)
Movement in other reserves	181,616	(30,339)	151,277
Net claims incurred	(2,007,474)	(536,766)	(2,544,240)
Other takaful expenses	(103,497)	(5,593)	(109,090)
Wakala fee expense	(640,708)	(661,726)	(1,302,434)
Total takaful expenses	(2,751,680)	(1,204,086)	(3,955,766)
Other income	91,481	46,240	137,721
Profit on wakala deposit	35,839	35,654	71,493
Mudarab Share	(17,920)	(17,827)	(35,747)
Surplus / (Deficit) from takaful operations	235,686	(184,121)	51,565
		2022	
Takaful revenue			
Gross contributions	6,414,400	3,486,486	9,900,886
Contributions ceded to retakaful	(2,052,048)	(2,691,342)	(4,743,390)
Net retained contributions	4,362,352	795,144	5,157,496
Movement in unearned contribution reserve - net	(2,110,110)	167,113	(1,942,997)
Income from retakaful contracts	51,039	35,785	86,824
Total takaful revenue	2,303,281	998,042	3,301,323
Takaful expenses			
Gross claims settled	(6,195,225)	(1,740,433)	(7,935,658)
Retakaful share in claim settled	3,779,951	1,547,563	5,327,514
Net claims settled	(2,415,274)	(192,870)	(2,608,144)
Movement in outstanding claims reserve - net	572,620	(170,224)	402,396
Movement in other reserves	368,403	(128,310)	240,093
Net claims incurred	(1,474,251)	(491,404)	(1,965,655)
Other takaful expenses	(5,030)	(2,729)	(7,759)
Wakala fees expense	(941,360)	(521,734)	(1,463,094)
Total takaful expenses	(2,420,641)	(1,015,862)	(3,436,503)
Profit on wakala deposit	24,920	13,545	38,465
Other income	40,477	(535)	39,942
Deficit from takaful operations	(51,963)	(4,815)	(56,778)

Projects awarded in Oman up 92% to \$960mn in Q1



Our Correspondent Muscat

Total value of projects awarded in Oman during the first quarter of 2023 reached US\$960mn, up by nearly 92 per cent compared to US\$501mn worth of projects awarded in the first quarter of last year, according to a research report released on Wednesday.

GCC project awards expanded during the first quarter despite global economic challenges such as the global banking sector turmoil, higher inflation, and the ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict, Kuwait-based Kamco Investment said in its GCC Projects Market Update report.

With regards to the new planned projects in Oman, the report said that the sultanate currently has approximately US\$7.8bn worth of contracts in the tendering or bid evaluation stage.

Total value of contracts awarded in the six GCC countries increased by 55 per cent year-on-year during the first quarter of 2023 to US\$29.9bn as compared to US\$19.3bn during the same period of 2022. This was the second highest quarterly project awards since the start of 2022, the report noted.

All GCC project markets witnessed year-on-year project awards growth during the first quarter of 2023 except for Bahrain which remains the smallest project market in the region. Saudi Arabia remained the largest projects market in the GCC during the first quarter of

this year. Saudi Arabia's project awards recorded 17.9 per cent growth during the quarter to reach US\$13.3bn as compared with US\$11.3bn in the same period a year ago.

Saudi Arabia alone accounted over 44.6 per cent of the contracts awarded in the GCC region during the first quarter, while Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar combined represented 84.1 per cent of the overall projects in the GCC.

The UAE project awards more than doubled to reach US\$10bn during the first quarter while Kuwait's contract awards reached US\$1.8bn this year as compared with US\$407mn in the corresponding period of 2022 recording the highest percentage year-on-year contract awards increase in the region.

In terms of sector classification, the chemicals sector witnessed the biggest increase in the value of projects awarded during the year recording US\$4.7bn year-on-year increase in new contract awards to reach a total of US\$5.7bn during the first quarter of 2023.

As per the report, the growth in the GCC project awards during the first quarter has been partly fuelled by the determination of the GCC countries to diversify their economies away from hydrocarbons. GCC member states have backed and invested in projects in the industrial sector such as aluminum, steel, and other industrial equipment manufacturing projects.



Demand for electric cars 'booming': IEA

Paris, France - Global sales of electric vehicles are booming and are expected to account for nearly one in five cars sold this year, according to a report released Wednesday.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) said the rapid electrification of road transportation will have big implications for the energy industry as it will eliminate the need for five million barrels of oil per day by the end of the decade.

World oil consumption averages just over 100mn barrels per day.

"Electric vehicles are one of the driving forces in the new global energy economy that is rapidly emerging - and they are bringing about a historic transformation of the car manufacturing industry worldwide," IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said in a statement.

In its annual report on electric vehicles, the IEA said it expects

annual sales to rise 35 per cent this year to reach 14mn.

It projected that to be a market share of 18 per cent, up from four per cent in 2020.

The IEA said the overwhelming majority of electric car sales are concentrated in three markets: China, Europe and the United States.

China is in pole position, accounting for 60 per cent of global electric vehicle sales last year, the IEA said.

It said measures such as the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, which offers generous subsidies to consumers to switch to electric vehicles, would further boost sales in the coming years.

The IEA forecasts that the average share of electric cars in total sales across China, the EU

Google, Microsoft top market expectations as AI rivalry heats up



San Francisco, US – Google parent company Alphabet beat market expectations in the first quarter of 2023 with a net profit of US\$15bn, in a sign that the search engine behemoth is regaining its footing.

The tech titan has found itself under pressure due to a general slowdown in advertising spending, over-hiring during a Covid-era boom and a major challenge by Microsoft on artificial intelligence (AI).

Its quarterly revenue came in at nearly US\$70bn, a billion better than expected by analysts, and in the same three-month period that the company said it would lay off 12,000 staff, or six per cent of its workforce.

Microsoft's results for the first three months of the year also pleased investors on Tuesday, lifted by its industry-leading business cloud products.

The company founded by Bill Gates reported profit of US\$18.3bn on revenue of US\$52.9bn as Cloud and AI more than offset drops in revenue from licensing Windows software to computer makers, as sales suffer in that market.

Most market attention was on Google, which became a focus of worry when Microsoft-backed ChatGPT was released and quickly went viral late last year. The Windows maker has added the technology to its Bing search engine and office software.

The search giant has since rushed out Bard, its own version of the language-based AI, but the release was seen as clumsy and has so far disappointed observers and company insiders, according to media reports.

"We'll continue to incorporate generative AI advances to make search better in a thoughtful and deliberate way," Google chief Sundar Pichai said during an earnings call.

"And we will test and iterate



as we go because we know that billions of people trust Google to provide the right information."

An arms race over AI is expected to play out for several years and could prove to be expensive for the tech giants.

To get itself battle ready for the AI wars ahead, Google has reorganised its AI division, putting the independently run Deep Mind subsidiary inside the company in a division called Google Brain.

'Serious challenges'

The threat from an AI-augmented Bing sent Pichai on a rare US media tour recently to reassure that the company remained an industry leader on everything from search to maps to AI pioneering.

Despite headwinds, Pichai received a total compensation package worth more than US\$225mn in 2022, according to a regulatory filing posted last week.

Google-owned YouTube's advertising revenue dropped for the third quarter in a row. However, there was "strong watchtime growth" at a YouTube Shorts section added to counter TikTok.

During the quarter, YouTube chief Susan Wojcicki stepped down after nine years, replaced by longtime executive Neal Mohan.

"Google exceeded both revenue and earnings expectations

this quarter, but reasons for investor optimism are modest," said Insider Intelligence senior analyst Max Willens.

"Google's core business is facing the most serious challenges it has encountered in quite some time."

Despite challenges, Alphabet's share price has recovered well from lows seen before January's layoff announcements and on Tuesday shot up by more than 4 per cent in after-hours trading to US\$108.4.

This was still well shy of the near US\$150 seen in 2021, when ad revenue was pouring in.

Microsoft has been steadily pressing on with its AI revolution, recently announcing that it would apply the powers behind ChatGPT to its iconic Excel, Word and Outlook programs.

The Redmond, Washington giant has been swiftly adopting language-based AI, showing less caution than its rivals despite early problems such as chatbots giving disturbing responses or blatantly inaccurate information.

"We see that when people use the new AI features, their engagement with Bing and Edge goes up," Microsoft chief Satya Nadella said during an earnings call.

"We look forward to continuing this journey in what is a generational shift in the largest software category - search."

AFP

Britain blocks Microsoft's \$69bn takeover of Activision Blizzard

London, UK – Britain on Wednesday blocked Microsoft's US\$69bn takeover of US video game giant Activision Blizzard, arguing it would harm competition in cloud gaming and leaving the blockbuster deal in peril.

The UK's Competition and Markets Authority prevented the deal "over concerns... (it) would alter the future of the fast-growing cloud gaming market, leading to reduced innovation and less choice for UK gamers over the years to come", the CMA said in a final decision on its long-running probe.

Microsoft replied it would appeal the verdict over its vast takeover, which has yet to win regulatory approvals in Europe or the United States.

The Xbox-owner launched in 2022 its bid to create the world's third biggest gaming company by revenue with the takeover of Activision, owner of hit games "Candy Crush" and "Call Of Duty", triggering antitrust concerns worldwide.

The CMA added Wednesday that Microsoft's proposed remedies over cloud gaming contained "significant shortcomings" and would require further regulatory oversight instead of allowing the market to decide.

"Preventing the merger would effectively allow market forces to continue to operate and shape the development of cloud gaming without this regulatory



intervention," it added in the statement.

Martin Coleman, chair of the independent panel of experts

new and innovative competitors," Coleman said.

"Microsoft engaged constructively with us to try to ad-

dress these issues and we are grateful for that, but their proposals were not effective to remedy our concerns and would have replaced competition with ineffective regulation in a new and dynamic market."

The announcement comes one month after the CMA narrowed the scope of its probe to

cloud gaming, after concluding that Microsoft's deal would not damage competition in relation to console gaming.

Yet it argued on Wednesday that the video games market needed competition to thrive.

"Cloud gaming needs a free, competitive market to drive innovation and choice," added Coleman.

"That is best achieved by allowing the current competitive dynamics in cloud gaming to continue to do their job."

The Xbox-owner launched in 2022 its bid to create the world's third biggest gaming company by revenue with the takeover of Activision, owner of hit games "Candy Crush" and "Call Of Duty", triggering antitrust concerns worldwide.

AFP

EU to revamp spending rules to boost growth

Brussels, Belgium – The EU unveiled an overhaul of its fiscal rules on Wednesday, a long-awaited reform that has bitterly divided member states over how to encourage investment while strengthening scrutiny of government spending.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, presented the proposal to simplify the complex rules, known as the Stability and Growth Pact, which limit how much the bloc's 27 member states can borrow.

Critics say the rules have failed to prevent debts from rising among the 27 member states and they must be reformed to fit with the reality of the bloc's diverse economies.

But the commission also pointed to boosted defence spending as Brussels comes to terms with what the reality of war raging on the bloc's doorstep, in Ukraine, means for EU countries.

The pact is currently suspended following the Covid pandemic and the Ukraine conflict.

But the reform has split the bloc between the more frugal northern countries, including Germany, and southern states like Italy.

There will now be months of rancorous negotiations between member states and the European Parliament because different



countries want changes for different reasons.

The commission has set an ambitious target of concluding the negotiations by the end of this year but that appears unlikely at this stage.

Germany, a staunch defender of fiscal discipline, fears the reform will overly relax the European Union's budgetary straitjacket and undermine fairness within the bloc. Italy and others argue the rules constrain their ability to invest.

The pact currently stipulates that states' public deficits should not go above three percent of gross domestic product, and debt should stay below 60 per cent of GDP.

Wednesday's proposals do not deviate far from what the commission first announced as

plans for reform in November 2022.

The three-percent deficit and 60-per cent debt targets will stay, but there will be more flexibility through individual plans for debt reduction tailor-made for each country.

"We simultaneously ensure both equal treatment and consideration of country-specific situations," the EU's economy commissioner, Paolo Gentiloni, told a news conference.

The EU also wants to give wiggle room for countries to invest in digital and green transitions as Brussels tackles the challenge from the United States and China, where energy costs are cheaper and lavish subsidies risk luring businesses away from Europe.

AFP

The Financial Corporation Co. SAOG

UNAUDITED FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE PERIOD ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

BOARD OF DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

We present the unaudited financial results of The Financial Corporation Co. SAOG (FINCORP) for the period ended 31 March 2023.

FINANCIAL RESULTS

The Group earned a Net profit of RO 84,985 for the period ended March 2023 compared to RO 571,271 in the same period for the year 2022. A summary of the financial results is tabulated below.

DETAILS	Group			Parent Company		
	31-Mar-23	31-Mar-22	Variance	31-Mar-23	31-Mar-22	Variance
	(in R.O)	(in R.O)	%	(in R.O)	(in R.O)	%
Total Income	214,309	727,548	-71%	422,326	663,617	-36%
Total Expense	-106,229	-116,290	-9%	-106,229	-116,290	-9%
Net profit/(Loss) before taxes	108,080	611,258	-82%	316,097	547,327	-42%
Taxation	-23,095	-39,987	-42%	-23,095	-39,987	-42%
Net profit/(Loss) after taxes	84,985	571,271	-85%	293,002	507,340	-42%

MARKET OUTLOOK

The GCC region is likely to remain attractive primarily attributed to economic stability with positive growth prospects from global institutions (IMF & World Bank) in contrast to uncertainty and muted growth prospects in other parts of the world. The Middle- East region is likely to be reaffirmed as a critical energy exporter amidst developing geopolitical events such as prolonging Russia-Ukraine conflict, disturbed US-China relations and the re-emergence of Saudi-Iran talks.

Economic diversification continues to overhaul the GDP composition of the GCC economies and drives export growth. With oil sector gains exhausted, non-oil activity is again leading the GCC recovery. The latest PMI surveys in the GCC region, timely indicators of the non-oil sector business conditions, showed growth supported by strong sentiment and contained price pressures (KSA: 59.80 vs 58.20 prior, UAE: 54.30 vs 54.10 prior, Qatar: 51.90 vs 45.70 previously as per trading economics).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq for his wise leadership and progressive vision as he continues to lead the country on the path of growth and prosperity. We extend our appreciation to Muscat Securities Market, Capital Market Authority and Muscat Clearing and Depository Company for their valuable co-operation and support. Finally, we thank all our staff for holding on during these times, shareholders for their faith, and our esteemed clients for the confidence, trust and support extended to FINCORP.

Mohamed Darwish Al Khoori
Chairman of the Board

P.O. Box 782, P.C 131,
Sultanate of Oman, Phone: (968) 24822327,
Fax: (968) 24822390, E-mail: fincorp@fincorp.org,
Website: www.fincorp.org

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 MARCH 2023

	Group 31-Mar-23 RO	Parent Company 31-Mar-23 RO	Group 31-Dec-22 RO	Parent Company 31-Dec-22 RO
ASSETS				
Bank balances and cash	993,853	993,853	1,535,154	1,535,154
Investments at fair value through	3,942,550	3,942,550	3,758,372	3,758,372
Trade and other receivables	1,390,370	1,390,370	752,786	752,786
Investment in subsidiary	-	-	-	790,000
Investment in an associate	1,663,759	1,663,759	1,567,141	1,567,141
Deferred Tax	55,272	55,272	78,367	78,367
Property and equipment	7,840	7,840	5,547	5,547
Investment property	270,000	270,000	270,000	270,000
Total assets	8,323,644	8,323,644	7,967,367	8,757,367
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES				
Equity				
Share capital	7,002,996	7,002,996	7,002,996	7,002,996
Legal reserve	929,392	929,392	929,392	929,392
Retained earnings / (accumulated losses)	(823,696)	(823,696)	(908,682)	(1,116,698)
Total equity	7,108,692	7,108,692	7,023,706	6,815,690
Liabilities				
Current liabilities				
Trade and other payables	1,169,650	116,650	899,349	1,897,365
Provision for income tax	7,614	7,614	7,614	7,614
Provision for end of service benefits	37,688	37,688	36,698	36,698
Total liabilities	1,214,952	1,214,952	943,661	1,941,677
Total equity and liabilities	8,323,644	8,323,644	7,967,367	8,757,367

STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE PERIOD ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

	31-Mar-23 Group RO	Parent Company RO	31-Mar-23 Group RO	Parent Company RO
Income				
Brokerage commissions	49,895	49,895	37,535	37,535
Management fees	22,693	22,693	24,810	24,810
Other Operating Income	11,461	11,461	5,289	5,289
Net gain/(loss) from financial assets at FVTPL - unrealised	(72,293)	(72,293)	449,781	449,781
- realised	13,075	13,075	45,899	45,899
Dividend Income	87,415	87,415	99,508	99,508
Other Income	5,384	5,384	631	631
Total Income	117,630	117,630	663,453	663,453
Expenses				
General and administrative expenses	(104,968)	(104,968)	(112,540)	(112,540)
Depreciation	(1,261)	(1,261)	(3,750)	(3,750)
Operating expenses	(106,229)	(106,229)	(116,290)	(116,290)
Operating profit/(loss)	11,401	11,401	547,163	547,163
Finance income	879	879	164	164
Finance costs	(818)	(818)	-	-
Finance cost - net	61	61	164	164
Write back of dues to liquidated subsidiary	-	208,017	-	-
Reversal of Impairment of investment in associate / Share of profit from associate	96,618	96,618	63,931	-
Profit/(loss) before tax	108,080	316,097	611,258	547,327
Taxation	(23,095)	(23,095)	(39,987)	(39,987)
Profit/(loss) for the period	84,985	293,002	571,271	507,340
Profit/(loss) per share (Basic and Diluted)	0.001	0.004	0.008	0.007

Note:
The complete accounts, either in Arabic and English as requested, will be sent by mail within 7 days of request to any unitholder who requests the Fund at the address: PO Box 782, PC 131, Sultanate of Oman, Tel : +968 24822327, Fax : +968 24822390

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WPS: A system to mitigate social, economic impacts of delayed salary

The Ministry of Labour's Wage Protection System (WPS) is a groundbreaking solution that aims to mitigate the economic and social repercussions of delayed or unpaid salaries. This system is designed to promote better working conditions for employees in both enterprises and companies, in alignment with the government's goals of enhancing productivity, stabilising the workforce, and fostering a well-functioning work environment.

In a press statement, the ministry asserted that the timely payment of wages is a crucial factor in promoting a harmonious work environment that contributes to a well-functioning society.

"By ensuring that wages are transferred through banks using certified financial institutions, the WPS seeks to maintain the sustainability of the work environment, while also increasing the productivity of workers," it added.

The system strives to pave the way for a bright and prosperous future, with the working class being safeguarded against salary defaults and businesses being held accountable for paying their workers on time, without causing any harm or inconvenience.

Non-compliance with workers' wages could lead to severe repercussions for employees, such as reduced productivity and instability within the workplace or organization.

This, in turn, may result in an increase in job seekers, heightened stress levels, and negative impacts on workers' mental health. The magnitude of this issue within the economy underscores the need for the WPS.

With the primary aim of en-



surging timely remuneration for workers and promoting a secure working environment, the WPS covers all establishments registered with the Ministry, spanning various sectors and industries that contribute to the diverse categories of the labour force.

The WPS serves to expedite the resolution of labour wage disputes, ensure compliance with contractual provisions registered with the ministry, minimise conflicts and investigation expenses, and monitor the performance of companies.

It was instituted in response to numerous issues that had arisen between the three key stakeholders in the production process, resulting in multiple conflicts between labour forces and various institutions.

The WPS has become an essential tool in safeguarding the rights of workers and solidifying Oman's position alongside international organizations committed to this cause. By facilitating

the identification and resolution of payment deferrals before they escalate into more significant issues such as demonstrations or strikes, the system serves to strengthen the relationship between employers and employees.

Moreover, it reinforces Oman's role in protecting its workforce and upholding its obligations towards international labour standards.

The Ministry of Labour operates within an integrated national system that is in line with current trends and major transformations, with efforts aimed at accelerating progress in the interest of both private sector institutions and employees. The WPS represents a necessary measure to ensure the smooth progress of the private sector, without any imbalances, inconsistencies, or weaknesses that might impede the Ministry's operations in its entirety and put workers through a challenging

test, potentially affecting various economic sectors within the country.

The purpose of the WPS is to oversee and track the distribution of salaries within privately-owned businesses, with the aim of ensuring compliance with transferring their employees' wages to their designated bank accounts. The Ministry of Labour, as the authorised entity, monitor the payment of salaries and promptly address any delays in their disbursement.

The system aids in the investigation and resolution of labour wage conflicts by providing researchers with access to wage transfer data. It also facilitates the transfer of wages to banks using a standardised wage formula, while safeguarding the interests of employers and ensuring that workers' claims of non-receipt of wages are properly addressed. This system serves to stabilise the employer-worker relationship and promote

productivity in the workplace.

The WPS has become an integral part of Oman's Vision 2040, which seeks to advance the country's economic and social development through a national system that is both dynamic and orderly, leading the country towards a better future. The Ministry of Labour and other authorities are playing an important role in this reform by leading the charge in implementing new measures to protect workers in private sector enterprises.

Wage Protection System represents a vital tool for ensuring the smooth operation of the private sector, while also safeguarding the rights of workers and promoting economic stability.

Its implementation is a crucial step towards Oman's economic and social development, ensuring that the country remains at the forefront of international labour standards and upholding its obligations towards its workforce.

Geely Auto's new logo released

Geely Auto Group has recently released a brand-new logo with new colours, representing the milestone that the brand will integrate cutting-edge technologies into new products that will accelerate its development of intelligent and electrified products in response to the strategic development of the Group that will bring a new image to the brand.

"For the past 25 years, Geely has been improving the driving experience of its users, adhering to the brand vision of - 'let Geely be a widely known brand around the world'," said a press statement.

Today, riding on the tide of intelligent products and electrification, Geely will continue to invest in cutting-edge technologies with the advantages of scale and system strength and bring high-value product experience to users, creating a smarter life through technology and exploring infinite possibilities by imagination.

The new logo released by Geely Auto inherits and extends the visual DNA of the



Geely brand. It adopts a minimal design from the original logo with shield and gemstone elements. Its digital and borderless form employs minimalism and openness, showing Geely's determination to break the boundaries and pursue innovation while transforming electrification with intelligent technologies. The new logo also conveys Geely Auto's brand connotation of being young, pure, and technologically advanced in the era of electrified mobility.

The new logo shows a more 'creative, vigorous, and imaginative' Geely Auto.

The new Geely, with its creativity, spares no effort to create a product experience that exceeds user expectations with the most advanced technologies, the company stated.

Registration opens in Oman for Visa Everywhere Initiative

Applications are now open for the Saudi Arabia edition of the 2023 Visa Everywhere Initiative (VEI), a global open innovation competition that sees startups pitch their innovative solutions to solve tomorrow's payment and commerce challenges. This year's Saudi Arabia edition of VEI is open to fintechs in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman.

In addition to monetary prizes totaling OR20,000 (more than US\$50,000), VEI winners gain access and exposure to Visa's vast networks of partners in the banking, merchant, and government sectors. The winners also benefit from receiving recognition from one of the world's most trusted and valuable brands.

This year's edition of VEI introduces an OR5,000 (US\$13,000) Impact prize, which goes to the one competitor whose solution has a positive social impact on the communities it operates in. Examples include initiatives that boost financial inclusion, promote sustainability, or safeguard the environment.

This year's VEI in Saudi Arabia will see an in-person competition in Riyadh on June 14, a release said.



Ali Bailoun

"The Visa Everywhere Initiative is a platform that empowers fintechs and entrepreneurs to showcase the most groundbreaking, impactful solutions in the world of payments and commerce," said Ali Bailoun, Visa's GM for Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman. "Through their technology-driven, innovative solutions, fintechs have the potential to offer broad social benefits to the markets they operate in - particularly when it comes to providing financial services to those who have traditionally been underserved. At Visa, we believe access to the digital economy drives equitable, inclusive growth, and VEI is an important means of supporting the innovators playing a leading role in this space."

MG Motor Oman opens after-sales facilities in Sur, Ibri

MG Motor Oman has announced the opening of its 11th after-sales facility in Sur to meet the needs of its customers in the Sharqiah region.

The new facility is fully equipped with modern facilities and is staffed by trained technicians who provide the best possible service to the customers. The new centre features nine service bays and is capable of providing major and minor services, as well as complex repairs, in a timely manner.

This was soon followed with the opening of the 12th MG service centre in Ibri, offering high-quality maintenance services for MG vehicles to customers in the Dhahirah region. The new service centre in Ibri is equipped with



state-of-the-art technology to ensure that customers receive the best possible care for their vehicles.

"We are very excited to expand our service network in Oman and provide our customers in both regions hassle-

free access to quality car servicing," said Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE. "Our commitment to deliver-

ing exceptional service and support is reflected in the state-of-the-art facilities, ready-availability of parts, efficient service and trained technicians at both centres. We believe that the new facilities will enable us to serve more customers across Oman and continue to deliver on our promise of excellence."

With this new addition, MG Motor Oman now has 12 service centres across the country, offering customers the convenience and peace of mind that comes with knowing their vehicles are in good hands. MG Motor Oman continues to grow its after-sales network to ensure that customers receive the best possible service across Oman.

ISC organises Eid Milan programme at its Darsait premises

Indian Social Club Oman in association with its linguistic wings organised an Eid Milan programme on the day of Eid al Fitr at its premises in Darsait.

Close to a 1000 community members attended the programme and greeted one another on the occasion.

Suhail Khan, honorary entertainment secretary at ISC Oman welcomed the guests and extended eid greetings to one and all on behalf of the Eid Milan organising committee.

H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman was the chief guest at the Eid Milan program. The ambassador addressed the gathering and greeted the Indian diaspora on the occasion of Eid al Fitr.

Leading businessman and



philanthropist Dr P Mohammed Ali gave a motivational speech on the occasion and stressed on

universal brotherhood, peace and harmony.

Dr Zia ur Rahman gave a lec-

ture on 'Understanding Our Differences and Embracing Our Similarities'. His talk was very

interesting and enlightening.

Shabbir Boxwala presented the vote of thanks and ex-

pressed his gratitude to all those who supported and contributed towards the success of the programme.

Eid related cultural programmes were performed by members of the various linguistic wings. Humera Salman was the emcee for the evening and kept the audience glued to their seats with her anchoring skills, anecdotes and shayari.

There were food counters from across Indian states offering delicacies including Haleem, masala pindi, malabar cutlet, and other savouries and snacks. The highlight of the evening was the Sheer Khurma - a very popular vermicelli based sweet dish made on the occasion of Eid.

There were spot prizes and quiz conducted by Tufail

Ahmed. Special arrangements were made for Heena for ladies and Face painting for children by Jenima Zaheer.

Organising team members Shameer PTK, Sanjit Kanojia, Mariam Cherian, Fayaz Hasanair, Dr Wasifuddin and Siddique Hasan ensured all arrangements were in order and took care of the guests, a release said.

With a huge crowd coming in there was a festive atmosphere all around.

The Eid Milan gave an opportunity to the Indian community members to meet and greet each other on the joyous occasion of Eid.

Those who live away from their families felt like being at home amongst family members.

Fears mount in Sudan after former regime members escape from jail

Khartoum, Sudan - A wanted Sudanese war crimes suspect has confirmed that he and other members of the Islamist regime ousted in 2019 have escaped from prison during recent fighting, raising new fears for a fragile ceasefire that has enabled foreigners to flee.

The 72-hour ceasefire brokered by the United States was already struggling to hold after the regular army launched renewed airstrikes against rival paramilitary forces in the capital late on Tuesday.

Anti-aircraft guns fired at fighter jets in the skies over Khartoum's sister city of Omdurman on Wednesday, witnesses said.

Armed clashes meanwhile continued in Soba on the outskirts of Khartoum, witnesses said.

The escape of leading figures from the ousted regime of Omar al Bashir, at least one of whom is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, has raised fears the conflict may take a turn for the worse.

Ahmed Harun, a top Bashir aide who led the regime's infamous counter-insurgency operations in Darfur in the mid-2000s, said late on Tuesday that he and other regime members had escaped from Kober prison.

The ousted dictator had himself been held in the same prison but the army confirmed on Wednesday that the 79-year-old had already been transferred to hospital before the current fighting erupted on April 15.

Members of Bashir's regime, including the strongman himself, had been moved to a military



A Saudi Navy sailor assists a woman with a child, who disembarked from a passenger ship upon arrival at King Faisal navy base in Jeddah after being evacuated from Sudan, on Wednesday (AFP)

hospital 'due to their health conditions... and remain in the hospital under the guard of the

mander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. "We remained in our deten-

in our own hands' in another location.

Security fears had already been raised on Tuesday when the World Health Organization (WHO) warned of a 'huge biological risk' after combatants occupied a Khartoum laboratory holding samples of cholera, measles, polio and other infectious diseases.

The fighting between the rival generals, which has involved air strikes and artillery exchanges, has killed hundreds of people and left some neighbourhoods of greater Khartoum in ruins.

Mass exodus

As the fighting eased on Tuesday in the city of five million people, foreign governments organised road convoys, aircraft and ships to get their nationals out.

A ship carrying nearly 1,700 civilians from more than 50 countries docked in Saudi Arabia early on Wednesday, the kingdom's foreign ministry said.

Sudanese workers meanwhile complained of being left in a state of desperation, unable to leave their homes during the fighting.

"I say to Hemeti, my brother, please, the war has destroyed the Sudanese people. My brother, Burhan, stop the war," Barir Hamad, a builder, told AFP.

"Why didn't the officials care for the Sudanese people and their suffering?" said Alnour Mohamed Ahmed, another builder. "People can't leave their homes."

Late on Tuesday, witnesses reported renewed air strikes in Khartoum North where they said fighter jets struck RSF vehicles.

The RSF posted a video in which it claimed to be in control of an oil refinery and the associated Garri power plant more than 70km north of Khartoum.

Shortly before, the army had warned in a Facebook post of 'heavy movement towards the refinery in order to take advantage of the truce by taking control of the refinery'.

The two sides have both made unverifiable claims to control key sites, adding to what experts call an overwhelming state of fear in the capital.

A UN report warned that 'shortages of food, water, medicines and fuel are becoming extremely acute, especially in Khartoum and surrounding areas'. "In some places, humanitarian aid is all that is keeping famine at bay," UN chief Antonio Guterres said on Tuesday.

AFP



A file photo of Iranian Shiite cleric Ayatollah Abbas Ali, a member of the Assembly of Experts that selects the country's Supreme Leader (AFP)

Powerful Iranian cleric killed in attack in a bank

Tehran, Iran - A powerful Iranian cleric, a member of the Assembly of Experts that selects the country's Supreme Leader, has been killed in an armed attack, officials said on Wednesday.

"Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani was killed this morning in an armed attack... the assailant was also arrested and is now being investigated," IRNA news agency reported, citing the political and security official for the northern Mazandaran province where the attack happened.

The attack took place in a bank in the city of Babolsar, the official said.

"The motive of the assailant is not yet clear and will be announced after it is clarified," the official added.

The governor of Mazandaran province Mahmoud Hosseinipour said the attacker was a local security personnel of the bank.

"So far, our information and documents indicate that this was not a security or terrorist act," Hosseinipour told state television.

Soleimani (75) was previously

the representative of the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

He had also been the imam who led the weekly Friday prayers in the cities of Kashan, in central Isfahan province, and Zahedan in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan.

Under the constitution, the 88-strong Assembly of Experts is mandated with supervising, dismissing and electing the Supreme Leader.

The all-powerful deliberative body is now headed by ultra-conservatives 96-year-old cleric Ahmad Jannati.

Its members are chosen in popular elections for eight year-terms from a pool of candidates vetted by the country's Guardian Council.

The attack is believed to be the most significant against a cleric in years in the country.

In April 2022, a suspected extremist knife attack in the north-eastern shrine city of Mashhad in Razavi Khorasan Province led to death of two clerics and injury of another.

AFP

Iran upholds German dual national's death sentence

Tehran, Iran - Iran's top court has confirmed a death sentence for a German-Iranian national whose trial over a deadly mosque bombing in 2008 has strained relations with Berlin, the judiciary said on Wednesday.

"Jamshid Sharmahd's sentence has been upheld by the Supreme Court," judiciary spokesman Massoud Setayeshi told reporters in Tehran, saying 'measures' ahead of the 68-year-old's execution 'will be taken later'.

The Tehran Revolutionary Court in February sentenced Sharmahd to death after convicting him in the April 2008 attack in the southern city of

Shiraz that killed 14 people.

Germany has condemned the sentence as 'unacceptable' and declared two staff members at Iran's embassy in Berlin personae non gratae, ordering them to leave the country. Tehran, in turn, expelled two German diplomats last month.

Prosecutors had also accused Sharmahd, a US resident, of having established contact with 'FBI and CIA officers' and of having 'attempted to contact Israeli Mossad agents'. His family says he was kidnapped by the Iranian security services while in transit through Dubai.

AFP

Erdogan cancels appearances after developing stomach bug

Istanbul, Turkey - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday cancelled his planned appearances due to a stomach bug less than three weeks before Turkey's crunch election.

The 69-year-old leader's announcement came in the heat of a hard-fought campaign in what is widely viewed as Turkey's most important election of its post-Ottoman era.

Erdogan had three appearances in the central Anatolian provinces planned for Wednesday. But he said Vice President Fuat Oktay would take his place instead.

"Today I will rest at home under the advice of our doctors," Erdogan said on his official Twitter account. "With God's permission, we will continue our



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (left) and presidential candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu (right) attend a ceremony, in Ankara on Tuesday (AFP)

program from tomorrow," he said.

"On this occasion, I wish all my citizens health, peace and enjoyment."

Erdogan has been campaigning tirelessly to reverse a dip in polls and extend his two-decade election winning streak.

He is running neck-and-neck with secular opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu and must contend with the dual blows of a raging economic crisis and the impact of a massive February earthquake that claimed more than 50,000 lives.

But he cut short a live television interview late on Tuesday after getting sick on air.

His television appearance on Tuesday began more than 90 minutes behind schedule and then went to a commercial break in the middle of a question 10 minutes into the show.

The camera shook and the reporter asking the question stood up from his chair when the broadcast cut off.

"Oh wow," an unidentified voice could be heard saying off camera.

Erdogan returned about 15 minutes later to apologise for getting sick.

"Yesterday and today were hard work. That's why I got a stomach flu," Erdogan said.

"At one point, I wondered if it would be misunderstood if we

cancelled the programme. But we promised. I ask for your and our audience's forgiveness."

The Turkish leader looked ashen and ended the programme a few minutes later.

Erdogan had gastrointestinal surgery in 2012 but has otherwise enjoyed robust health.

Turkey's 74-year-old opposition leader Kilicdaroglu was among the first of many politicians to wish Erdogan a swift recovery on Tuesday.

"I convey my best wishes to Mr. Erdogan," Kilicdaroglu tweeted moments after the episode aired.

Nationalist leader Meral Akseener and other top members of Kilicdaroglu's six-party opposition alliances also tweeted their support.

AFP

Kenyans fear for relatives linked to cult as search for bodies resumes

Malindi, Kenya - Weeping relatives on Wednesday awaited news of loved ones linked to a suspected starvation cult in Kenya as police resumed the search for victims after unearthing dozens of bodies since last week.

The discovery of mass graves in Shakahola forest near the coastal town of Malindi has shocked Kenyans, with cult leader Paul Mackenzie Nthenge accused of driving his followers to death by preaching that starvation was the only path to God.

As the death toll hit 90 on Tuesday, police said investigators were pausing the search for bodies because the morgues were full, with children accounting for more than half the victims.

But on Wednesday morning,

search teams resumed operations, according to an AFP journalist at the scene.

"The exhumation is going on," a police officer told AFP.

The gruesome saga, which has been dubbed the 'Shakahola Forest Massacre', has prompted calls for a crackdown on fringe religious outfits in the largely Christian country.

At the state-run Malindi Sub-County Hospital, whose morgue is already stretched well beyond capacity with dozens of bodies, families were desperate to know if their loved ones had been found.

"The last time I saw my mum was in February, she was part of the cult," 16-year-old Issa Ali told AFP.

"She was so weak the last time I saw her," the soft-spoken



Exhumed bodies in bodybags are displayed on the ground prior to their transport to a mortuary at a mass-grave site in Shakahola, outside the coastal town of Malindi, on Tuesday (AFP)

teenager added.

Hassan Musa, a Kenya Red Cross official, told AFP that 311 people, 'including 150 minors' had been reported missing to its

support staff in Malindi.

"We don't know how many more graves, how many more bodies, we are likely to discover," Interior Minister Kithure Kindiki

told reporters during a visit to the site on Tuesday, adding the crimes were serious enough to warrant terrorism charges against Nthenge.

The majority of the dead were children, according to three sources close to the investigation, highlighting the macabre nature of the cult's alleged practices which included urging parents to starve their offspring.

Starving children

Hussein Khalid, executive director of the rights group Haki Africa that tipped off the police to Nthenge's activities, told AFP that the Good News International Church appeared to require children to starve first, followed by women, and finally men.

He said 50 to 60 per cent of the victims were children, whose bodies were found wrapped in cotton shrouds inside shallow pits. Kenya Red Cross official Kawthar Muhamed told AFP on Wednesday that rescuers had

'found two more persons in the bush this morning'.

Kindiki said on Tuesday that 34 people had been found alive so far in the 325-hectare area of woodland around Shakahola.

Kenya's President William Ruto has vowed to take action against rogue pastors like Nthenge 'who want to use religion to advance weird, unacceptable ideology'.

As the investigation unfolds, questions have emerged about how the cult was able to operate undetected despite Nthenge attracting police attention six years ago. The televangelist had been arrested in 2017 on charges of 'radicalisation' after urging families not to send their children to school, saying education was not recognised by the Bible.

AFP

US nuclear submarine to visit South Korea

In addition to a beefed-up military umbrella, US will increase information sharing with Seoul

Washington, US - A US nuclear missile submarine will visit South Korea for the first time in decades as part of a reinforced nuclear shield set to be announced at the White House by presidents Joe Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol, an official said.

The senior US official said measures being announced on Wednesday have not been seen since the height of the Cold War and are meant to boost deterrence in the face of North Korea's aggressive nuclear activities.

Biden and Yoon, at the White House for a state visit, will issue a document called the Washington Declaration outlining how in addition to a beefed-up US military umbrella, Washington will increase information sharing with Seoul.



US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden, South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol and First Lady Kim Keon Hee (hidden) pay their respects as they visit the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Tuesday (AFP)

The arrangement - responding to ever-growing tension over communist North Korea's missile tests and nuclear arsenal - echoes moves last seen when Washington oversaw the strategic defense of Europe against the Soviet Union.

"The United States has not taken these steps, really, since the height of the Cold War with our very closest handful of allies

in Europe. And we are seeking to ensure that by undertaking these new procedures, these new steps, that our commitment to extended deterrence is unquestionable," a senior official said ahead of the Biden-Yoon meeting.

Officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, stressed that there are no plans to station US nuclear weapons in South Korea

- a difference from the Cold War, when US strategic weapons were deployed to Europe. In addition, Seoul will reiterate its pledge in the declaration not to seek its own nuclear arsenal.

"We'll announce that we intend to take steps to make our deterrence more visible through the regular deployment of strategic assets, including a US nuclear ballistic submarine visit to South

Korea, which has not happened since the early 1980s," a senior official said.

"We'll strengthen our training, our exercises and simulation activities to improve the US-ROK alliance's approach to deterring and defending against DPRK threats, including by better integrating ROK conventional assets into our strategic planning," the official said, referring to South

and North Korea by their official acronyms.

In addition to submarines, there will be a 'regular cadence' of other major platforms, 'includ-

are taking these steps," the official said, adding that the Biden administration is 'disappointed that China has been unprepared to use its influence' on North Korea.

Yoon is only the second foreign leader invited for a state visit by Biden and he and his wife were set to be greeted with full military honours at the White House. The two presidents will hold talks in the Oval Office before giving a press conference in the Rose Garden.

The day will round off with a lavish state dinner.

On Tuesday, Yoon and Biden visited the Korean War Memorial, depicting life-sized steel statues of US soldiers marching during the 1950-53 war against the communist north.

Yoon also laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery and joined US Vice President Kamala Harris for a tour of a NASA space facility near Washington.

Washington and Seoul are also highlighting strong cultural links, something emphasized by Netflix's announcement of a US\$2.5bn investment in South Korean content. Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos met with Yoon in Washington on Monday. AFP

We'll strengthen our training, our exercises and simulation activities to deter and defend against DPRK threats

AN OFFICIAL

ing bombers or aircraft carriers', the official said. But there will be 'no basing of those assets and certainly not nuclear weapons'.

Despite more shared information and planning, a US official stressed that use of American nuclear weapons remains under sole authority of the US President.

An official said that steps are being taken in advance to defuse any potential tensions with Beijing over the tougher military posture.

"We are briefing the Chinese in advance and laying out very clearly our rationale for why we

Indigenous Brazilians demand more land reserves

Brasilia, Brazil - Thousands of indigenous Brazilians are gathered in the capital this week to demand the creation of new reserves on their ancestral lands.

They came from all around the country to Brasilia for their 19th annual gathering under the slogan *Terra Livre* (free land) - the first since the return to power in January of leftist leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Lula had expressed support for expanding Indigenous reserves, unlike his far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro, who had vowed to not yield 'one more centimetre'.

"We travelled a week to get here. What we want is equal rights for all Indigenous peoples throughout Brazil," Joyce Pau-mari Hiraka (24) told AFP-TV - her face, like many others there, decorated with tribal motifs.

Many among the assembled sported majestic feather headdresses and body paint, presented a stark contrast to the futuristic architecture of the



An indigenous man adjusts his headdress as he walks through the Terra Livre Indigenous Camp, in Brasilia on Tuesday (AFP)

capital city hosting the week-long gathering that started on Monday.

"The demarcation of our lands is very important for us, to prevent intrusions by those who come to destroy the forest," said 33-year-old Andre Guajajara, who came from the northeastern state of Maranhao.

Indigenous reserves are considered by experts as a bulwark against Amazon deforestation

caused mainly by mining and agricultural expansion.

"Our territory is an island of forest with destruction all around," said Yakari Kuikuro Mehinaku, who lives on a reserve in the Alto Xingu region of Brazil's central Mato Grosso state.

"The government needs to take care of the environment as we the Indigenous people do," he added.

AFP

Japan firm fails in historic Moon bid

Tokyo, Japan - Japanese start-up ispace conceded on Wednesday its ambitious attempt to become the first private company to land on the Moon had failed but pledged to move ahead with new missions.

The unmanned *Hakuto-R Mission 1* lander had been scheduled to arrive on the Moon's surface overnight but communications were lost during its descent and had still not been reestablished 25 minutes after the scheduled landing.

'It has been determined that there is a high probability that the lander eventually made a hard landing on the Moon's surface,' ispace said in a statement. The company said its engineers were working to establish why the landing had failed.

"Although we do not expect to complete the lunar landing at this time, we believe that we have fully accomplished the significance of this mission, having acquired a great deal of data and experience," ispace CEO and founder Takeshi Hakamada said.

"What is important is to feed



ispace chief technology officer Ryo Ujiie with company's CEO Takeshi Hakamada address a press conference in Tokyo on Wednesday (AFP)

this knowledge and learning back to Mission 2 and beyond," he said.

Hakamada said the firm is developing two further attempts to land on the lunar surface and the setback would not change that.

Still, the apparent crash marks a frustrating end to a mission that began with the lander's launch last December aboard a *SpaceX Falcon 9* rocket.

The vessel was carrying payloads from several countries, including a lunar rover from the

United Arab Emirates.

Chief technology officer Ryo Ujiie became emotional as he addressed reporters, describing the attempt as a 'very precious experience'.

Standing just over two metres tall and weighing 340kg, the lander entered lunar orbit last month.

Its descent and landing were fully automated and the craft was supposed to reestablish communication as soon as it touched down.

So far, only the United States, Russia and China have managed to put a spacecraft on the lunar surface, all through government-sponsored programmes.

In April 2019, Israeli organisation SpaceIL watched its lander crash into the Moon's surface.

India's attempt to land a spacecraft on the moon in 2016 also ended in a crash.

Two US companies, Astrobot and Intuitive Machines, are scheduled to attempt Moon landings later this year.

'We congratulate the ispace inc team on accomplishing a significant number of milestones on their way to today's landing attempt,' Astrobot said in a tweet. 'We hope everyone recognises - today is not the day to shy away from pursuing the lunar frontier, but a chance to learn from adversity and push forward.'

ispace, which listed its shares on the Tokyo Stock Exchange Growth Market this month, was already planning its next mission before the failure of Hakuto-R.

AFP

US, Philippine troops fire rockets at ship during drills

San Antonio, Philippines - US and Philippine troops fired a salvo of rockets at a warship representing an enemy vessel in the disputed South China Sea on Wednesday, in the final exercise of the allies' largest-ever military drills.

It was the first time the countries had conducted a joint live-fire exercise in the hotly contested waters, which China claims almost entirely.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, who has sought stronger defence ties with the US, sat in an observation tower with US and Philippine officials watching the event north of Manila.

"No Hollywood effects this morning, this is old-fashioned training," said Lieutenant Colonel Nick Mannweiler, a US Marine Corps public affairs officer.

The live-fire drill kicked off with the *US HIMARS* precision rocket system launching a series of rounds at a decommissioned Philippine Navy corvette anchored about 22km off the coast.



A US soldier loads an Avenger surface-to-air missile system during the US-Philippines Balikatan joint military exercise at San Antonio in Zambales, north of Manila on Tuesday (AFP)

The objective was to sink the decades-old ship, which represented an enemy vessel approaching the Philippine shore.

That was followed by artillery units lined up along a grassy field firing rockets at floating drums 10 kilometres offshore.

F-16 Fighting Falcons, AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and Philippine Air Force FA-50 fighter jets were also to take part in the event. The drill was briefly

interrupted when a small private aircraft entered the exercise area, Mannweiler told AFP.

The drills aim to boost Manila's military capability while serving as a US show of support for its Asian ally as China's assertiveness in the region grows stronger.

Nearly 18,000 troops have taken part in the annual exercises dubbed Balikatan, or 'shoulder to shoulder', in Tagalog.

Wednesday's event 'demonstrated new potential and revitalised the strength of our militaries while we continuously forge an ironclad alliance', the Balikatan director for the Philippine military, Major General Marvin Licudine, said in a statement.

The drills, which began on April 11, have involved helicopters landing on a Philippine island off the northern tip of the main island of Luzon, nearly 300km

from Taiwan.

The US military also showed off its Patriot missiles, considered one of the best air defence systems in the world.

This year's Balikatan follows a deal announced earlier this month for US forces to use an increased number of bases in the Philippines, including one near Taiwan.

China considers self-ruled Taiwan a part of its territory.

The exercises and growing US access to Philippine bases have angered China, which has accused the United States of endangering regional peace and trying to drive a wedge between Manila and Beijing.

Philippine drills spokesman Col Michael Logico said it was the Southeast Asian country's 'inviolable right to exercise within our territory'.

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands.

AFP

Norway irked as Swedish rocket crashes on its turf

Oslo, Norway - The Norwegian foreign ministry expressed irritation with Sweden for not immediately informing it of a research rocket that crashed in Norway, in a rare spat between the neighbours.

The rocket, which was launched early on Monday from the Esrange Space Centre in Kiruna, northern Sweden, plunged into a mountainside in the Malselv municipality in Norway's far north, about 10km from the closest inhabited area.

No one was injured and no material damage was reported.

'The crash of a rocket like this is a very serious incident that can cause serious damage,' the foreign ministry in Oslo said.

'When such a border violation occurs, it is crucial that those responsible immedi-

ately inform the relevant Norwegian authorities through the proper channels,' it said.

The rocket was carrying out experiments in zero gravity at an altitude of 250km.

'The rocket took a slightly longer and more westerly trajectory than calculated and landed after a completed flight 15km into Norway', the Swedish Space Corporation said on Monday. 'Work on retrieving the payload is underway,' it added.

Norway's foreign ministry also noted that retrieval work was not supposed to begin without Norwegian authorisation, which had not been granted.

Norway's Civil Aviation Authority said it had learned of the crash from the Swedish Space Corporation's press release issued on Monday.

AFP

Joy, fear as India becomes most populous

According to the UN’s projections, India now has a population of 1,425,775,850, surpassing China

Dehra, India - Exhausted, elated and cradling her newborn daughter in a rundown government hospital, young mother Manu Bala had just helped make India the world’s most populous nation.

Tears of joy and relief streamed down Bala’s cheeks as her as-yet-unnamed child - one of the more than 67,000 born across India on Monday - rested on her chest.

According to the UN’s projections, which are calculated through a variety of factors including census data and birth and death rates, India now has a population of 1,425,775,850, surpassing China for the first time.

“I am very happy that my child was born on the day India left behind China - it feels special to become a mother on this day,” the 22-year-old housewife told AFP from her bed.

“I want my baby to study hard and become whatever she wants to become. I want to give her a good life.”

Bala had writhed in agony on her gurney inside the crowded and somewhat decrepit mater-



A woman breastfeeds her newly born child inside a maternity ward of a civil hospital in Dehra, in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh (AFP)

nity ward of her Himalayan town’s public hospital.

Flanked by nurses in green and white overalls, her face turned pale as she lay on a bare bed with her feet mounted in stirrups. “Push harder,” the doctor urged the first-time mother in the labour room, while her husband and mother-in-law waited anxiously outside.

Sweat trickling down her

I am very happy that my child was born on the day India left behind China - it feels special to become a mother on this day. I want my baby to study hard and become whatever she wants to become

MANU BALA

forehead, Bala winced in pain and clasped the sides of the bed before the final push, met with a round of cheers from the staff.

Holding the baby to her chest with relief writ large on her face, she mustered up one final reservoir of energy to thank the doctor and nurses.

Bala’s husband Rohit, a state government employee, was relieved that the birth was without complications and ecstatic about becoming a father.

He already has his mind turned to the weeks ahead: The

family will have a naming ceremony 11 days after the birth, with the assistance of a Hindu priest consulting astrological charts for an auspicious moniker.

But beyond that, Rohit was fretting over the future awaiting his daughter.

“There are many problems we have to face because of the growing population,” the 30-year-old told AFP. “Even for seeing the doctor here we had to queue up for so long.”

India faces huge challenges in providing electricity, food and housing for its growing population. Many of its cities struggle with water shortages, air and water pollution, and packed slums. Millions of young people are entering the workforce each year and struggling to find opportunities in an economy that does not have the capacity to provide them all with jobs.

“Already there is so much unemployment in the country. It will become all the more difficult to get a job,” Rohit said.

“I think one baby is enough in today’s times.”

AFP

Chinese President holds telephonic conversation with Ukraine’s Zelensky

Beijing, China - Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky by phone on Wednesday, Beijing and Kyiv said, the first call between the two leaders since the start of Russia’s invasion.

Beijing says it is neutral in the Ukraine conflict and Xi has never condemned the Russian invasion, but the Chinese leader has come under increased pressure from Western nations to step in and mediate.

A 12-point ‘position paper’ published by China in February was seen by many Western governments as skewed towards Russia, and a friendly Moscow visit in March by Xi to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin led to widespread criticism.

“I had a long and meaningful phone call with President Xi Jinping,” Zelensky said on Twitter.

“I believe that this call, as well as the appointment of Ukraine’s ambassador to China, will give a powerful impetus to the development of our bilateral relations,” he wrote.

Zelensky’s spokesman Sergiy Nykyforov said on Face-



China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin addresses the press on the phone call between Xi Jinping and Volodymyr Zelensky (AFP)

book that the two leaders had ‘an almost one-hour-long telephone conversation’.

Chinese state broadcaster CCTV reported that during the call - which was initiated by Kyiv - Xi told Zelensky that ‘talks and negotiation’ were the ‘only way out’ of the war. ‘On the issue of the Ukraine crisis, China has always stood on the side of peace and its core position is to promote peace talks,’ CCTV quoted Xi as saying.

According to a readout of the call, Xi said China ‘will neither watch the fire from the other

Taliban kill IS ‘mastermind’ of Kabul airport attack: White House official

Washington, US - Taliban government forces have killed the Islamic State mastermind of a devastating suicide bomb attack at the Kabul airport during the chaotic withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021, the White House said on Tuesday.

The bomber detonated a device among packed crowds at the airport’s perimeter as they tried to flee Afghanistan on August 26, 2021. The blast killed some 170 Afghans and 13 US troops who were securing the airport for the traumatic exit.

It was one of the deadliest bombings in Afghanistan and prompted a wave of criticism of President Joe Biden for his decision to pull American forces out of the country nearly 20 years after the US invasion.

The leader of the Islamic State cell that planned the attack has since been killed by Taliban authorities, White House national security spokesman John Kirby said in a statement.

‘He was a key ISIS-K official directly involved in plotting operations like Abbey Gate, and



A Taliban security personnel talks with a flag vendor outside the Eid Gah mosque in Kabul on April 20 (AFP)

now is no longer able to plot or conduct attacks,’ Kirby said, referring to the spot outside the airport where the attack took place.

ISIS-K refers to Islamic State Khorasan, the branch of the group operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

‘He was killed in a Taliban operation,’ Kirby added without giving any details of it.

Taliban government officials have so far not responded to AFP requests for comment.

The pullout, ending on August 30, 2021, saw Taliban fighters sweep aside Western-trained Afghan forces in just weeks, forcing the last US troops to mount the desperate evacuation from Kabul’s airport.

An unprecedented military airlift operation managed to get

more than 120,000 people out of the country in a matter of days.

Biden has long defended his decision to leave Afghanistan, which critics have said helped cause the catastrophic collapse of Afghan forces and paved the way for the Taliban to return to power two decades after their first government was toppled.

AFP

Myanmar returns camera of slain Japanese journalist

Bangkok, Thailand - When Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai was shot dead by Myanmar troops as he covered anti-military protests in 2007, his video camera disappeared, along with the last images he filmed.

On Wednesday, 16 years and a secret journey out of Myanmar later, the camera and its contents were handed back to his family, who hope the footage will hold clues to the final moments of his life. Nagai had travelled to Myanmar to cover monk-led demonstrations against the then-junta for APF News, a Tokyo-based agency.

Ten Indian police personnel killed in Maoist rebel attack

Raipur, India - Ten police and their driver were killed in India’s central Chhattisgarh state on Wednesday when their vehicle hit an improvised explosive device, an attack police blamed on Maoist rebels.

India’s long-running Maoist insurgency began in the 1960s and has cost thousands of lives in the decades since, although violence has waned considerably in recent years.

Wednesday’s deaths were the worst casualties for security forces in more than two years and claimed the lives of police reservists returning from a mission to investigate rebel movements in remote Dantewada district.

“They were returning from an operation when the explosion took place targeting their vehicle,” senior Chhattisgarh police official Vivekanand, who uses only one name, told AFP.



This image taken from the footage aired on NDTV shows a crater stretching several metres into the earth

Footage aired on broadcaster NDTV showed a crater that stretched several metres into the earth, and security forces inspecting mangled vehicle parts strewn about by the blast.

‘I pay my tributes to the brave personnel we lost in the attack,’ Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote on Twitter. ‘Their sacrifice will always be remembered.’

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel told reporters the attack was ‘very saddening’ and pledged to redouble efforts to combat the state’s Naxalites, as India’s Maoist insurgents are

known.

“This battle is in the last leg and we will not spare any Naxalites, and we will make a proper plan to wipe out Naxalism.”

No rebel group has claimed responsibility for the attack so far.

‘Red Corridor’

India has deployed tens of thousands of forces to battle the rebels across the insurgent-dominated region known as the ‘Red Corridor’, which stretches across several central, southern and eastern states.

Naxal groups say they are fighting for rural people and the poor.

They are believed to be present in more than ten states across India but are most active in remote parts of the country’s interior.

Their strongholds are in areas where much of the popu-

lation remains mired in poverty and lacks access to critical services.

Delhi has also pumped millions of dollars into infrastructure development in the remote areas dominated by tribal communities, and claims to have confined the armed insurgency to 53 districts in 2020, down from 96 in 2010.

Twenty-two police and paramilitaries were killed in a gun battle with the far-left guerrillas in 2021.

In March 2020, 17 police from a commando patrol were killed in an attack by more than 300 armed rebels in Chhattisgarh.

Sixteen commandos were also killed in the western state of Maharashtra in a bomb attack that was blamed on the Maoists in the lead-up to India’s election in 2019.

AFP

'AIMING FOR THE WIN'

Oman's Al Zubair teams up with Schiller to start International GT Open campaign in Portugal

Portimao, Portugal - Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair gets his challenge underway in the 2023 International GT Open at this weekend's opening race at the Autodromo Internacional Algarve, in Portimao, Portugal.

After finishing third in the 2023 Asian Le Mans Series, Al Zubair teams up with Germany's Fabian Schiller in the Getspeed Performance Team to drive a Mercedes-AMG GT3 running under the Al Manar Racing banner.

Al Zubair, who finished third in the International GT Open series in 2021, said: "Very excited to get the European season started for 2023. I believe it will be a very good year. I am feeling very confident and happy with the atmosphere and performance levels at Getspeed.

"I'm looking forward to getting started with the GT Open. There are some strong line-ups in the



Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair will be driving a Mercedes-AMG GT3 at the International GT Open

championship so, for sure, it won't be so easy. Nonetheless, we are coming fully prepared and looking to turn ambitions into results. We will definitely be aiming for the win."

There are 33 cars on the entry list for the opening round of a series that also visits Belgium, Hungary, France, Austria, Italy and Spain this season and is in its 18th year. Al-Zubair, Schiller and Al-Manar Racing have a varied race programme in 2023 and will compete in Hungary and Spain after their opening Portuguese outing.

International GT Open competitors are sharing the Algarve circuit with Euroformula Open, GT Cup Europe and TCR Europe entrants this weekend.

A 30-minute qualifying session follows from 11.10hrs on Saturday morning and the 70-minute race one fires into life with a rolling start from 4.30pm.

Kazakhstan MotoGP cancelled

Paris, France - The Kazakhstan MotoGP, scheduled for July 9, has been cancelled and will not be replaced on this year's world championship calendar, organisers announced Wednesday.

"Ongoing homologation works at the circuit, paired with current global operational challenges, have obliged the cancellation of the 2023 event," the international motorcycling federation (FIM) said in a statement.

"MotoGP looks forward to visiting Sokol International Racetrack in 2024 to welcome a new region to the calendar. The event will not be replaced in 2023."

The cancellation means the world championship will now be contested over 20 Grand Prix races.

Al Rawahi, Al Amri eye glory at Jordan National rally

Omani rally champion Abdullah al Rawahi and his Jordanian navigator Atta al Hamoud will compete in the first round of Jordan National Rally on Friday. The duo, in a Skoda Fabia, along with Oman's other team of Zakaria al Amri and his co-driver Mohammed al Mazroui, in a Subaru Impreza N14, will be hoping for some valuable experience for the Jordan leg of the Middle East Rally Championship to be held next month.

The Jordan National Rally, comprising five stages at the dead sea in Baptism and Ma'in will feature 24 drivers from Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait and the Sultanate. Al Rawahi, who won the first round of the Middle East rally championship in Oman in January withdrew from the second round in Qatar and will try to overcome the disappointment with a podium finish. Qatari champion Nasser al Attayah still leads the championship.

Al Amri will try to recover back from the last frustration in Qatar



Zakaria al Amri



Abdullah al Rawahi

where he was forced to leave the rally during the super special stage due to some technical issues in the car.

Al Rawahi said: "I am here in Jordan to prepare for the Interna-

tional one, which will be held in similar terrain and stages, we will be focusing on our strategy during the race and hope that it will end successfully this time without any technical problems."

Oman's Al Harthy targets strong showing at Spa-Francorchamps

Muscat - Spa-Francorchamps, one of the most iconic tracks in global motorsport, hosts the third race of the 2023 FIA World Endurance Championship this Saturday, 29th April - an encounter which Ahmad Al Harthy hopes will mark a turning point in his rookie WEC season.

Performance-wise, Al Harthy and team-mates Michael Dinan and Charlie Eastwood have consistently delivered at the wheel of the No.25 Aston Martin Vantage since the championship curtain-raiser in America back in March. From a strategy point-of-view too, the Oman Racing with TF Sport squad has been equally strong and everyone's combined efforts have certainly warranted more than the ninth and eighth place finishes achieved thus far in the first two races of the campaign.

Frustratingly, the Balance of Performance grading for the Aston Martin in the GTE Am class has left the car struggling



Ahmad Al Harthy

for outright pace and top speed against the competition from the likes of Ferrari and Porsche. For the upcoming Spa race, it is hoped the playing field will have levelled out.

Belgium's famous 4.3-mile track, a staple on the calendar of global and European endurance categories, hosts the TotalEnergies 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps on Saturday with free

practice getting underway on Thursday, 27th April.

Al Harthy, who is supported by key partners Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS, is relishing being back in the Ardennes where the Omani has enjoyed glittering success over the years with podiums, race wins and championship glory.

Most notably clinching the

Pro-Am title in the GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup [then the Blancpain Endurance Cup] at Spa back in 2017, Al Harthy and Oman Racing then went on to win the Total 24 Hours of Spa in 2019 - remarkably from an enforced pitlane start - and duly wrapped up a second Pro-Am crown during the following race in Barcelona, Spain.

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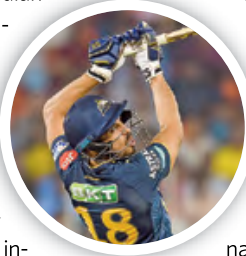
Miller, Manohar blitz helps Gujarat thrash Mumbai

Ahmedabad, India - A batting assault by David Miller and **Abhinav Manohar** powered defending champions Gujarat Titans to a 55-run demolition of Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League on Tuesday.

The left-handed Miller (46 off 22 balls) and rising Indian talent Manohar (21-ball 42) put together 71 runs to steer Gujarat to a mammoth 207-6 in their home Ahmedabad.

The Miller-Manohar show, which included seven sixes, and an unbeaten five-ball 20 by Rahul Tewatia helped Gujarat get 94 runs from the final six overs of mayhem.

Man of the match Manohar said, "I think I have been gifted to time the ball well and I've been doing it from a young age and to do it at this level it feels special, it



feels like a dream."

With their task cut out, Gujarat bowlers kept down five-time champions Mumbai to 152-9 as Afghanistan wrist spinners Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmad shared five wickets between them.

Gujarat, who had a fairytale debut season last year when they won the IPL, moved second in the table behind toppers and four-time winners Chennai Super Kings at the midway stage of the T20 tournament.

At the conclusion of the league stage, the top four teams will qualify for the playoffs. The final is on May 28 in Ahmedabad.

The evening belonged to the Gujarat batters after opener Shubman Gill set the tone for his team's domination with his 56 off

ROY LEADS THE CHARGE AS KOLKATA EASE PAST LACKLUSTRE BANGALORE



Jason Roy of Kolkata Knight Riders plays a shot during their Indian Premier League match against Royal Challengers Bangalore on Wednesday. Roy smashed four sixes in an over, bowled by Shahbaz Ahmed, to lead the charge as Kolkata made 200 for five. Though Virat Kohli, who scored 54 off 37 balls and Mahipal Lomror with an 18 ball 34, threatened for a while, in the end, it was an easy 21-run win for Kolkata.

FANTASTIC FAF AND LORD RINKU, THE STORY SO FAR

New Delhi, India - The Indian Premier League has reached its midway stage with Faf du Plessis firing on all cylinders, Rinku Singh achieving a miracle and MS Dhoni's Chennai Super Kings top of the table. Here are five highlights so far of the current edition of the tournament, which reaches its climax on May 28.

Faf thwacks it

Six-machine Faf du Plessis has lit up the competition for Royal Challengers Bangalore with a barrage of boundaries including one 115-metre (380-foot) missile into the stands. The South African veteran tops the batting chart with 405 runs in seven matches, including five half-centuries, and has gelled with fellow opener Virat Kohli with two century stands.

Australia's Glenn Maxwell, also at Bangalore, has similarly been no slouch in the powerhitting stakes with 23 sixes behind



Faf du Plessis

Du Plessis' 25 - the only two to go above 20. For Chennai, India's normally more sedate Ajinkya Rahane has been a revelation with a strike rate of over 199 in five matches, including an atomic 71 not out off just 29 balls.

Rinku phenomenon

Batsman Rinku Singh became an

overnight sensation with an incredible five sixes in the last five balls of Kolkata Knight Riders' against-the-odds chase against a stunned Gujarat Titans.

Teammate Venkatesh Iyer called him "Lord Rinku" after the match-winning unbeaten 21-ball 48 and the 25-year-old followed up his performance with two half-centuries in the next four matches.

Big buys sizzle

Punjab made history by picking Sam Curran as the most expensive IPL player for \$2.23 million and the all-rounder has more than delivered with some stellar performances including a match-winning 55 on Saturday.

England's white-ball wizard has also led Punjab in three matches - two wins and a loss - in the absence of injured skipper Shikhar Dhawan.

Australia's Cameron Green overcame some ordinary scores

to hit 64 off 40 balls and took a wicket with his pace bowling for Mumbai Indians last week to live up to his \$2.11 million price tag.

Warner's Delhi flop

Delhi Capitals have now registered two successive victories but after five losses Ricky Ponting's men remain bottom of the 10-team pile without injured talisman Rishabh Pant.

Skipper David Warner has been among the runs but admitted his struggles with a relatively poor strike rate of 120, well behind the likes of Du Plessis on 165.

SKY falls in

Dubbed "SKY" or "Mr. 360" for his all-round hitting prowess including the audacious scoop shot, Suryakumar Yadav smashed his first fifty of the season this weekend but has struggled to meet big expectations.

AFP

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'DREAM NIGHT'

Girona's Castellanos hits four against Madrid, Real Sociedad hold off Betis

Barcelona, Spain - Girona striker Taty Castellanos hit an incredible four goals as his side thrashed champions Real Madrid 4-2 in La Liga on Tuesday, helping leaders Barcelona edge closer to the trophy.

Carlo Ancelotti's Madrid are 11 points behind Barcelona having played one extra match, with this defeat virtually killing any hope they had remaining of defending the title.

Fourth-place Real Sociedad earned a hard-fought 0-0 draw at Real Betis to frustrate the Andalusians, fifth, ensuring a six-point gap remains between them.

Girona's Castellanos was left in tears after missing a big chance against Barcelona earlier in April in a goalless draw, but made amends in spectacular fashion at Montilivi against Madrid.

The Argentine striker, on loan at Girona from New York City FC - owned by the City group - exposed gaps in Madrid's defence ahead of their Champions League semi-final tie against Manchester City in May.

Castellanos shut down his social media accounts after his bad night in front of goal at Camp Nou, but thanked those close to him for their support.

"It was a dream night, we had a great game against one of the best teams in the world, it was a dream night," Castellanos said.

"I never imagined this, (I'm) enjoying it with our fans, with the

people who have sent me support - my family, people in Argentina, they are always supporting me and that's fundamental."

In April 2022 Castellanos hit four goals for New York City against Real Salt Lake and repeated the trick a little over a year later.

"Obviously they are different days, it was a dream to score against Madrid and to score four - you can't even imagine it," he added.

"I'm very happy for everything,

I never imagined this, (I'm) enjoying it with our fans, with the people who have sent me support - my family, people in Argentina, they are always supporting me

TATY CASTELLANOS

for the fans, for the lads."

Castellanos now has 11 goals in La Liga this season in 29 appearances.

Ancelotti had said his team needed to stay in a positive winning dynamic in the league to stay at the top of their game in Europe, but badly took their eye off the ball in Girona.

"A tough night, yes, when you lose a game like that it's a tough night," said the Italian.

"On a defensive level it was a bad game, and that was the key to the match... the individual level

was lower than normal too.

Ancelotti was hampered by striker Karim Benzema taking a knock in the win over Celta Vigo at the weekend, while goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois did not travel because of a stomach problem among other absentees.

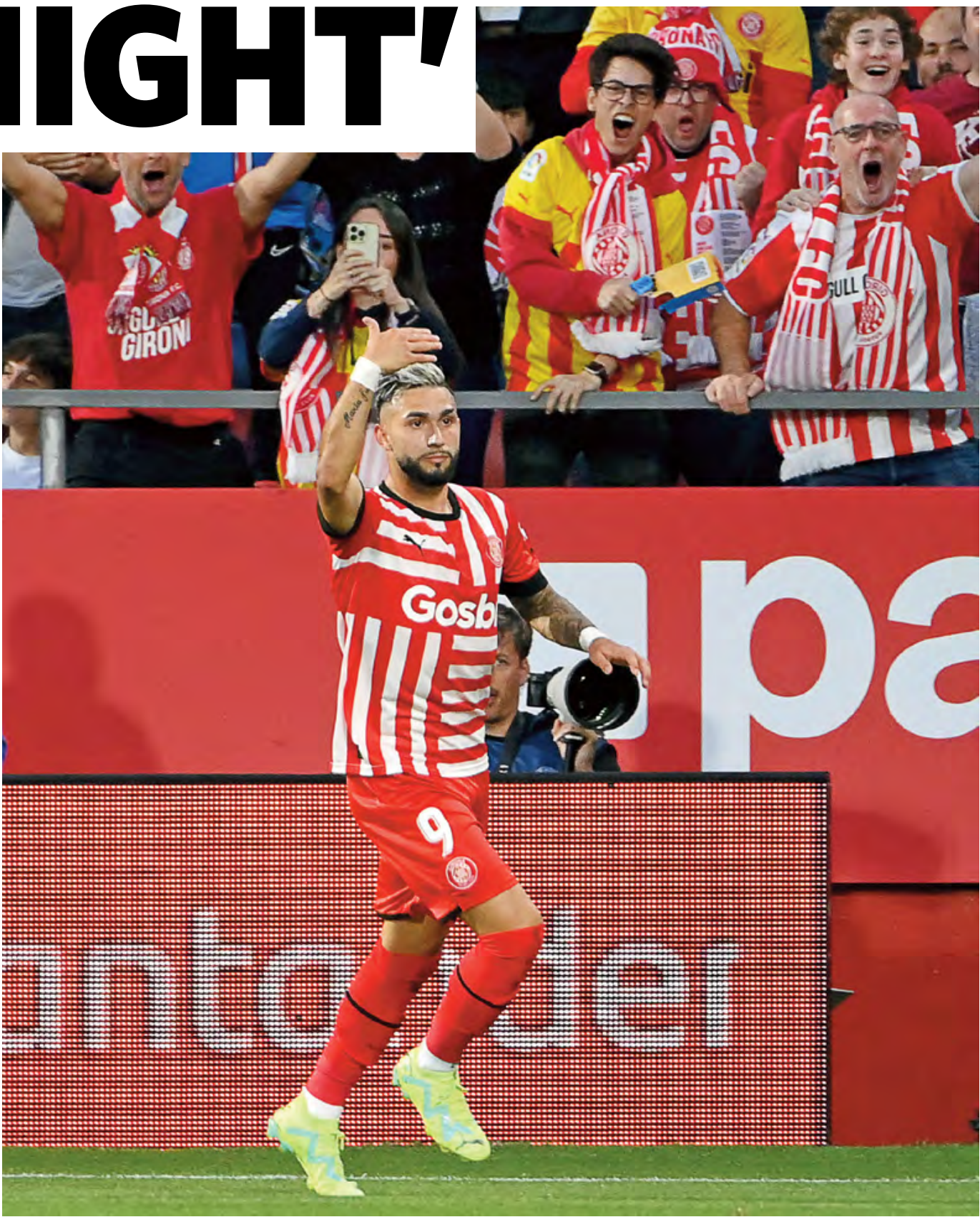
Former Madrid defender Miguel Gutierrez set up the opening goal with a cross for Castellanos, which he headed home from six yards out after 12 minutes.

Castellanos doubled Girona's lead after 24 minutes when he

got in behind Eder Militao and blasted through Andriy Lunin's legs. Vinicius Junior pulled one back for Real Madrid with a header from Marco Asensio's fine inswinging cross, giving them hope of a second half comeback.

However Castellanos netted his third just 36 seconds after the interval after a fine run and cross from Yan Couto. The striker pounced again after 62 minutes, again capitalising on a Militao mistake to net his and Girona's fourth.

AFP



Girona's Taty Castellanos celebrates after scoring his fourth goal against Real Madrid in their Spanish league match on Tuesday (AFP)

Erik Ten Hag tells Manchester United to expect 'mad' Tottenham

London, United Kingdom - Manchester United boss Erik ten Hag expects to face a "mad" Tottenham on Thursday following Spurs' humiliating 6-1 defeat by Newcastle but has insisted no opponent can be "hungrier" than we are.

Spurs' embarrassing loss to the Magpies led to the sacking of acting head coach Christian Stellini. Tottenham have now appointed Ryan Mason as their caretaker boss.

But United themselves have had to recover from some disap-



Erik ten Hag

pointing results this season, with Ten Hag telling a pre-match news conference on Wednesday: "We had some, not so often, that we have to bounce back.

"Definitely (more than I would like) but it happens with all the great teams, even Real Madrid, eh? It's obvious they (Tottenham) had a really bad defeat. Of course, then they are mad. That can be fuel for bouncing back.

"But it's about us. An opponent can never be more hungry than we (are), so that is how we have to prepare the game."

Burnley beat rivals Blackburn to seal Championship title

London, United Kingdom - Burnley clinched the Championship title at the home of local rivals Blackburn as Manuel Benson's strike secured a 1-0 win at Ewood Park on Tuesday.

Vincent Kompany's men were far from their best in a keenly contested Lancashire derby but did enough to not only lift the title, but also dent Rovers' chance of climbing into the play-off places.

Benson curled home his 12th goal of the season with Burnley's only shot on target to open up a 13-point lead over second-placed



Burnley players celebrate with coach Vincent Kompany after their triumph

Sheffield United, who have four games remaining.

Blackburn remain outside the

playoff places on goal difference after their winless run stretched to eight matches.

ACC Premier Cup: Oman rout Saudi Arabia to enter semis

Muscat - A clinical performance by Oman saw them whip Saudi Arabia by 72 runs to secure a spot in semi-finals of the ongoing ACC Men's Premier Cup at the TU Ground in Kathmandu, Nepal, on Wednesday. Chasing a huge total of 366/7 set up by Oman, the Saudis were bowled out for 294 in the 47th over.

Following the victory, Oman are on top of Group A with six points while hosts Nepal, which will play against Qatar in their last league game on Thursday, have five points. Malaysia and Saudi Arabia finished third and fourth in the pool with four and three points respectively. Qatar have yet to open their account. Nepal are favourites to top the group as they face bottom-place Qatar, and a win will take them past Oman with seven points.

The top two from each group qualifies for the semi-finals with the Group A topper due to meet Group B second-placed team while Group B winners will meet Group A runners-up.

UAE lead Group B with six

points after concluding their group engagements. Hong Kong have five points while their next opponents, Kuwait, have four. The winners between Hong Kong and Kuwait on Thursday will seal the spot in the last-four stage. Oman will play either UAE or the winners of Hong Kong or Kuwait in the semi-finals, scheduled to be held on Saturday.

Playing their concluding league Group A match on Wednesday, Saudi Arabia got off to a disappointing start as Waaqar ul Hassan became the first of his four victims to leave the team at 1/7 in the third over.

However, Abdul Waheed and Saad Khan, then put up a strong fight back as they shared a 177-run stand in 27 overs to keep the team in the chase of a victory target of 367 runs.

Jay Odedra gave Oman the much-needed breakthrough in the 30th over that changed the course of the match. A double strike from him sent back both the settled batters, first Khan castled by Odedra for 78, and then



Oman's Jatinder Singh celebrates after scoring a half century

two balls later, Waheed caught behind by Khushi for 86-ball 95 that included 14 boundaries and a six.

Two overs later, Odedra had his third wicket of the match when he sent back Manan Ali and Saudis were 189/4 to leave Oman in the driver's seat.

match for his all-round performance as he took 2/41 after smashing a half-century. Ayaan Khan also was among wickets with 1/56.

Earlier, Oman batters made merry after being put to bat first by Saudi Arabia. The openers - Jatinder Singh and Kashyap Pra-

Bilal Khan was the most successful bowler with 4/75 while Odedra grabbed 3/61. Skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, once again, was named the player of the match for his all-round performance

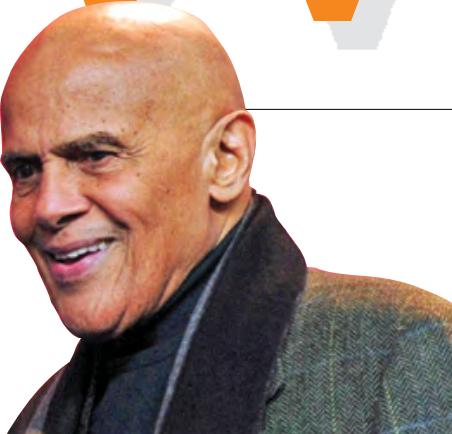
Skipper Hisham Sheikh (36) and Abdul Wahid (25) put up some semblance of a fight, but the rest of the batters fell cheaply as Oman bowled their opposition for 294 in the 47th over.

Bilal Khan was the most successful bowler with 4/75 while Odedra grabbed 3/61. Skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, once again, was named the player of the

japati - who have been in good form in the tournament, slammed the bowlers from the start and raced to a century-partnership in just 12.1 overs with both batters nearing half-centuries.

Saudi Arabia got their first success with Oman at 125 when Prajapati departed for a 53-ball 51 that included six boundaries and two maximums.

Weekend



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END OF AN ERA
Harry Belafonte died of congestive heart failure at his New York home



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IN TOWN
Oman celebrates Eid al Fitr with prayers and sermons this week



16

ENTERTAINMENT
A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood



Land odyssey with a punch

Devgn, who had made his debut as an actor with antics like riding two bikes in Phool aur Kaante, has this time repeated the stunt as a director in Bholaa



BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: **BHOLAA**
Genre: Action-Adventure
Starring: Ajay Devgn, Amala Paul, Tabu, Abhishek Bachchan

By Anirban Ray

After the instant success of Shah Rukh Khan's *Pathaan*, Bollywood is now toeing the line of 'sleek, yet mindless' action flicks. The latest is Ajay Devgn's *Bholaa* - a 180-minute roller-coaster packed with punches (no pun intended) and 'choreographed bobs and weaves' with a bunch of rugged yet stupid goons. (Didn't we see enough of that in a string of Rohit Shetty hits!)

Somehow, Bollywood flicks have always had a trump card when the protagonist has been a dark character with a good conscience. Viewers seem to relish that with a never satiating appetite, whether in mainstream Hindi cinema or in southern blockbusters. And *Bholaa* (the character) stands out as just that for the umpteenth time.

With both, a macho and a gorgeous, lineup of several big names in the cast, *Bholaa* is actor Ajay Devgn's directorial debut - we knew he'd get there sooner or later. It's always interesting to watch an actor direct or a director act (aka Raj Kapoor or Charlie Chaplin). And obviously, there will be several pitfalls and loopholes when a director chooses to be in front of the camera, that, too, as the lead actor.

We see some spark in Devgn as he juggles with many hats and, indeed, hints about his directorial talent were all out there in the 2020 biographical blockbuster - *Tanhaji* - the unsung warrior which churned out a whopping R3.75bn (RO17.66mn), posing a formidable competition for Bollywood's *Bhajiyaan*.

Bholaa tells the tale of an ex-prisoner

named *Bholaa* who is to meet his daughter for the first time in ten years. But his journey turns out to be a rather difficult task when IPS Diana Joseph (Tabu) asks him to drive a truck full of 40 unconscious police officers. They send out multiple gangs to kill the cops in the truck and capture Diana, but *Bholaa* turns into an super force and fights them all. It had to be done with an endless cat-and-mouse-chase involving the truck being driven recklessly across state highways to get the better of crude-looking goons who are seen waiting with weird weapons to nab him.

This film seems to consolidate the Devgn-Tabu pair which went down well with audiences after the success of *Dhishyam I* and *II* and *De De Pyar De*. Tabu, with her strong dialogue delivery and acting skills and kohlladen eyes, it is a delight to watch in a badass role than as a girl-next-door. She has good screen presence that matches Devgn's celluloid charisma.

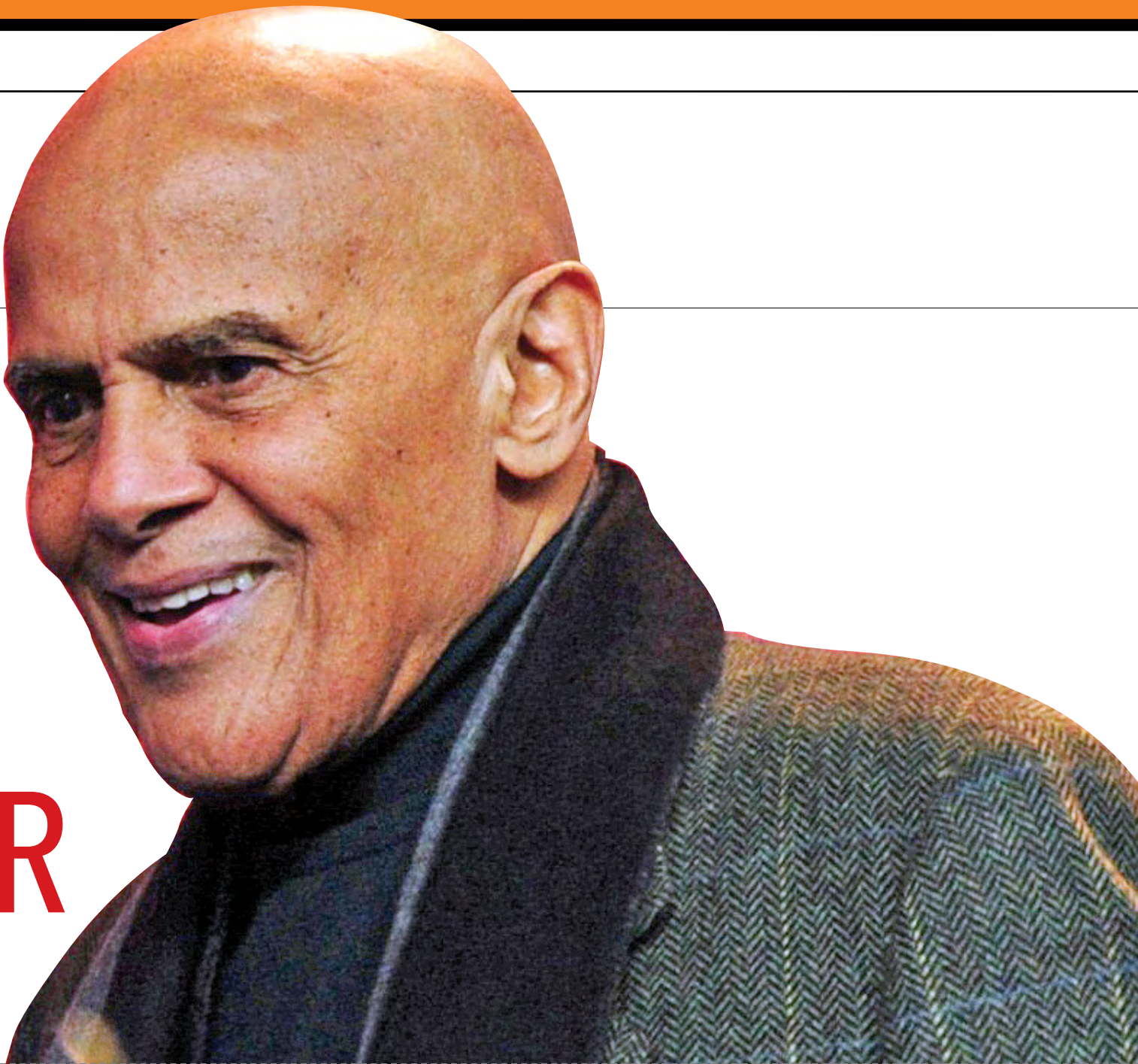
The film is a remake of Lokesh Kana-garaj's Tamil film *Kaithi* (2019). Box-office wise, the film was lucky to witness two big holidays on weekends (Ram Navami and Easter) that helped it soar the charts. Though there are a few adrenalin rush moments in the movie, the action scenes often fall flat due to improper character development, irrelevant fights and unwanted back-ground scores.

Devgn, who had made his debut as an actor with antics like riding two bikes in *Phool aur Kaante*, has this time repeated the stunt as a director in *Bholaa*. And, perhaps, this is his USP, to attract two different age groups who equally relish his histrionics.

end of an era

Harry Belafonte died of congestive heart failure at his New York home

THE PERFORMER THE ACTIVIST



This file photo shows US singer Harry Belafonte during a performance in Paris on September 24, 1988 (AFP)

Harry Belafonte, the superstar entertainer who introduced a Caribbean flair to mainstream US music and became well known for his deep personal investment in civil rights, died on Tuesday in Manhattan. He was 96.

The barrier-breaking artist-activist died of congestive heart failure at his New York home, his publicist said in a statement.

Born in Harlem to a Jamaican mother and a father from the French territory of Martinique, the calypso singer and actor spent part of his childhood in Jamaica before returning to New York - a binational upbringing that shaped his musical and political outlooks, and saw him campaign tirelessly for racial equality.

Belafonte's calypso, the genre of Caribbean music that drew from West African and French influences, saw him skyrocket to fame in the midst of post-World War II prosperity and suburbanisation.

His third album, entitled *Calypso* and released in 1956, became the first LP to sell more than one million copies in the United States.

The album featured what would become Belafonte's signature song, *Day-O* (The Banana Boat Song) - he scoffed at the idea it was simply feel-good dance music, calling the track a rebellious take on workers demanding fair wages.

Belafonte "used his platform in almost a subversive way because he would sneak messages in there, revolutionary messages," crooner John Legend said on Tuesday at a *Time* magazine event.

"When people just thought he was singing about good times and the islands, he was always infusing messages of protest and revolution in everything he did."

Legend was one of many, from all walks of American life, to send tributes; singers, politicians and activists hailed Belafonte's talent, advocacy and trailblazing contributions.

'Harry Belafonte was not only a great entertainer, but he was a courageous leader in the fight against racism and worker oppression,' progressive senator Bernie Sanders wrote.

Struggle

Even early in his career, Belafonte did not shy away from controversy.

He starred in the 1957 film *Island in the Sun* as an upwardly mobile Black politician on a fictional island who becomes involved with a woman from the white elite, in one of Hollywood's earliest depictions of interracial romance.

In 1954, he became the first African American man to win a Tony Award, for his role in the Broadway musical *John Murray Anderson's Almanac*.

Six years later, he became the first African American to win an Emmy Award for *Tonight with Belafonte*, his musical television program. He also won three Grammys and a humanitarian award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

But his life's work went far beyond performance, with both his music and acting taking a supporting role to his activism.

"When people think of activism, they always think some sacrifice is involved, but I've always considered it a privilege and an opportunity," he said in a 2004 speech at Emory University.

He opened his own coffers to back the civil rights movement, becoming close with

Martin Luther King Jr.

Belafonte brought the civil rights leader along with the Birmingham, Alabama pastor Fred Shuttlesworth to his New York apartment to plan out the 1963 campaign to integrate the notoriously racist southern city.

When King was thrown into a Birmingham jail, Belafonte raised US\$50,000 - nearly US\$500,000 in current value - to post his bail.

"Belafonte's global popularity and his commitment to our cause is a key ingredient to the global struggle for freedom and a powerful tactical weapon in the civil rights movement here in America," King once said.

King's daughter Bernice on Tuesday posted a photo of a crying Belafonte seated with her mother Coretta at the slain activist's funeral.

'When I was a child, #HarryBelafonte showed up for my family in very compassionate ways,' she wrote.

'I won't forget...Rest well, sir.'

Game-changer

Harold George Bellanfanti Jr was born on March 1, 1927, in New York's Harlem.

As a child, he moved to Jamaica with his mother and younger brother, and described his Jamaican roots as shaping 'almost everything' in his life.

Belafonte did not grow up believing he would enjoy a promising career.

He had vocal gifts and striking good looks but suffered from dyslexia and dropped out of high school to serve in the US Navy during World War II. When he returned, he worked as a janitor.

At one point, he received a tip of two tickets to the American Negro Theater, which inspired him to take acting classes.

He then met Sidney Poitier, who was born just eight days before Belafonte to parents from The Bahamas; the actor would become a lifelong friend.

Despite his frequent criticism of American policies, Belafonte said the United States 'offers a dream that cannot be fulfilled as easily anywhere else in the world' - but one that is only attainable through 'struggle'.

Beyond Belafonte's involvement in the civil rights movement, President John F Kennedy appointed him to the advisory committee of the soft-power initiative Peace Corps meant to promote US goals abroad.

But the singer said he wanted the program to also expose young Americans to the struggles of the developing world.

Belafonte spent increasing time in Africa, especially Kenya, and became one of the foremost US artists fighting apartheid in South Africa.

His album *Paradise in Gazankulu*, released in 1988, revolved around the oppression of black South Africans and was recorded partially in Johannesburg with local artists.

"Your passion, love, knowledge and respect for Africa was unlimited," said Beninese singer Angelique Kidjo. "Your wisdom made me strong. Your music inspired me."

Belafonte also initiated the USA for Africa supergroup whose *We Are The World* song in 1985 raised millions of dollars for Ethiopia's famine victims.

He is survived by his wife Pamela, four children and two stepchildren, and eight grandchildren.

Accepting an award in Hollywood in 2014, Belafonte said that the entertainment industry had a sorry past record on race, but offered hope for the future.

"I really wish I could be around for the rest of the century to see what Hollywood does with the rest of the century," he said.

"Maybe, just maybe, it could be civilization's game-changer."

AFP



When people just thought he was singing about good times and the islands, he was always infusing messages of protest and revolution in everything he did

JOHN LEGEND



Seeberger

A PURE PLEASURE.

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take a break

IN TOWN

EID AL FITR 2023



Glimpses of various parts of Oman as the sultanate celebrated Eid al Fitr with prayers and sermons (Photos: V K Shafeer)



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which company carries the construction of submarines, missile-boats and destroyers and so on for the India navy and offshore supply vessels and well-head platforms and so on?
A. Mazgaon Dock Limited (MDL)
B. Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineering Limited (GRSE)
C. Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL)
D. None of the above

02. Which is the major mineral found in Punjab?
A. Coal
B. Gold
C. Salt
D. Iron

03. When was Shakespeare born?
A. 1564 AD
B. 1618 AD
C. 1642 AD
D. 1776 AD

Answers: 1. A 2. C 3. A

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

D	O	N	K
D	E	U	I
S	D	E	C
C	E	L	A

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

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Real problems require real solutions, not just window dressing. You have to get to the root of the issue and face the truth about what is really going on here. The time when you could just smile and pretend that everything is okay has long passed, and you need to admit that things have gone in a direction that could be best described as disastrous.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your brain is going to be focused on your future now. You're thinking about what will be coming into your life and not as concerned with what's going on in it today, but this isn't a bad thing. Stretching yourself to imagine what could be will help you create futuristic ideas that can guide you in making decisions. It's also a great way to visualise success in a new relationship or work project.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

An unthinking person might blurt out something that hurts your feelings today, but getting all emotional about it isn't going to help you feel better. Calmly ask them to clarify what they mean, and they'll probably be mortified that what they said upset you. These misunderstandings are going to be common right now, unfortunately. Your emotions are right under the surface.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Good energy is coming your way early today, which is good because you'll need it to help you prepare for something big that's coming your way later on. Fun, creativity, and even a tiny bit of exciting drama are all in your near future, but you'll have to get rid of all the boring tasks first. Hit the ground running. The sooner you get the work done, the sooner you'll get to the good times.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Try to avoid giving a friend a loan or asking for one today. By having no financial dealings with others right now, you can avoid making complicated commitments that will only end in frustration. There's no reason to mingle your professional and personal lives right now, no matter how attractive you think that new coworker might be.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

As you work on each of your various projects today, remember what you're doing all the work for. Think of the end result and the feeling of accomplishment you'll have when it's all done. Few things make you feel better than looking back with pride on a job well done! Keep focused on making progress, and try to speed up your output. Do whatever it takes to make significant headway.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You've been doing too many things on the go lately, and this reckless pace has to stop. Sure, you've been promising yourself for days that you're going to cut back and get some downtime, but when are you going to actually do it? Make that day today. Cancel or postpone whatever you can and give yourself a few hours with nothing to do.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Changing your tactics every now and then is not just a good way to keep life interesting, it's also a great way to generate an air of mystery about yourself. And boy, do people love a mystery! So find a different approach to all those issues that come your way today. If you make a joke in the face of tension, try taking it more seriously.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Try to mix things up a little today. Don't behave the way that other people expect you to. See what happens when you act out of character. If you're usually shy in a new social situation, unleash your inner performer and see what it's like to be the centre of attention.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Prepare to sign on the figurative dotted line today, because now is the right time to advance a project, commit to a sale, or begin a new relationship. You have to stop pondering and start committing or your opportunities will fly away from you. Even if you feel you're taking a risk, what if you are? Life calls for risks.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Little details like names and dates are overwhelming now, and you're getting a bit behind when it comes to keeping track of them. But don't worry. If you get on the ball and work out an organizational scheme in the morning, you can get everything done and stay sane. You might have double-booked yourself.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Today, your mental clarity is extremely strong, which means that you'll finally be able to break down that complex challenge you've been struggling with for so long. These smaller bits and pieces will be easier for you to comprehend and work through. If you see other people struggling with their own challenges, share your newfound technique with them.

entertainment

WHEN JENNIFER LOPEZ SLAMMED WINONA RYDER



Celebrities often make mistakes during interviews by saying things they shouldn't ever. At times they do it out of excitement, and sometimes it's their sheer stupidity or arrogance. Jennifer Lopez made a similar mistake early in her career, and it bites her even today. In the scandalous interview, JLo talked about her contemporaries quite brutally and said they were not as talented as her. She mentioned Winona Ryder among those stars, and it has not gone well over the years.

The rumour mills have often buzzed with gossip about Jennifer's dominating behaviour. The diva is apparently a big-time believer of the 'my-way-or-the-highway' policy and always does things her way. In the old interview, she talked about some famous 90s stars, including Salma Hayek, Gwyneth Paltrow, Madonna and Winona and later realised her mistake.



During an interview with *Moviline* in 1998, Jennifer Lopez was asked to comment on her contemporaries. *The Boy Next Door* actress did not have anything pleasant to say about anyone and had her claws out the entire time. While talking about Winona Ryder, she said, "I was never a big fan of hers." The actress has delivered amazing performances in shows and movies like *Stranger Things*, *Little Women*, *Star Trek*, *The Age Of Innocence*, and *Black Swan*. While JLo accepted all of that, she still did not appreciate Winona.

Jennifer Lopez called Winona Ryder's accolades and nods trivial and added, "In Hollywood she's revered, she gets nominated for Oscars, but I've never heard anyone in the public or among my friends say, 'Oh, I love her'." Winona was not the only one on Jennifer's list. While talking about Gwyneth, she had said that she was more famous because of her association with Brad Pitt. Obviously, these statements did not sit well in Hollywood, and the actress realised it shortly afterwards.

While talking to *Vanity Fair*, she realised her mistake and said, "I was so misquoted and so taken out of context, and it's a sore subject for me. I don't like to hurt anybody. I don't like to hurt their feelings. I like to joke, so I do that sometimes. What they wrote in that article hurt people."

COMING SOON

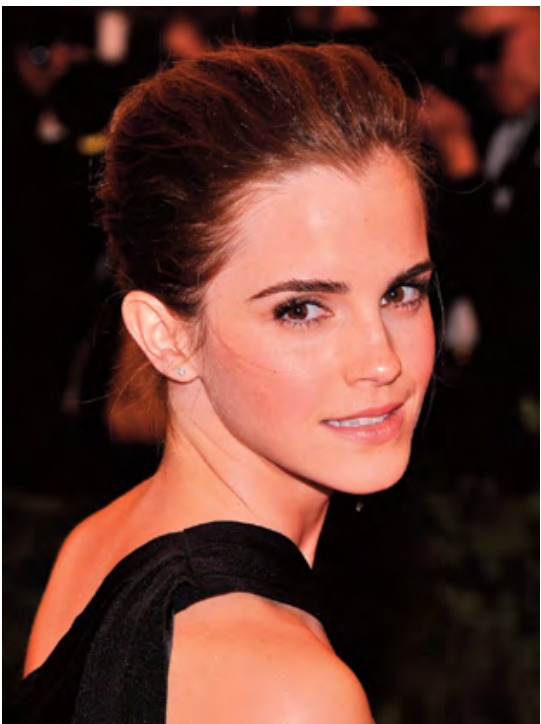
RENFIELD

In this modern monster tale of Dracula's loyal servant, Nicholas Hoult stars as Renfield, the tortured aide to history's most narcissistic boss, Dracula (Oscar® winner Nicolas Cage)

Genre: **Horror**

Starring: **Nicholas Hoult, Nicolas Cage, Ben Schwartz, Adrian Martinez**

Language: **English**



Emma Watson had no idea of who Brad Pitt was

Emma Watson has been an integral part of many people's childhood. Her role as Hermione in the famous Harry Potter movies is loved and appreciated by all. Her character in the films was nerdy and miss know-it-all kind, and at times had problems making friends. Once in an interview, she revealed how she didn't fit the world of her peers or contemporaries. The actress confessed to going against Hermione's image by pretending to be what she thought interested other girls of her age. In doing so, she once shared that she pretended even to have a crush on Brad Pitt.

Pitt is a massive movie star and was one even at the time the Harry Potter movies came out. He has given many noteworthy films over the span of his celebrated career. Emma has no doubt blossomed into a fantastic talent, but she took her time to accept herself completely. Emma Watson once told *Paper* how she tried to fit in with other girls and pretended to have a crush on Brad Pitt. "I watch interviews that I did when the first movie came out and I was so lost! I would think, 'What do young girls talk about? What do they say?' 'I like going shopping and I have a crush on Brad Pitt.' And I had no idea who Brad Pitt really was."



WHAT HAS SHE DONE TO HERSELF?

Aishwarya Rai Bachchan is one of the most beautiful women in the world. She's known globally for her brilliant acting skills and looks. The actress is also among the first women to start working in the West and has done commendable work in the entertainment industry over the years. Aish made a stunning appearance at the Ponniiyin Selvan II media conference and donned a beautiful traditional attire but is getting trolled for her monotonous fashion and hairdo by netizens on social media. Scroll below to take a look at the video.

Bollywood actress Aish made a stunning appearance at the Ponniiyin Selvan II media conference but is getting trolled for her monotonous fashion

Aishwarya is massively popular among her fans, with over 12mn followers on Instagram. She often gives a sneak peek into her luxurious lifestyle with her daughter Aaradhya Bachchan on the photo-sharing platform. Besides her incredible acting skills, Aish often makes headlines for being a doting mom to her 11-year-old daughter, who always accompanies the actress on

her work trips.

Aishwarya Rai Bachchan appeared for the Ponniiyin Selvan II press conference and aced a traditional look for the event. The actress wore an off-white Anarkali suit that came with golden and silver embroidery and detailing all over.

The beauty styled the look with a layered emerald necklace and went with her signature winged eyes with the middle-parting hairdo.

Reacting to her video on social media, a user on Instagram commented, 'What has she done to herself? Why can't she hire a good stylist. It's her life, I understand but when she is in glamour world and everything revolves around it

then shouldn't she be a little updated.' Another user commented, 'iske hair set kro ko' (someone set her hair)



HOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW:
JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 4

Genre: Thriller **Starring:** Keanu Reeves, Donnie Yen, Bill Skarsgard, Lance Reddick, Laurence Fishburne, Ian McShane, Shamier Anderson



EVERY PUNCH KILLS, AND YOU CELEBRATE

The first *John Wick* movie released almost a decade ago, in 2014. The franchise set up an entire culture of assassins for us. It is a system with its own set of rules, obedience, and discipline and is supremely possessive of their existence.

Even with its most overtly exaggerated aspect, the John Wick Franchise never felt like it was doing too much. *Chapter 4* is like the final 'Love You' before the next era begins. While it is almost three hours long, the story is crisp and only branched out as needed. The writing takes its

own time in setting up the world of the High Table and how they are directly behind Wick now.

John Wick: Chapter 4 is the best film in the franchise so far for the very reason that it continues to keep its heart in the right place even when there is so much happening around. Every department has worked with love and to worship the idea of a assassin who dreams of a normal life and is ready to kill the world for it because he promises his dead wife and his dog. Also, there is enough of dog content this time!

Star performer Keanu Reeves is

now synonymous with John Wick, and there is no going back. Every punch feels personal, and every emotion is heartfelt. In a critical moment, a character describes him as 'a ghost in the search of a graveyard,' Reeves makes sure you feel it in his performance. Even with the world against him, he never stops and assesses the risks of his movements because they don't matter to him, and there is no one around him who would be worried. The movie delivers much more than it promises, and Keanu Reeves ensures you don't leave the hall with any complaints.

What's Good: Imagine two 30-minute-long action sequences but not dull for even a second: An insanely amazing Keanu Reeves and an equally fiery script.

What's Bad: If you don't catch this one on the biggest screen possible.

Loo Break: Not at all. Maybe carry a bottle, or wear a diaper, or do any form of workout that teaches you to control your motions.

Watch or Not?: Book your tickets now because the High Table demands your presence.

Rating ★★★★★



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