

Associations for debt relief, marriage soon

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) will soon announce the formation of an association to help debtors and another to facilitate marriages.

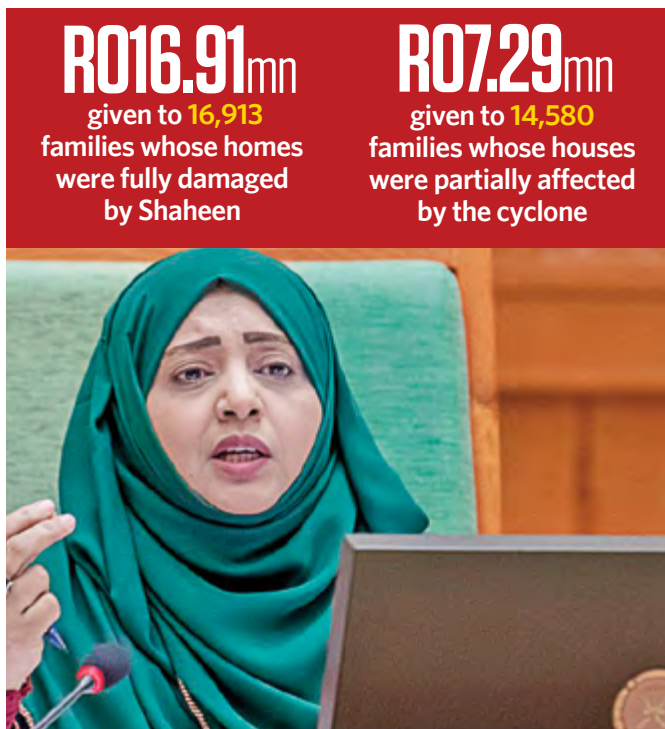
Addressing the Majlis A'Shura on Monday, H E Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, also stated that the ministry disbursed more than RO24mn to support families affected by Cyclone Shaheen.

MoSD is also exerting efforts to include thousands of eligible families, who have not registered, in the National Subsidy System.

H E Laila informed that 37,215 families that are eligible for subsidy have not registered in the National Subsidy System.

MoSD is following up the issue of electricity and water tariffs for families not registered in the subsidy system and all departments affiliated to the ministry in all governorates have been directed to guide these families to register so that they can get subsidised electricity and water.

H E Laila told Majlis A'Shura that MoSD has been dealing with



Financial and housing assistance worth RO17.48mn was given to 288,940 families in 2021

H E LAILA AL NAJJAR

several cases who are unable to pay their utility bills due to the current economic situation.

"They are assisted by disbursing an emergency fund," she said.

H E Laila called on all eligible families to register for the subsidy programme initiated by MoSD.

She informed that immediate financial assistance was provided to 33,687 Cyclone Shaheen victims who applied for help following damages to their homes and properties in Mus-sanah, Suwaiq, Khabourah and

Saham. A total of RO16.91mn was disbursed to 16,913 families whose homes were fully damaged in the cyclone; RO7.29mn given to 14,580 people whose houses were partially affected.

"The ministry also provided financial and housing assistance worth RO17.48mn to 288,940 families in 2021."

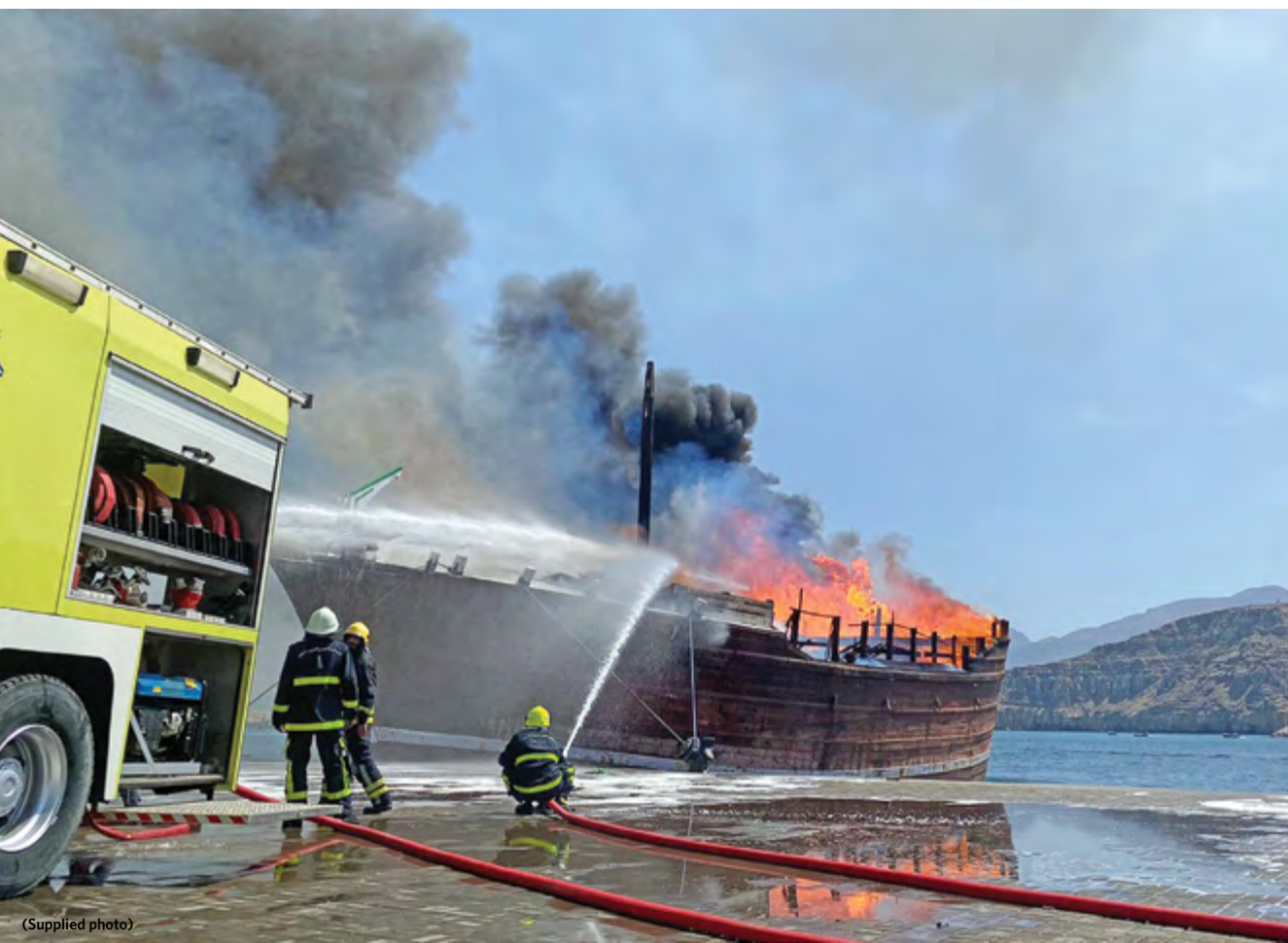
Help for debtors

The Al Gharimeen Charity Association will help debtors who are unable to repay loans. "The Assistant Mufti of Oman has taken cognisance. Work is underway to make an announcement soon. Measures will be put in place to prevent duplication with other associations working for the same cause."

Association to facilitate marriages

"Articles of the association have been framed and we hope to announce it soon," H E Laila said.

Addressing concerns about the lack of specialist in physiotherapy for people with disabilities, the minister urged Omanis to pursue studies in these speciality subjects.



(Supplied photo)

FIRE BREAKS OUT ON SHIP AT KHASAB PORT

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) in Musandam responded to a fire incident in a wooden ship in the port of Khasab where two crew members suffered minor injuries. CDAA teams, in cooperation with the Governorate Police Command and Royal Air Force of Oman, were able to control the fire and prevent it from spreading to other ships anchored in the port, a statement said. CDAA called on ship owners and their employees to adhere to safety procedures.

No Zika virus cases reported in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has announced that no cases of Zika virus have been reported in the sultanate.

A statement issued by MoH said, "Referring to what has been circulated on some social media platforms about registration of cases of Zika in the sultanate, the ministry confirms that no such cases have been reported in Oman."

MoH called on all citizens and residents to obtain correct information from official sources only.

Meanwhile, a spraying programme has been undertaken by MoH to eradicate *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes and larvae. This

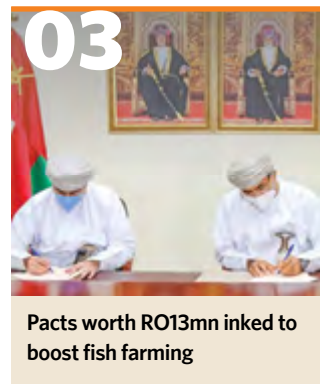
species of mosquito has been known to carry the Zika virus.

The ministry also stated that there is no specific treatment for dengue fever spread by *Aedes Aegypti*. It is treated with pain killers, good rest and plenty of fluids.

MoH urged citizens and residents to visit the nearest health facility if symptoms worsened.

A statement issued by the Department of Blood Bank Services said, "People with dengue fever are not allowed to donate blood for a period of six months."

'As a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of infection, residents of areas where cases of dengue have been registered will not be allowed to donate blood for a period of 28 days.'



ODB plans new post-pandemic recovery packages for SMEs

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following a call by Redha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), to provide more packages to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), authorities are working closely with the sector to make sure SMEs continue their businesses post-pandemic.

In OCCI's Ramadan Nights event held on Sunday under the auspices of H E Dr Mahad bin Saeed Baowain, Minister of Labour, that discussed the challenges and difficulties faced by SMEs and the role of relevant authorities and institutions in facilitating and overcoming these,



Saleh said SMEs play a significant role in global economies as these are responsible for 50 per cent of gross domestic product.

"SMEs are important drivers of economic growth and social development. In addition, they play a major role in stimulating

innovation and competition in the market," he said.

Ibrahim Abdulla al Hosni, chairman of OCCI's SMEs committee, said that an integrated system is needed to organise and empower SMEs. "There is also a need to establish a unified

SMEs are important drivers of economic growth and social development. In addition, they play a major role in stimulating innovation and competition in the market

REDHA AL SALEH

centre to complete transactions for all small enterprises, besides supporting Omani products."

On his part, Dr Abdul Aziz bin Mohammad al Hinai, CEO of Oman Development Bank (ODB), informed that the bank's portfolio currently includes ap-

proximately 30,000 loans, including 20,000 loans to SMEs and micro enterprises, constituting the largest share.

He explained that in the past two years, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the bank provided nearly 8,000 emergency loans to small investors, and a package of 'rescue loans' to SMEs in the form of 'working capital' that are repaid between 90 to 360 days.

"Most of these loans were used to pay the institutions' obligations for their continuity and overcoming the challenges. The bank is planning new post-pandemic recovery packages."

Hinai further added that the assets of ODB are currently valued at RO200mn, and that it has

existing funds in the market amounting to RO195mn in industrial, agricultural, fisheries, services, technical, technological and other sectors.

"The bank has financed loans over RO1bn since its inception for more than 100,000 projects," he said.

Abdulaziz bin Saeed al Raisi, vice president of Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises Development, stressed that the authority works to support entrepreneurs through the development and empowerment of such institutions, marketing and promoting these, searching for opportunities for them, and finding financing means, besides promoting and developing craft industries.



Abu Huraira reported:
The Messenger of
Allah said,
‘Whoever does not
leave evil words and
deeds while fasting,
Allah does not need him
to leave food and drink.’

Talhah ibn Ubayd reported: Whenever the Messenger of Allah saw the crescent moon of Ramadan, he would say, 'O Allah, bring it over us with blessings and faith, safety and Islam. My Lord and your Lord is Allah.'

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

in Uganda, too, like in other countries, who make sure the less privileged have food for iftar to break their fast. Kampala resident Sulaiman Said Hassan is one among those generous individuals.

"Everyday, my family and I prepare meals that I transport to the masjid for distribution at iftar time. Rice and chicken or meat stew and matooke are common," he said from mpala.

"In Uganda, non-Muslims also rejoice about Ramadan. They mingle with others in the masjid, having the food that is distributed. In this way, they get to learn more about Islam," Sulaiman informed.

Describing a typical day during Ramadan, he said, "I start my day at 4am when I say my night prayers, followed by Fajr prayers and taking the children to school and then going to office where I get very busy.

"I start preparing iftar after Duhr, if I have to, but most of the time it's done by my wife. I usually help her after picking up the children from school at 3pm. Since there isn't much time between Maghrib and Isha, I immediately drive to the masjid for Isha and Taraweeh prayers."

Though the Muslim population in Uganda is small, compared to other neighbouring countries like Kenya and Tanzania, the fervour of Ramadan is evident everywhere. "The festivities are at a peak in the masjid during iftar," he said.

 @shadadm

Fervour of Ramadan inescapable in Uganda

Shaddad al Musalmy
Muscat

Uganda's historical links with Islamic nations, including Oman, aren't well known but it's a safe haven for people of all faiths. The country has a diverse and rich culture, and is remarkably hospitable to people of all faiths.

In this edition of the 'Ramadan around the world' series, we visit Uganda to explore how Oman played a role in introducing Islam in the country, and influenced Ugandan culture and tradition.

According to Mohamed Nasser Ammar al Harthi, who has researched and is currently in the final stage of publishing a book on Omanis in Uganda,



Omanis travelled deep into Africa from its eastern coast during the reign of Seyyid Said bin Sultan in Zanzibar. Uganda was one of the major destinations for Omanis.

"In 1844, Ahmed bin Ibrahim al Amri, who introduced Islam to the King of Buganda in Uganda, was the first Omani and foreigner to enter Uganda," Harthi said.

You can't escape the spirit and feel of Ramadan. It's everywhere. Everyone, regardless of faith, feels it's Ramadan. There is peace and respect for all those fasting

NGABIRANO AZIZ

Dishdashas, locally known as 'kanzu' - worn by men in some parts of East Africa - become more visible during Ramadan.

"The King of Buganda (Kabaka) who accepted Islam was the first to put on the Omani dishdasha and the bisht (bisuti) followed by his senior officials in 1844. The kanzu was then adopted as standard clothing for men in Buganda

and slowly spread to other neighbouring regions, including Toro, Bunyoro and Busoga," Harthi informed.

"The pattern and design of the original Omani dishdasha, which women traditionally wove by hand, continues in Uganda, albeit now it's tailored locally."

Speaking to *Muscat Daily* from Uganda's capital Kampala, Ngabirano Aziz said, "People go to mosques during

the month of Ramadan wearing kanzus. It's a unique tradition that continues today.

"You can't escape the spirit and feel of Ramadan. It's everywhere. Everyone, regardless of faith, feels it's Ramadan. There is peace and respect for all those fasting. Rice is staple food during Ramadan. People break fast with bananas and porridge."

Aziz, however, said that his day is filled with mixed emotions in these hard times, mostly wondering if he'll manage to get food for iftar for his family. "I can't devote most of my time supplicating, but rather struggling to find what to put on the table. When I get money, which sometimes I don't, I buy food to break the fast," he said. But there are people

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Labour

ANNOUNCEMENT

Internal Tender Committee, Ministry of Labour, invites the following Tender:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Last date for electronic purchasing	Last date of tender submission	Documents fee (RO)
4 /2022	Provide a database storage unit for the supply system (oracle)	Wednesday 18/05/2022 at 02:00 pm	Sunday 29/05/2022 at 10:00 am	R.O 25/=

- Specialized establishments can obtain electronic documents from this link below, starting from Tuesday 19/04/2022, 7:30 AM.

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om/>

- Each bid is to be attached with a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate of (1%) of the value of the tender for the Ministry of Manpower, valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission of the tender.
- Each electronic bid is to be attached with a copy of the bank guarantee.
- Tenders envelopes will be opened at 11:00am on the same day.

(The ministry is not bound to accept the lowest price of or any tender)

labour_OMAN



Bank Muscat supports Fak Kurban, helps resolve 260 humanitarian cases

Muscat - Bank Muscat has extended its support to the ninth edition of the Fak Kurbah initiative in line with its commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility and community service. The initiative is organised by Omani Lawyers Association in coordination with the Ministry of Social Development and the Council of Administrative Affairs of the Judiciary.

This year's contribution by Bank Muscat will reunite 260 citizens with their families on the joyous occasion of Eid al Fitr. The bank has supported 826 humanitarian cases in the previous four years. None of these cases relate to payments involving banks or financing institutions in the sultanate.

The Fak Kurbah initiative is implemented through voluntary efforts by the Omani Lawyers Association. The initiative has contributed to resolving many cases and succeeded in bringing joy and happiness to many



Hamza Abbas al Ajmi

Omani families. The association has been working tirelessly since 2012 for the success of the initiative in partnership with a number of partners.

Dr Muhammad bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, supervisor of Fak Kurbah, said, "Bank Muscat is one of the leading institutions that is continuously supporting the initiative. Continuing the support it provides to the initiative, and to emphasise its strategy in social responsibility, Bank Muscat has contributed to resolve 260 cases

this year. The initiative is based on the support of individuals and institutions that have proven their eagerness to participate in this noble cause over the years, thereby confirming the values of solidarity and cooperation to help those in need and relieve their distress."

Zadjali confirmed that Bank Muscat is keen to support the initiative. "It is continuing its contribution for the fifth year, and this is what prompts us to invite other institutions in this country to follow the bank's example in providing contributions to achieve the goals of this initiative."

On his part, Hamza Abbas al Ajmi, deputy general manager, credit, Bank Muscat, expressed his gratitude and appreciation for the Omani Lawyers Association and all others involved in the initiative. "The bank is proud to support this unique and noble initiative by the Oman Lawyers Association, which has been one of the most successful social re-

sponsibility initiatives in the Sultanate and has brought joy to many Omani families in their hour of need. The bank is delighted to support this great humanitarian initiative for the fifth consecutive year. It has helped secure the release of 1,086 citizens who met the eligibility norms in the past five years, and we thank the Omani Lawyers Association for initiating such an important programme that strengthens our community."

Ajmi added that the bank is proud to be a leading institution in the field of social responsibility in the sultanate and will continue to take part in initiatives, which serve the community and spread happiness amongst those facing hardship. "The bank will continue to join hands with civil society institutions for various social development initiatives, such as Fak Kurbah, which bring joy and happiness to those who require assistance, especially during Ramadan."

Phase 1 development of Ain al Kasfa springs begins

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to revitalise tourism and the economy, South Batinah Municipality has started the Phase 1 development of Ain al Kasfa hot spring area in the wilayat of Rustaq.

Nasser bin Rashid al Abri, a member of Shura Council representing Rustaq, said on Monday, "South Batinah Municipality has started developing the Ain al Kasfa area in cooperation with the office of the Governor of South Batinah and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. The executing company has started Phase 1 of the construction work of the project, which will include the expansion of car park to 33 slots, establishing new toilets, swimming pool, a park, umbrellas to provide shade, children's rides and kiosks."

According to Abri, the development also includes covering Ain al Kasfa with a transparent roof. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism will also restore the



(Supplied photo)

watch tower adjacent to Ain al Kasfa.

The Ain al Kasfa hot water spring is a popular tourist destination. Swimming is not allowed at the site, but the spring is frequently visited for its therapeutic sulphur content.

Meanwhile, according to an official in the office of the Governor of South Batinah, the governorate is exerting all efforts to attract investment and develop public facilities. The governorate

has started implementing 36 projects to develop many of its landmarks, some of which are in their final stages of completion.

All these projects are part of the Governorates Development Programme, which is being implemented under the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq. In the 10th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) RO20mn is allocated for each governorate to develop their local economies.

Pacts worth RO13mn inked to boost fish farming

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) and Blue Waters company signed two usufruct agreements on Monday for marine sites in the wilayat of Quriyat. The sites will be used for tuna fish fattening and finfish farming.

The agreements were signed by H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and Sheikh Nasser bin Sulaiman al Harthy, chairman of the Board of Directors of Blue Waters.

The tuna fish fattening project is a first-of-its-kind initiative for yellowfin tuna fattening in Oman that will target global markets importing high-quality tuna fish, such as restaurants for traditional Japanese dishes.

Spread over 193 hectares, the project will produce 400 tonnes



(Supplied photo)

of tuna in the initial phase and expand to 2,000 tonnes at an investment value of RO4.8mn. Under the finfish agreement, the company will raise the production capacity of its existing floating cage farm in Quriyat to 5,000 tonnes from the current 3,000 tonnes in the next three years.

According to the agreement,

the project will be expanded by exploiting a new marine site in Ramla area in Quriyat on an area of 3.75mn sqm and with an investment value of RO8.6mn.

Blue Waters, a fully-owned subsidiary of Fisheries Development Oman, achieved a remarkable increase in production of farmed finfish in 2021, reaching 1,350 tonnes, an increase of 27

per cent compared to 2020. It seeks to increase production to 2,350 tonnes this year.

Nabil bin Salem al Ruwaidi, CEO of Blue Waters, said that the new projects are part of the company's expansion plan and its vision to advance the fish farming industry in the sultanate to meet the increasing demand for fish in the GCC.

He added that Blue Waters' products are very popular among GCC consumers because of high quality. "This is in addition to providing consumers with fresh produce within 24 hours, after being subject to quality control standards and measures."

Ruwaidi said that the firm is planning to expand its operations in Musandam and develop an integrated plan to establish another fish farming area in the wilayat of Khasab.

Blue Waters currently farms European sea bream fish in floating cages in Musandam.

SATISFIED WITH TELECOM SERVICES?

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority's (TRA) survey on the satisfaction of users of fixed telecommunication services revealed that 70 per cent of people in Oman are satisfied with the fixed-line telecommunications services, while 52 per cent of them are not satisfied with the prices of fixed-line Internet services. Additionally, 74.2 per cent of participants said that their service provider takes an active role in solving users' problems. However, some members of the public had different opinions. Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers had to say:



Mohamed Uwais
Salesman

The services of telecommunication companies are good. Calling countries like India is more affordable, while the rate is high for the UAE and Sri Lanka. It would be highly appreciated if the charges can be reduced to get in touch with our dear ones.

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

I'm not at all happy with the services. Broadband connections are the worst as we are not getting the speed that we were promised. Telecom companies issue new SIMs with big promises but once you join the network, the offer gets over quickly and the rates are so high. Why have they blocked Whatsapp calls, Messenger calls, etc? It's unbelievable.

Mohan Anandan
Banking sector employee

Telecommunications services have come a long way in Oman since the time when the country had only one service provider. Today, there are multiple service providers providing competitive rates as per the needs of the customers. Speed and efficiency are evolving in the process leaving no room for complaints and customer dissatisfaction.

RECEIVED VIA INSTAGRAM

Faiz Jehan

You should ask the question, 'Are we getting what we are paying for?' A postpaid connection gets disconnected if I don't pay the bill... forget out going... no incoming as well. But the monthly plan amount keeps piling up. Why should I pay the monthly post-paid plan when my phone is completely blocked from the service? Be fair.

Umm Aliy

With certain telecom service providers, when you recharge your phone with RO2, an amount of RO1 is deducted for no reason. When you call customer care, they tell you to report via an app. But when you get to the app, chatbots answer and you finally have to give up without getting a solution. So I find the telecom services very poor and very expensive.

Urooj Craft

I find the prices too high and the Internet range very limited. This is an extra burden for us. Now a days, Internet is the key to life and it's very essential. Although we are using Internet services, it is very difficult to pay these very high rates.

Ambika Padmanabhan

The prices are exorbitantly high. There is no competition among the telecom operators. Mobile data is far too expensive in Oman compared to India.

Murtaza Khuzaina

The prices are high. There needs to be more companies in the telecom sector that can increase the competition and drive the prices down instead of the triopoly that we are currently facing.

Susie

I'm not at all satisfied with the telecom services. I have had Internet at home for almost seven years and I make at least six complaints per year. I pay my dues on time but I don't get a good service that is worth my money. Sometimes I get a speed that is a quarter of what I'm paying for. I keep wanting to change the service provider, but who knows what the competitors are like!

Pact inked on employment of Oman, US envoys' spouses

Muscat - An agreement on the employment of diplomatic officials' spouses was signed between the governments of the Sultanate of Oman and the United States of America at the Foreign Ministry on Monday.

The agreement was signed by H E Mohammed Nasser al Wahabi, Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, and H E Leslie M Tsou, US Ambassador

to Oman.

As per the agreement, spouses of officials in diplomatic missions are eligible to work in non-governmental establishments in the host country.

The agreement comes within the framework of the advanced relations between Oman and US and in affirmation of the two countries' keenness to boost cooperation.

ONA

RO1,000 fine for import of partially-hydrogenated oils

Muscat - H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, issued a decision to amend the food safety regulation on Monday. Decision No 83/ 2022 stipulates banning the production, import or marketing of partially-hydrogenated oils and food products containing

these oils. Anyone who violates the decision will be fined RO1,000.

The decision was issued on April 18, 2022, and will come into force 30 days following its publication in the Official Gazette.

Hydrogenated oil is a type of fat food manufacturers use to keep foods fresh for longer.

Tender Announcement

Muscat Electricity Distribution Company S.A.O.C Invites Interested Companies To Participate In The Following Tender

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Tender Price (R.O)
MEDC-2022-008	Lease of (76) Vehicles for MEDC for 5 years	12/5/2022	24/05/2022	Specialized	1575

The table below shows the instructions for participation: -

Participation	- Companies registered with Tender Board and in I Supplier may obtain Tender documents. - The amount specified above is including 5 % VAT. - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply) - to obtain the tender document and payment procedure , please visit MEDC Website/ Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com or call 24588600 – Ext: 8577 - 8726
Enquiries	- Any inquiry can be sent to MEDC Website/Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com , one week before bid submission date - Any request for clarification received after the above-mentioned period will not be considered.
Tender Submission	Please follow SUBMISSION OF TENDER mentioned in clause 20.0 in Prime Document and to the supplier guideline available MEDC Website/Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com
Guarantee	- The Tender should enclose a bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman Unconditional and irrevocable and shall be disbursement as soon as it is submitted for the value of (1%) of the tender value valid for a period of at least ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF MINOR TENDER COMMITTEE, MUSCAT ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION COMPANY S.A.O.C. - The bid bond should be included in the commercial proposal only. - Any tender not accompanied by a Tender Bond shall be rejected.
Terms and Conditions	- Tenders received after the deadline stated in the Invitation to Tender, including any extension thereof, for any reason whatsoever will not be considered - The Tender shall be valid for a period of at least ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission including any extension thereof. - If the submission date extended, the bank guarantee or a certified cheque shall be extended in accordance with the bid extension date. - MEDC is not bound to accept the lowest (or highest) Tenderer. - Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from Local Products and have a High-level percentage of Omanization - Muscat Electricity Distribution Company gives priority to award the projects to SMEs companies. - For projects whose value is less than OMR 10K, the priority to award will be given to registered companies that hold a valid certificate Of Reyadah. - Failure to comply with the instructions in tender document may lead to disqualification.
Bid Placement	Follow the Supplier guideline available MEDC Website/Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com



How are you preparing to celebrate Eid this year with most COVID-19 restrictions lifted?

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

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

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

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MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,253.65
Sensex	57,166.74

FOREX RATES

(ROI equals)	
Indian Rs	197.48
Pakistani Rs	474.07
Bangladesh taka	225.65
Philippines peso	135.37
Sri Lankan Rs	842.96

*Rates as on April 18

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Libya oil firm announces closure of major oil field

Libya's National Oil Corporation announced Sunday the closure of production at a major oil field in the country's south, declaring a "force majeure".

"On Saturday... the Al-Fil field was subjected to arbitrary closure attempts, due to the entry of a group of individuals and the prevention of the field's workers from continuing production," the NOC said on Facebook.

It added that the field was shut down on Sunday - marking the second closure in a matter of weeks - "making it impossible for the NOC to implement its contractual obligations".

The firm said it "is obliged to declare a state of force majeure" and would no longer be able to provide crude to the Mellitah complex on the country's northwestern coast.

Declaring force majeure is a legal move allowing parties to free themselves from contractual obligations when factors such as fighting or natural disasters make meeting them impossible.

According to Libya's state news agency, the closure comes after a group of individuals declared that they were halting production "until a government appointed by parliament takes office in the capital".

MSX-listed firms post total net profits of \$1.4bn for 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani companies which are listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) reported total net profits of US\$1.39bn for the year 2021.

However, total net profits of the listed companies last year declined by 3.7 per cent compared with total earnings of US\$1.44bn in 2020 after four out of the top five sectors at the MSX recorded falls in net profits, according to a research report released by Kuwait-based Kamco Investment Company.

As per the report, Oman's banking sector, the biggest sector in the exchange by market capitalisation, offset some of the net profit declines of other main sectors. The banking sector recorded a 28.2 per cent growth in total net profits at US\$861.9mn in 2021 compared to US\$672.5mn net profits posted in the previous year.

Full-year 2021 net profits for Bank Muscat, the biggest lender by assets in the MSX, rose 16 per cent to reach US\$492.5mn driven mainly higher operating income and lower impairment charges. Moreover, National Bank of Oman reported 66.8



per cent growth in 2021 net profit which reached US\$78.6mn contributing to the overall growth of the banking sector's aggregate full-year net profits. Strong fee income and a decrease in net impairment combined with gross loans increase were the main drivers of NBO's performance, Kamco Investment noted in its report.

On the other hand, the sultanate's telecom sector registered a 9.8 per cent year-on-year decline in 2021 with aggregate earnings falling to US\$207.2mn, according to Kamco Investment.

The diversified financials sector also witnessed a 44 per cent drop in aggregate net profits which decreased to US\$117.7mn in 2021, the report added.

GCC corporate earnings soar

Total net profits of the publicly listed companies in the GCC soared to record high in 2021, mainly due to higher growths reported by energy, materials and banking sector companies.

Earnings reported by the GCC region's listed companies jumped to a record high of

US\$196.5bn in 2021 as compared to US\$93.1bn during 2020, Kamco Investment said.

The US\$103.5bn growth came mainly on the back of jump in profits for Aramco (by US\$56.1bn or 113.8 per cent year-on-year) followed by banking, materials and utilities companies. The four sectors accounted for 85 per cent of the total full-year net profit in 2021.

The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the relaxation of the restrictions globally significantly impacted economies in the GCC region supporting the robust perform-

ance in earnings for the full year 2021,' Kamco Investment said.

Most of the sectors in the GCC showed solid increase in net profits during the year. The utilities and transportation sector witnessed remarkable jump in net profits during 2021 after suffering subpar performance during the pandemic.

Out of the 21 sectors, four sectors witnessed year-on-year decline in profits whereas the rest reported growth. At the exchange level, Oman was the only market which reported a decline in aggregate net profits for listed companies during the full year 2021 with a fall of 3.7 per cent, the report noted.

In terms of sectors, profitability for the GCC banking sector reached one of the highest yearly levels during 2021, increasing by 52.9 per cent to reach US\$35.4bn. Banking sector profits reached the highest mark since 2018.

The year-on-year increase in 2021 was broad-based across the GCC with profits for Kuwaiti banks almost doubled to US\$2.9bn. Saudi and UAE-listed banks also reported healthy profit growth of 59.5 per cent and 67.2 per cent during the year.

UAE office rents recover to pre-COVID levels

Dubai, UAE - Office rents in the UAE's two largest business hubs have begun to recover to pre-COVID levels as demand for prime space intensifies, according to global real estate consultancy, Knight Frank.

According to Knight Frank's analysis, five out of 27 locations in Dubai have seen office rents return to pre-pandemic rates, while in Abu Dhabi, the city's best buildings continue to demonstrate rental resilience.

Faisal Durrani, partner - head of Middle East research at Knight Frank, explained, "Despite the quieter end to 2021, early data from first quarter suggests a rebound in demand in Dubai, led by technology businesses that are expanding their footprints, albeit many are start-ups."

Still, Knight Frank points to the lack of new prime stock, which is sustaining upward pressure on rents in high quality buildings in some locations.

Leading the recovery in office rents is Business Bay in Dubai, where average rents have climbed from AED76 per square feet in the first quarter of 2020 to AED101 per square feet at present.

SMEs invited to provide postal services in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Post and Asyad Express, a member of Asyad Group, has invited the sultanate's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to provide postal and last-mile delivery services in various governorates of Oman.

Oman Post and Asyad Ex-

press, in cooperation with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (Riyada), on Sunday opened the registration for SMEs, for a period of one week, for the provision of postal and last-mile delivery services.

Nasser Ahmed al Sharji, CEO of Oman Post and Asyad Express, said, "As we believe in the

importance of the private sector and SMEs' involvement in providing postal services, we will continue to deploy multiple touchpoints and increase the number of postal service delivery points throughout the sultanate.

This is not a stand-alone initiative; it is part of a project to expand the network of Oman Post and Asyad Express by opening

touchpoints in selected locations across the sultanate to provide accessible postal services."

"In fact, the number of established touchpoints with the support of our partners in the private sector stood at approximately 107 to date which contributed to the growth of postal revenues at varying rates in the governorates, with Muscat Governorate

recording the highest growth rate of 43 per cent. Moreover, we are planning to add 48 new touchpoints, bringing the total number to 213 touchpoints by end of 2022," Sharji added.

Explaining the goals of the initiative, Eng Rahma Darwish al Shaqsi, head of retail transformation at Oman Post and Asyad Express, said, "This initiative will

push SMEs to use postal trademark and service systems without burdening participating businesses with additional costs. Moreover, training and technical consultancy will be provided to our partners on topics of business development and marketing campaigns for services through various social media platforms."

OPEC cuts oil demand forecasts



Istanbul, Turkey - The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has revised down its global oil demand growth forecasts for 2022 by around 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) to stand at 3.7mn bpd, mostly reflecting the downward revision in the world economic growth.

Demand growth for the OECD is forecasted at 1.9mn bpd, while non-OECD is projected to grow by 1.8mn bpd.

Global oil demand is now forecasted to average 100.5mn bpd, which, according to OPEC is 400,000 bpd lower than the previous month's estimates and approximately 300,000 bpd

higher than 2019.

OPEC said the decrease in demand growth reflects the declines in global GDP on account of the geopolitical developments and the resurgence of the Omicron variant on global oil demand in China.

Global output rises

Global oil supply in March 2022 increased by around 370,000 bpd compared to the previous month to average 99.66mn bpd, marking a year-on-year rise of 6.03mn bpd, OPEC said in its monthly oil market report.

The report shows that OPEC crude oil production averaged 28.56mn bpd in March, for an

increase of about 57,000 bpd month-on-month. Crude oil output rose mainly in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, while production in Libya, Nigeria and Congo declined.

Production increased by 54,000 bpd to 10.26mn bpd in Saudi Arabia, by 25,000 bpd to nearly 2.64mn bpd in Kuwait, and by 23,000 bpd to 2.98mn bpd in the UAE.

Meanwhile, oil output in Libya decreased by 37,000 bpd to around 1.07mn bpd, and fell by 24,000 bpd to 1.35mn bpd in Nigeria, and by 15,000 bpd to 260,000 bpd in Congo.

The share of OPEC's crude out of total global production

decreased by 0.1 percentage point to 28.7 per cent in March compared with the previous month. Non-OPEC liquids production, including OPEC natural gas liquids, grew by about 320,000 bpd in March compared to the previous month to average 71.10mn bpd, representing a year-on-year increase of 2.54mn bpd.

'Preliminary estimated increases in production during March were mainly driven from the US and Norway by 260,000 bpd, due to the ending of outages, improved weather conditions, and shale oil production increases,' OPEC's report said. Anadolu Agency

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China's economy grows 4.8% in Q1 but virus stalks outlook

Beijing, China - China's economic growth accelerated in the first quarter of the year to 4.8 per cent, official data showed Monday, but the government warned of "significant challenges" ahead while massive COVID-19 lockdowns started to bite.

The world's second-biggest economy had lost steam in the latter half of last year with a property slump and regulatory crackdowns, pulling down growth.

But it exceeded expectations in the first three months of 2022, growing 4.8 per cent on-year, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said, with Lunar New Year spending and factory production cajoling growth.

The weeks ahead, however, appear treacherous for the economy with Beijing's unrelenting zero-Covid approach to outbreaks clogging supply chains and locking down tens of millions of people - including in the economic dynamos of Shanghai and Shenzhen as well as the north-eastern grain basket of Jilin.

Virus restrictions in March have already gouged at retail sales, as consumers shied away from shopping, and drove up unemployment.

"With the domestic and international environment becoming increasingly complicated and uncertain, economic development is facing significant difficulties and challenges," NBS spokesman Fu Linghui said on Monday.

The pandemic rebound - as well as the sanctions binding Russia's economy - ups the ante on officials to deliver Beijing's



People cross a street in the central business district in Beijing on April 14 (AFP)

full-year growth target of around 5.5 per cent.

The target comes in a pivotal political year for President Xi Jinping who is eyeing another term in power at the Party Congress to be held this autumn.

The current virus outbreak is the worst since the peak of the first wave which emerged in Wuhan in late 2019, and the economy is beginning to weaken.

Industrial production growth eased to 5.0 per cent in March, NBS data showed, down from the January-February period. Meanwhile, retail sales sank 3.5 per cent and the urban unemployment rate ticked up to a 22-month high of 5.8 per cent last month.

"March activity data suggests

that China's economy slowed, especially in household consumption," Tommy Wu, lead China economist at Oxford Economics, said in a note.

'Worse to come'

China's government is trying to balance "minimising disruption against controlling the latest wave of COVID-19 infections", Wu said, but he warned of a drag on economic activity into May or beyond.

Last week, carmakers including XPeng and Volkswagen warned of severe disruptions to supply chains and possibly even a halt on production completely if the lockdown on Shanghai's 25mn inhabitants persisted.

Already, goods are piling up at

the world's busiest container port in Shanghai, prompting shipping giant Maersk to say it will stop taking new bookings for refrigerated containers into the city. "Further impacts from lockdowns are imminent," said Iris Pang, chief economist for Greater China at ING.

Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics cautioned that "the worst is still to come".

As Shanghai struggles to rein in an outbreak that has seen tens of thousands of daily cases, Pang said other cities may attempt to replicate Shenzhen's success in reopening swiftly by resorting to strict measures with just a few COVID patients.

The southern tech powerhouse went into full lockdown for

almost a week in March, but has since eased restrictions.

Fu of the NBS warned of high commodity prices on Monday with the Russia-Ukraine conflict leading to a decline in the availability of commodities such as corn and wheat.

Although China's central bank has announced a reserve ratio cut, lowering the amount of cash banks must hold in a push to support small businesses, experts say officials were taking a restrained approach to stimulus.

But economists expect officials will eventually publish a growth figure consistent with official targets, as part of doubts that the numbers may be massaged for political reasons.

AFP

Crises slowing economic growth worldwide: IMF

Washington, US - The war in Ukraine has undercut the global recovery, slowing expected economic growth in most countries in the world, IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said.

And beyond the humanitarian tragedy and economic crises, the war has exposed fractures in the international system at a time when global cooperation is the only solution, she said.

The war hit as the world was struggling to recover from the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and has caused an acceleration of inflation that endangers the gains of the past two years.

"To put it simply: we are facing a crisis on top of a crisis," Georgieva said in a speech ahead of the spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank. "The economic consequences from the war spread fast and far, to neighbors and beyond, hitting hardest the world's most vulnerable people," she said. Families already were struggling with higher energy and food prices and "the war has made this much worse."

The IMF is due to release its updated economic forecasts today, which Georgieva said will further downgrade the estimate for global growth that was cut to 4.4 per cent in January.

"Since then, the outlook has deteriorated substantially, largely because of the war and its repercussions," she said, and 143 countries will suffer downgrades.

While most will still achieve positive growth, the future is "extraordinarily uncertain," and she warned of a deep divide between rich and poor countries.



Kristalina Georgieva

After a decade of low inflation, prices worldwide have surged amid strong demand for goods that outstripped supply as economies began to return to normal, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February and the sanctions imposed on Moscow pushed fuel and food prices up sharply.

Ukraine and Russia are major grain producers, and Russia also is a key source of energy for Europe.

"The root cause of what we face today is the war and it is the war that must end," Georgieva said in a discussion following her speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Inflation, which has hit a four-decade high in the United States, "has become a clear and present danger," she said, noting the trend will likely last longer than expected.

"This is a massive setback for the global recovery," she said.

It also complicates policy-making: major central banks are raising interest rates to contain prices, but that increases borrowing costs for emerging markets and developing nations, which face high debt burdens.

AFP

As EU eyes stopping Russian gas imports, Israel sees an opening

Jerusalem - As Europe aims to wean itself off Russian fossil fuel because of the Ukraine invasion, Israel hopes to help fill the gap with gas from its offshore reserves.

EU states remain divided on the time scale, but European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has said the bloc hopes to phase out its dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal by 2027.

Israel could build one or more pipelines, potentially via Greece or Turkey, or increase the quantity of gas piped to Egypt to be liquified and shipped off, say officials and experts.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said after a recent visit to Athens that "the war in Ukraine stands to change the structure of the European and Middle Eastern energy market".

"We are also examining additional economic cooperation, with an emphasis on the energy market."

The Jewish state has worked for years to create gas export routes, with mixed results so far.

Turkey, whose ties with Israel have recently thawed after over a decade of rupture, has expressed new interest in a pipeline, and its energy minister is expected in Israel in the coming weeks.

During the years of diplomatic alienation from Turkey, Israel signed an accord with Greece and Cyprus in 2020 aiming to build the EastMed pipeline through those two countries from Israel to Europe.

Turkey opposed the project, and a senior US diplomat said last week it would be too expensive and take too long to build.

Energy Minister Karine Elharrar also hailed the potential for



A file photo shows European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (left) shaking hands with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (AFP)

gas sales to Europe, telling the French Association of Defence Journalists that "we have the ability and we will try to do as much as we can".

Regional alliances

With both Greece and its regional rival Turkey vying to be the conduit for the gas, Israel would have to tread carefully amid the regional alliances it wishes to uphold and strengthen.

Major gas finds in the eastern Mediterranean - nearly 1,000bn cubic meters (bcm) - have in the past decade turned Israel from a natural gas importer into an exporter.

It now sells small quantities from its two major offshore fields, Leviathan and Tamar, to Egypt and Jordan.

Israel's domestic consumption over the next three decades would leave some 600 bcm available for export, said opposition lawmaker Yuval Steinitz, Israel's energy minister until last year.

"In 2016 the pipeline to Turkey was examined, including with Turkey and commercial companies," said Orit Ganor, di-

rector of natural gas international trade at Israel's energy ministry.

"The project didn't reach fruition mainly due to economic reasons."

Ganor said "the EastMed pipeline is still an option, and the company advancing it, Poseidon, is in the final stages of geophysical and geotechnical surveys of the pipe's route in our waters and those of Greece and Cyprus".

No financing has been secured for the project, which Steinitz said would cost about US\$6bn and take around four years to complete.

He said there was also agreement with Cairo on a seabed pipeline from Leviathan to Egypt's liquification plants that would allow for greater exports to Europe.

Israel's Leviathan field, which would be the source for European exports, is operated by an Israeli-American consortium including NewMed Energy and US major Chevron.

NewMed Energy CEO Yossi Abu recently stated his ambition of "bringing Israeli gas to Europe and Asia".

AFP

Google plans to invest \$9.5bn in US offices and data centers this year

Mountain View, US - Alphabet Inc's Google said it plans to invest about US\$9.5bn across its US offices and data centers this year, up from US\$7bn last year.

Google said the investment will create at least 12,000 full-time jobs in 2022 and focus on data centers in several states including Nevada, Nebraska and Virginia, Reuters reports.

The company will open a new office in Atlanta this year, and expand its data center in Storey County, Nevada, it added.

"It might seem counterintuitive to step up our investment in physical offices even as we embrace more flexibility in how we work. Yet we believe it's more important than ever to invest in our campuses...," Google said in

a statement.

Google has been trying to bring back its employees to some of its offices in the United States, the UK and Asia Pacific by mandating working from office for about three days a week, a step to end policies that let employees work remotely because of COVID-19 concerns.

Google will continue to invest

in offices in its home state of California and support affordable housing initiatives in the Bay Area as part of its US\$1bn housing commitment.

Last year, Google helped provide US\$617bn in economic activity for US businesses, creators and developers, according to its 2021 economic impact report.

BNA

Invitation to Tender

In accordance with the following conditions:

Tender / Auction Number	Subject	Tender / Auction Document Fees (Non-refundable)	Tender / Auction Bond	Tender/Auction Offer	Closing Date
QPMC/TD/2022/08	Call-Off Agreement for the Supply of Single Size and Pipe Bedding Gabbro Aggregate (CIF) for Qatar Primary Materials Company ("Supplies")	QAR 5000	QAR 1,000,000	Two Bids (Technical & Commercial)	25 April, 2022 01:00 PM
QPMC/TD/2022/09	Call-off Agreement for Caterpillar Power Train Rebuild Program (CAT D8R Dozer) for Qatar Primary Materials Company ("Services")	QAR 1000	QAR 5000	Two Bids (Technical & Commercial)	25 April, 2022 01:00 PM

1. Tender Documents can be collected from our head office located at Al-Saad, Suhaim bin Hamad St., Qatar First Bank Building, 10th Floor (Sunday: Thursday) between 08:00 to 13:00.

2. Bids are to be submitted in two sealed (in red wax) envelopes (Technical & Commercial) and addressed to Tenders and Auction Committee. Tender reference number and subject are to be clearly written on the envelopes, provided that the last date for submitting bids is one o'clock in the afternoon on the closing day. Any bids submit after this date will not be accepted.

3. Tender Documents will be released only after delivery of Deposit Slip Stamped by Commercial Bank along with Authorization Letter to the delegated person signed by authorized person as per Computer ID, Copy of commercial Registration (CR), Business License and Computer ID.

4. Tender Fees are nonrefundable and can be transferred online to Account of Qatar Primary Material Company- Bank A/C (4050-651111-006) at Commercial Bank of Qatar. For IBAN, send email for tender department email. Tender reference number and subject are to be written on the deposit slip.

5. Tender Bond (Bank Guarantee/ Manager Cheque) must be valid for 120 days after closing date and must be submitted in separate & sealed envelope along with technical bid and a photocopy is to be attached with commercial bid. Bids without tender bond will be rejected.

6. Bids must be valid for 90 days after closing date and are to be submitted in two copies (Original & Duplicate).

7. Any queries relating to the Tender Documents must only be raised in writing, preferably by email, to the address specified in the respective Tender Document. Any response issued by Qatar Primary Material Company will be in the form of a question and answer and will be distributed to all Tenderers without revealing the identity of the originator of the query(ies) in the form of Tender Bulletins. Queries must be received at the address specified in the respective ITT Documentation at least five (5) calendar days prior to the Tender closing date. Any queries received after such date will be ignored.

8. The amount of the Performance Bond to be provided by the awarded bidder is (10% of the contract value) and its validity period; must remain valid under the contract implementation period and the guarantee period according to the terms of the tender.

9. The Technical Bids shall be opened within one week from the closing date.

10. Qatar Primary Material Company has the right, during the contract period, to request an increase or decrease in the amounts of the items, works or services by a percentage not exceeding (20%) of the contract value with the same conditions and prices, provided that the increase is of the same type of contracted items, works or services.

11. Qatar Primary Material Company's tendering terms and conditions apply.

For further Inquiry, please send your queries at Fax Number: 44479559 or email to tender@qpmc.qa or visit Qatar Primary Material Company website @ www.qpmc.qa

KR Eshraqa's Stemazone makes learning fun at Qaranqasho event

As part of its continued effort towards helping the sultanate build a knowledge economy, Khimji Ramdas (KR) Eshraqa Stemazone recently organised a Qaranqasho-themed edutainment event for children at the Al Azaami Boulevard.

Held over a three-day period, Stemazone representatives welcomed children, as well as their parents and teachers, to the event, which was abuzz with various STEAM activities and workshops. The event was organised with the aim to reach more children and introduce them to the spectacular world of Stemazone, especially its online learning management system (LMS) platform 'e-stemazone'.

Stemazone's representatives conducted several interactive workshops for groups of 15 children, every 15 minutes at three learning stations during the course of the event. This included various STEAM-related experiments: Lava Lamp (Science and Technology), Electronics - Buzzer sensors (Coding), Green screen (Technology and Art), and Ice-cream (Science and Engineering). Giveaways and information leaflets were also distributed to the participating children, as well as parents and teachers.

Nailesh Khimji, director, Khimji Ramdas Group, said, "In line with Oman's Vision 2040,



Stemazone aspires to build a generation of scientific thinkers and problem solvers that excel in their future careers. Through events like Qaranqasho, we aim to provide convenient access to activities and information surrounding Stemazone to Omanis residing in different parts of the Sultanate and encourage them to enrol their kids in the programme. As a community-focused educational initiative, our aim is to equip students with the required skills to be future-ready for the job market."

Discussing the significance of the event in inspiring the youth to explore and learn future

skills, Mahmood Khalifa al Saqri, Social responsibility manager - Eshraqa, Khimji Ramdas Group, said, "Qaranqasho is observed on the fourteenth night of the holy month of Ramadan, and was an opportunity for us at Eshraqa Stemazone to engage with the local community and introduce them to our workshops which offer an ideal platform for children to understand the analytics of problem-solving, collaborating, testing ideas, and creating inspirational work."

Established by Eshraqa, the corporate social responsibility arm of Khimji Ramdas, Stemazone is a sustainable edu-

cational programme that has been conceptualised in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth to introduce Omani children to the remarkable world of science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM).

Stemazone offers a hybrid learning experience through a center located at the Children's Museum and a state-of-the-art online learning system available at www.stemazoneoman.om.

Both experiences offer engaging and interactive sessions of creativity for kids.



Mall of Muscat celebrates its third anniversary

Oman's most luxurious mall, Mall of Muscat celebrated its thirds anniversary in a unique way by inviting school children to come and release doves as a symbol of peace and joy. The mall management reinforced its commitment to offer every visitor a unique and memorable shopping experience. The staff and management of the mall were present to participate in this glorious occasion.

The credit of the sustained success of the mall is attributed to the close collaboration and

common vision with the key stakeholders of the mall including the valued tenants.

Festivities on the anniversary day included lots of fun activities for the family and a first in Oman Live Mermaid Show in collaboration with Oman Aquarium which also celebrates its third anniversary.

Marking this great occasion, Mall of Muscat has launched a two-month long campaign 'Mall of Muscat Festival' comprising shop, spin and win sales promotion, weekend night bazaar, free

kids activities and entertainment including kids foosball in addition to various offers and discounts across the mall.

Since its launch in 2019, Mall of Muscat has continuously enhanced the shopping experience in Oman to outstanding levels cementing the Mall's position as Oman's most luxurious mall. It encompasses more than 100 world-class retail, lifestyle, dining, entertainment, and leisure experiences in one genuinely great destination with sophistication and elegance.

Mercedes-AMG GT 4-door Coupé is now more individual than ever

With greater ride comfort and a wider range of equipment, the globally successful AMG GT 4-door Coupé is now even more individual than ever. Available at Mercedes-Benz Oman, the exclusive edition underlines the all-round character of the four-door sports car. Moreover, there is an extended choice of wheels, upholstery, trim, exterior colours and a retuned suspension with an even wider spread between sportiness and comfort. Thanks to an extensive update last summer, the AMG GT 4-door Coupé already has state-of-the-art technology. New features include updated driving assistance systems and the Widescreen Cockpit including the MBUX multimedia system with AMG-specific displays and functions. Valid until May 31, 2022, customers can avail the Mercedes-Benz Ramadan Package to receive exceptional benefits to match their new car.

"Combining seamless craftsmanship, AMG technology and breath-taking power, the AMG GT 4-door Coupé ticks all the boxes. With tailor-made products and more options than ever, it truly is an expression of individuality, while offering an unmatched experience for those lucky enough to drive it," said Shaun Michael, chief executive officer at Mercedes-Benz Oman. "I invite those looking to to buy a car soon to make the most of our fantastic Ramadan offer as it will add a range of benefits to owning one of our vehicles and peace of mind when it comes to servicing," he added.

With the Ramadan package, customers can drive away with one of the most coveted vehicles and enjoy five years/75,000km service package, four years Mo-



tor on road assistance service, three years unlimited mileage warranty, free registration for the first year, and a complimentary gift from the Mercedes-Benz Lifestyle Collection.

With a promise towards delivering top safety and luxury, Mercedes-Benz Oman makes sure every journey is comfortable and peaceful. To find out more about the Ramadan Package or the unparalleled Mercedes-Benz line-up, or to book a test drive, visit any Mercedes-Benz Showroom or call and speak to the expert sales team on 80077333.

Khimji Ramdas holds blood donation drive

As part of its corporate social responsibility initiatives, the Khimji Ramdas Group (KR) recently organised its annual Ramadan blood donation drive at the Indian Embassy in association with the Ministry of Health. The KR Group employees took part in the annual campaign held with necessary COVID-19 precautions.

Thanking all those who participated in the voluntary blood donation drive Anil Khimji, director, Khimji Ramdas Group, said, "Giving blood is a noble and important practice, and we at Khimji Ramdas through our employees and their families have been supporting this cause for more than four decades, espe-



cially during the holy month of Ramadan. We appreciate the efforts of the team from the Blood Bank of Oman and the Ministry of Health, notably their work to ensure sufficient blood supplies to save lives in the time of need."

Khimji Ramdas blood donation drive was conducted in strict accordance with the authorities'

COVID-19 safety requirements, which included maintaining social distance, wearing masks, and sanitising the facilities before and throughout the drive. All details related to vaccination, travel history, and medical screening were documented before the blood donation process.

The number of people who

volunteer to donate blood has grown steadily year-on-year, largely through the commitment of employees, their family members, and friends. It reflects the spirit of volunteerism displayed by all participants.

The Khimji Ramdas Group has consistently contributed to community-based projects.

Enjoy special Ramadan offer on all-new INFINITI QX55

INFINITI Oman has launched a special Ramadan offer on all-new INFINITI QX55 SUV which features a bold, stylish and tech-savvy look and innovative new technologies befitting its luxury status. From a provocative design perspective, the INFINITI QX55 is the spiritual successor to brand's iconic FX series. Available in INFINITI Oman showroom, the vehicle's striking roofline and unapologetic shape are in tune with equally bold buyers.

A senior spokesperson at INFINITI Oman, said, "We are pleased to announce a special promotion on INFINITI QX55 in Oman. The provocative all-new QX55 returns to the soul of INFINITI - bringing the legendary crossover coupe shape of the FX back to life. The INFINITI QX55 has an entirely new shape with more stylish details and a modernised interior."

The range of offers on INFINITI QX55 includes free registration, assured gifts vouchers,

periodic vehicle maintenance, manufacturer's warranty, AAA/road assistance card, digital promotion, INFINITI loyalty programme and reference programme.

The special offer will be available till May 19, 2022. The scheme is applicable for all the customers purchasing INFINITI vehicles for personal use only. Vehicles purchased with commercial registration will not be eligible for the scheme. Vehicles bought for taxi, driving school, ministries, fleet, and rent-a-car usage will not be eligible for this scheme. The scheme is applicable for retail billing only.

Free registration

All customers purchasing INFINITI QX55 during the scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle registration.

Assured gift vouchers

All customers purchasing INFINITI QX55 during the scheme period will be eligible for value



added service (VAS) gift vouchers of RO200. The voucher can be redeemed for vehicle service at SBA workshop, purchase of value-added service products at SBA workshop, purchase of parts/accessories at SBA workshop and purchase of service contracts from SBA workshop. VAS voucher will have to be utilised fully in one go and cannot be fragmented. Any additional

expenses on top of the voucher amount will be paid by the customer separately. VAS voucher will have a limited validity period and will have to be used before October 31, 2022. VAS voucher is transferable and will be in denomination of RO50. Multiple vouchers will be issued for RO200. VAS voucher can be redeemed only at SBA Workshop and the amount cannot be dis-

counted in cash.

Periodic vehicle maintenance

Customers purchasing INFINITI QX55 in the scheme period will get free Periodic Vehicle Maintenance of two years or 30,000km (whichever is earlier). This offer excludes battery and wear and tear components. This offer includes only the service intervals

of 10,000km.

Manufacturer's warranty

INFINITI QX55 purchased during the scheme period will have a 3 years/100,000km manufacturer's warranty.

AAA/ Road Assistance Card

Free AAA/road assistance card will be given on the purchase of INFINITI QX55 for the first year only and as supported by AAA Oman and the UAE.

Digital promotion

Two winners from all the social media users who will participate in the Ramadan campaign, contest and other online challenges on Instagram (@sbainfinitioman) and Facebook (@sbainfinitioman) will get BOSE Ear Buds.

INFINITI loyalty programme

All INFINITI existing owners and

their immediate family members [father, mother, son(s) and unmarried daughter(s)] will be eligible for the following additional benefits on purchase of another INFINITI vehicle. Diamond members will get a loyalty Bonus on trade-in price of Infiniti vehicle of RO300 and platinum will get RO400. Special in-house finance rate for diamond members is 3.75 per cent and platinum is 3.50 per cent. Diamond members will get a special accessories package of window tinting and platinum members will get window tinting and paint protection.

Reference programme

INFINITI will generate references of people looking to buy a car. This reference will be generated from existing INFINITI customers. The same person cannot refer himself but can refer multiple names. If any of the referred persons buy an INFINITI car, then the person who referred him will get RO100 gift voucher.

LuLu launches iftar meal box initiative

During this Holy Month, LuLu Oman has launched a noble initiative to provide wholesome iftar meal boxes to commuters on the move, who are delayed from reaching home to break their fast. The aim of this initiative is to embody the spirit of Ramadan through a visible expression of social unity. Continuing LuLu's core philosophy to support the community, the group has rolled out this initiative, in association with N7N Volunteers team who will be engaged in the distribution at different traffic signals like Baushar,

Darsait, Markaz al Bahja and at similar locations in major towns like Sohar and Salalah. Speaking on the initiative, Shabeer K A, regional director - Oman, said, "In our own humble way, this is a reflection of our continued commitment of spreading a culture of charitable work and humanitarian initiatives that create social impact. Also, furthering our vision of giving back to the community we operate, gives us great pride". "We are thankful to the N7N Volunteers Team for supporting this idea by distributing the iftar

meal boxes for families and commuters who are still on the road and are yet to break their fast," he added. Mohammed al Zadjali, spokesperson for the N7N Group, said, "It was an honour for N7N Volunteers team to collaborate with LuLu to achieve this campaign. We always strive to help the community and to be given this opportunity from LuLu felt like the cherry on top! We look forward to do more such activities and give back to the community whenever the chance presents itself."



In addition to this, LuLu has tied up with various other charitable organisations in Oman to support their Ramadan activities and provide the iftar boxes to those who are in need. As part of its multi-pronged Corporate Social Responsibility campaign, Lulu Group has constantly been investing in social initiatives and community development programmes that create tangible positive impact in the lives of people, society, the environment, in addition to building a cohesive and mutually supportive society.



Every step counts at the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon

The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon 2022, pioneers of marathon running in Oman, are all set for the biggest participative sporting event this year. Slated to be flagged off at the leading lifestyle destination, Al Mouj Muscat on November 11 and 12, the event has been a symbol of pride and prestige for the country. The health and fitness impact that this event will have on the city is unrivaled. The participants of Al Mouj Muscat Marathon will make their race more meaningful by dedicating it to a cause greater than themselves, as part of the proceeds from the 5km Run category will be going towards non-profit organisations. The race is associated with two charities; Environ-

ment Society of Oman (ESO) and Oman Diabetes Association (ODA). The aim is to make a positive impact on the community by raising awareness of the need to care for the natural environment and community health. "Sport has the power to unite the community towards a collective goal. We are incredibly proud to support just some of the very good causes in operation within the nation and use Oman's most iconic sporting event to raise awareness of the important programs underway to maintain Oman's natural heritage and make a long-term positive contribution to creating opportunities for the wellbeing of the communities across the country," said Sayyid Aymen al Busaidi, vice chairman of Sabco Group.

Ominvest holds three-day Strategic Management Process Programme to empower employees

In an effort to enable a qualified workforce and build employee capacities, Ominvest recently held a Strategic Management Process Programme that aims to equip trainees with the concepts and tools required to think strategically and translate actions into effective results. The three-day programme was attended by nominated employees, introducing them to a 'culture of thinking' through interactive workshops and various practical and group exercises. The programme is a Chartered Management Institute (CMI) recognised certification, which provides successful participants with a 12-months CMI membership to benefit from. Commenting on the importance of the programme for the company, AbdulAziz al Balushi, Group CEO at Ominvest, said, "Investing in the training and development of our people enables us to remain competitive and build capacity around latest



practices. It also proves our commitment to developing the skills and expertise of our talents. Providing them with the right tools and skills to elevate performance, productivity and profitability ultimately means a more impactful contribution to the value we create for all stakeholders." He added, "We are extremely proud of the team we are building, with plans in place to con-

sistently upskill and develop their capabilities. Our corporate purpose is 'Transforming Businesses to Enrich Societies', and there is no better area to start making a difference than the development and progress of our very own people. 'Excellence' and 'Collaboration' are two of the important pillars in Ominvest's five core corporate values, and we always devise strategies that sharpen

our people's expertise and give them the confidence to excel, while also engaging employees from Ominvest's group companies." The top ten performers of the recent programme will be invited to take part in an advanced version of the programme, receiving a more in-depth insight into the strategic management cycle, from assessment and analysis to strategy formulation

and implementation. Founded in 1983, Ominvest is one of the largest investment companies in the region. Its vision is to be an eminent investment group with significant global reach and impact. It seeks to create value for all its stakeholders by prudently investing in growth sectors and markets while implementing innovative solutions, scalable platforms, and impactful initiatives.

Qurum Stars win Danube Ramadan Cricket Tournament

In an exciting final played between Qurum Stars and Kala Cosco on Sunday night, Qurum Stars defeated Kala Cosco by 3 runs and won the Danube Ramadan Cricket Tournament organized by Al Hail Cricket Team. Sheik Irfan from Danube Company presided as the chief guest. Doshambe al Balushi, Ismail Waleed, captain of OCT Al Hail CT and Khalid al Balushi, senior board member of Al Hail CT were also present for the award ceremony. In the Final match, Qurum Stars captain Vishal Desai won the toss and selected to bat first. Qurum Stars went on to score 56 runs in stipulated 8 overs for the loss of 5 wickets, while Waseem top scored with 19



runs and other useful contribution came from Mubin with 16 runs and Imran with 6 runs. For Kala Cosco, Omar Mahmood took 2 wickets giving

away 7 runs respectively. In reply, Kala Cosco fumbled to a measurable 53 at the end of 8 overs losing 4 wickets. Eshan was the top scorer with 20 runs

while Rubin from Qurum Stars was the pick of the bowlers destroying the Kala Cosco top line. Rubin ended with 1 wicket for 8 runs and got useful support

from Imran 1 wicket for 4 runs and Kamran 1 wickets for 15 runs. Mubin was declared man of the match for his match winning 16 runs, while Waseem Abbas of Kala Cosco was declared as man of the tournament. Irfan of Kala Cosco was adjudged as Best bowler of the tournament taking 12 wickets. Waseem of Qurum Stars declared Best Batsman of tournament scored 120 runs. The tournament is sponsored by Al Danube, number one Building materials company in the Sultanate and supported by Al Mudhish Company, Oman Oasis Company, Ayan International, Cricket Cottage and Baab Al Hail Trading.

Al Hashar announces Ramadan offers on Peugeot range

This Ramadan, drive home with incredible offers on Peugeot models - now built with more premium, class-leading and modern technology. Al Hashar - the official Peugeot distributor in Oman has announced a special offer that includes a free three-year service package, free first year insurance (Oman and UAE) and registration. In addition customers will also get 5 year or 100,000km warranty, Johnson window tinting and more. These generous offers are available on Peugeot's award-winning premium SUV range - the all-new 2008 and 3008. And, for customers who are looking to stand out from the crowd an upgrade to the new 508 luxury sedan with 217 HP and 19-inch alloy wheels.

New Peugeot 2008
In the compact SUV segment, the Peugeot 2008 SUV is a vehicle that stands apart. Its robust and fluid silhouette with high ground clearance, suggests a generous size and controlled power. The distinctive signature light, lightened 18" rims with aerodynamic insert and the Black Diamond roof reinforce its efficient and sporty spirit. The experience of being in control is enhanced with the new Peugeot i-Cockpit 3D cockpit, featuring intuitive ergonomics with its compact steering wheel, the 7-10" HD capacitive touch screen and the configurable 3D digital instrument panel. It offers hands-free starting and locking, unlocking the doors, key in pocket, by simply ap-

proaching or moving away from the vehicle. As fuel-efficient as a manual, the new EAT8, 8-speed automatic offers quick and smooth gearshifts thanks to the 'Shift and Park by wire' electric shift control and steering wheel paddles. **New Peugeot SUV 3008**
The new Peugeot 3008 with its revolutionary and unique design, and the familiar characteristics of a recreational vehicle combines power, sophistication and dynamism. The exterior design highlights its assertive character, balance of strength and smoothness. A new frameless grille features at the front, while gloss black side scoops and a painted lower bumper trim frame the new de-



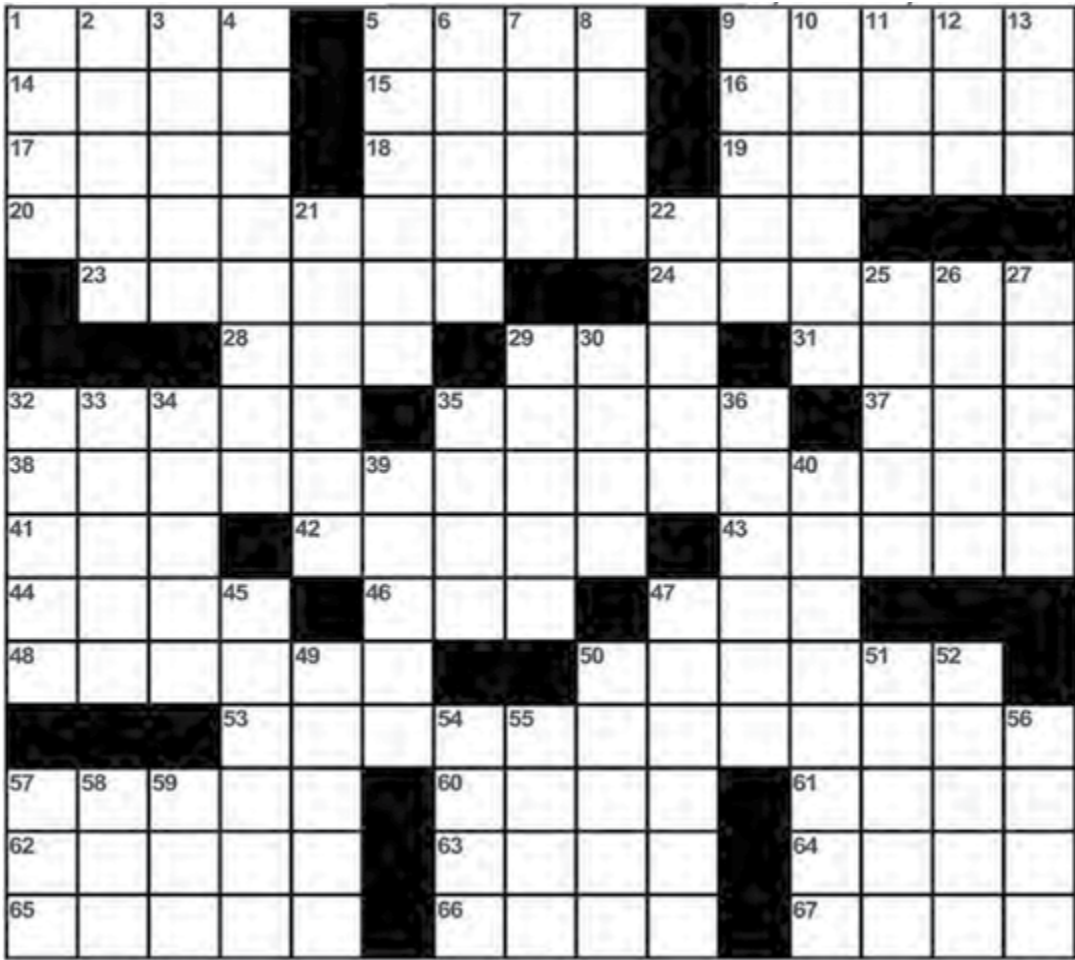
sign. The lighting signature is further enhanced with the striking front LED daytime running lights that also include the vehicle indicators. This distinctive lighting ensures that you can see and be seen at all times and optimises both driving and safety.

With a raised driving position and increased ground clearance, the SUV Peugeot 3008 has precise and outstanding road handling. Once you experience this safe and smooth road handling, you will not be able to stop driving!

New Peugeot 508
The Peugeot 508, a radical designed top-of-the-range saloon, packed with advanced technological innovations to provide an outstanding driving experience. With its low, dynamic shape, aggressive front end and

steely, muscular style, the Peugeot 508 Fastback heralds a new era of sportiness and elegance. Its sculpted lines, finely detailed grille and new light signature emphasise its sleek, bold and innovative spirit. Take the controls in the Peugeot i-Cockpit and experience an agile and visionary drive, with a compact steering wheel, and 10" HD capacitive touchscreen allowing you to display information. The GM of Peugeot Oman, said, "We are home to one of Peugeot's flagship showrooms in the region and pride ourselves on delivering the very best experience to our customers. A passionate team of Peugeot product experts are welcoming customers to this extraordinary brand now with an enticing offer."

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) "Sir" alternative
5) Way through the woods
9) According to
14) Hairdo one picks out?
15) Mixed bag
16) Material on a coarse board
17) Rustic cross
18) Type of large bag
19) Kitchen appliance
20) What all divers must do
23) La Brea hazard
24) Deadly
28) Absorbed, as a cost
29) Hawaiian dish
31) Performances for one
32) A Muse
35) Weeper of myth
3 7) Apprehend
38) Be acclaimed and then some
41) Coke complement
42) Things discouraged in society
43) Destiny, to a Hindu

44) Flight data, briefly
46) Cheerios grain
47) Thing to seek forgiveness for
48) Beliefs
50) Small songbird
53) Hide out for a bit
57) Calculating snake?
60) Death notice, briefly
61) Arm bone
62) As from
63) Characteristic carrier
64) Word on a bathroom door
65) Warmths
66) Admirer at a distance
67) Big first for a baby

DOWN

1) Cleopatra's Antony
2) Happening, as "the game"
3) Bouquet
4) Not rushed, to a conductor
5) Baked, crusted entree
6) Like an active kite
7) Brother of Janet Jackson

8) Farmer, at times
9) High dwelling
10) Brains or intelligence
11) Ballpoint, e.g.
12) .0000001 joule
13) Bread type
21) North, to Manhattanites
22) Accused's need
25) Courtroom addressee (with "your")
26) Burglar deterrent
27) Chad's neighbor
29) Burgundy grape
30) _ and aahs
32) "Snowy" bird
33) One way to go
34) Don Draper, e.g.
35) 1492 ship of note
36) Type of kiss that involves noses
39) Hangman's creation
40) Brat's outbursts
45) Choose
47) More cushiony
49) Auto's four
50) Bale binder
51) Arm of the sea
52) 1,000 kilograms

54) Balcony section at the opera
55) Comply with
56) Mud dauber, e.g.

57) Cigarette remains
58) Kick the bucket
59) Evidence acceptable in court

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

It could be an interesting day, complete with the possibility of a visit from the green-eyed monster. And when it comes along, you really shouldn't blame yourself. Jealousy is in the air. It doesn't mean you actually did anything to inspire it, much less that you're responsible for its arrival. Your only defence is to be honest, stand your ground, and try to explain what happened. After that's done, your part is over.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

People have very long memories, so when you meet a new and interesting person today, make sure that you're going to be a good memory for them. Turn on the charm and remember to listen, listen, listen. Use their name repeatedly, and show them that you're paying attention. If you want to see them again, let them know that. Don't play it cool. Be direct and clear. Take the initiative and they'll take note.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Flinging a chair around the room won't help. You'll feel a little bit better, but not much. At the moment, you might even be convinced that you have every right, but you're only going to feel guilty afterward, which, as very few people know about you, actually happens easily. If you're trying to work something out between you and a dear one, hold back. You might not win, but you'll feel better about yourself in the morning.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Someone you're quite intimately involved with might seem to be a bit cranky today, to say the least. Does this mean it's over between you, or that there's really nothing to do about the current situation? Not at all. The first thing to do is to start up a conversation, gently, about the problem. Let them know you want to understand what's going on. If they don't want to talk, there isn't much you can do about it except to wait until they are.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You've just about had it with the veiled comments and sarcastic remarks that have been tossed your way lately on a far too regular basis. It's probably family members that have been at it, you're ready to stop being nice and fight back. Good for you. Why put up with something you know you don't deserve, especially when you know you'd never do this to them? Words can hurt far worse than weapons if they're aimed at the heart.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Someone you haven't seen in a long time, possibly someone who moved or has been away, seems to be making trouble for you from behind the scenes. You might be right, but then, you might be wrong. You'd better be sure before you say or do anything that will put you in an irreparably bad position with them. Check your sources before you make that long-distance call.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

A loved one seems to be completely out of control and totally irritated with you. Regardless of what you say, they might not believe you're telling the truth. Yes, it could be a challenging day, but somehow you'll manage to find the patience you need to get through it. All you have to do is pretend you're in their shoes. That and let them know you're willing to talk.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

This is just one of those days when even you, with your remarkable ability to make peace, restore balance, and bring warring factions together, won't be able to work your magic. Your peace-loving little self might find it necessary to hide out from the world temporarily, and there's nothing wrong with that. If others won't cooperate, putting some distance between you and the ruckus isn't a bad move.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Whoever told you that opposites attract was lying to you, or at least not taking your lifestyle into consideration. Right now, you need to be around the people who think like you, act like you, and have the same beliefs as you. Don't be seduced by the charms of someone who gets you all riled up. Confusing attraction with provocation isn't wise. Conflict is only going to create stress in your life, and that's the last thing you need now.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're not quite sure of what's going on with a friend or co-worker, but you know you don't like it. They've been acting oddly for some time, but today it seems to have come to a head. The one thing you're sure of is that the anger and jealousy they're turning in your direction aren't deserved. Still, you'll be able to put your hurt feelings aside and be rational. Nice going. It won't be easy, but you'll be so proud of yourself afterward.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

It's time for you to admit that your values have changed. What used to be important no longer matters. That means it's time to make some corresponding outward changes, and big ones. Fortunately, you're more than ready, even if that means saying goodbye to people, things, or ways of life that were once primary to you. Don't worry about it. You'll get through this the same way you get through everything: bravely.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

The higher-ups in your life have been less than understanding lately. That goes for family members, elders, and authority figures in general. You've gone out of your way to keep doing what they just recently told you was the right thing to do. But now you're a bit confused. If that same intensity leaks over into your other relationships, try to be patient. This, too, shall pass. Guaranteed.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these is an alternative medicine that means, in Japanese, "mysterious atmosphere"?

A. Tai Chi
B. Shiatsu
C. Reiki
D. Feng Shui

02. Topiary is practised on what objects?

A. Cooked poultry
B. Dead animals
C. Carcinogens
D. Plants

03. What are traditional ingredients of the dish known as coquilles saint jacques?

A. Scallops, potatoes and cream
B. Cream, wine, eggs, mushrooms, shallots and scallops
C. Minced chicken, cream, parsley and scallops
D. Scallops, burnt butter, brandy and cream

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. B

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

M	L	I	A
N	U	I	T
L	E	N	P
U	S	E	E

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Iran's Raisi warns Israel against any hostile action

Tehran, Iran – Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi warned on Monday that the armed forces would not let arch-foe Israel rest if it took action targeting the Islamic republic.

"You must know that if you try to take any action against the Iranian nation... our armed forces will not leave you in peace," Raisi said, during a military parade to mark National Army Day.

His comments come days after he warned neighbouring Iraq against using its territory for activities that disrupt Iran's security.

Last month, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the military's ideological arm, said it fired a dozen ballistic missiles at a 'strategic' site in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous northern Kurdistan region, claiming they were being used by Israel.

However, Arbil governor Oumid Khouchnaw dismissed as 'baseless' the presence of Israeli sites in and around the city.

"There are no Israeli sites in the region," he said at the time.

Also last month, Israel hosted talks attended by top Arab diplomats and US Secretary of State



President Ebrahim Raisi attends a military parade alongside high-ranking officials and commanders during a ceremony marking the country's annual army day in Tehran on Monday (AFP)

Antony Blinken, saying the meeting would send a strong message to Tehran.

"This new architecture, the shared capabilities we are building, intimidates and deters our common enemies - first and foremost Iran and its proxies," Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said at the end of the meeting in

southern Israel.

The meeting came as world powers have been negotiating a way to revive a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, to rein in its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief.

Israel is adamantly opposed to the original deal and any effort to restore it.

The accord started to unravel in 2018 when then US president Donald Trump left the deal and re-instated sanctions, leading Iran to in turn step up its nuclear programme again. On Thursday, the UN atomic energy watchdog said Iran has started to make components for machines used to enrich uranium at a new work-

shop in Natanz, the country's main nuclear site.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said the new workshop replaces a nuclear facility in Karaj, near Tehran, after an attack there last year, which Iran said was an act of sabotage carried out by Israel. AFP

Turkey launches new offensive against Kurdish rebels in Iraq

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkey on Monday said it has launched a new air and ground offensive against outlawed Kurdish militants in northern Iraq involving special forces and combat drones.

Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said commando units, unmanned aerial vehicles and attack helicopters were pounding Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) hideouts in three restive regions near the Turkish border.

Designated as a terrorist group by Ankara and its Western allies, the PKK has been waging an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984 that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Turkey routinely carries out attacks in Iraq, where the PKK has bases and training camps in the Sinjar region and on the mountainous border with Turkey.

"Our heroic pilots successfully struck shelters, caves, tunnels and ammunition depots belonging to the terrorist organisation," Akar said.

"A large number of terrorists were neutralised," he said, adding that the scale of the operation will 'further increase in the coming hours and days'.

Akar would not say how many troops were involved in the operation, which he said started from Sunday night.

Asked by AFP to comment on Turkey's operation, a PKK spokesman in Iraq said on condition of anonymity: "The occupation army, which tried to land troops by helicopters, also wanted to advance by land.

"There are intense clashes between the Turkish army and HPG guerrillas," referring to the PKK's military wing.

The defence ministry said the operation was meant to thwart a large-scale attack against Turkey by the PKK.

But its planning had been reported in the Turkish media for weeks.

It was launched two days after a rare visit to Turkey by the prime minister of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, Masrour Barzani, suggesting that he had been briefed on

Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said commando units, unmanned aerial vehicles and attack helicopters were pounding Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) hideouts in three restive regions near the Turkish border

Ankara's plans.

Barzani said after his talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that he welcomed 'expanding cooperation to promote security and stability' in northern Iraq.

The government of Iraq's Kurdistan has an uneasy relationship with the PKK guerrillas, whose presence complicates the region's lucrative trade ties with Turkey.

But the offensives have added strains to Ankara's ties with Iraq's central government in Baghdad, which accuses Turkey of failing to respect the war-torn country's territorial integrity.

The latest raids, dubbed Operation Claw-Lock, come on the heels of Operations Claw-Tiger and Claw-Eagle launched by the Turkish army in northern Iraq in 2020.

AFP

North Korea must return to 'diplomatic path': US envoy

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea must return to a 'diplomatic path', the top US envoy for the country said on Monday, following Pyongyang's blitz of missile launches and growing signs it is resuming nuclear testing.

North Korea has carried out more than a dozen weapons tests so far this year, the latest one over the weekend - a short-range test that state media claimed would enhance the 'efficiency in the operation of tactical nukes'.

US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim arrived in Seoul for a five-day visit on Monday and met his South Korean counterpart Noh Kyu-duk.

After talks, the two envoys jointly condemned 'recent escalatory actions' by Pyongyang, in-



Anti-war activists hold peace signs during a protest against joint military exercises between South Korea and the US in Seoul on Monday (AFP)

cluding what they said were 'at least three' launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). "We agreed on the need for a strong response to the destabilising behaviour we have been from the DPRK," Kim told reporters, using the acronym for

North Korea's official name.

"We also discussed how to respond to future DPRK actions, including a possible nuclear test," he added. Kim reiterated that the United States has offered to meet Pyongyang 'anywhere without any preconditions', say-

ing that Washington has not 'closed the door on diplomacy'.

"I once again call on Pyongyang to pursue a diplomatic path with us," Kim said. "I want to make clear that we have no hostile intent towards the DPRK." Pyongyang has so far rebuffed offers of talks, blaming Washington's hostile policies.

Kim's visit comes as Seoul and Washington kicked off a nine-day annual joint military drill. Such exercises have always infuriated Pyongyang, which calls them a rehearsal for war.

The allies regularly stage military exercises, but they have been scaled back in recent years as outgoing President Moon Jae-in made efforts to facilitate nuclear talks with North Korea.

"This training is a defensive command post training using computer simulation, and there is no real military manoeuvre training," Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said on Sunday.

North Korea had paused long-range and nuclear tests while leader Kim Jong Un met then-US president Donald Trump for a bout of doomed diplomacy, which collapsed in 2019. Talks have since stalled.

But last month Pyongyang test-fired an ICBM at full range for the first time since 2017.

Recent signs of new activity at North Korea's key nuclear testing site have also raised concerns over the possible resumption of nuclear testing. AFP

'Repatriate Australian citizens from Syria'

Sydney, Australia - United Nations human rights experts have asked the Australian government to repatriate 46 of its citizens from detention camps in Syria, raising 'deepest disquiet' that women and children are living in squalor. In a joint letter made public on Sunday, 10 UN special rapporteurs said bringing this group - which includes 30 children, some as young as two years old - home to Australia was 'the only legal and humane response'.

The UN experts described the situation in the Al-Hol and Roj camps as 'uncertain and sordid' for Australian citizens, who they understood were being held over alleged past association with the Islamic State group. "Some women may have been coerced or trafficked into Syria," they wrote. The experts said the complexity of the situation could not justify 'the complete lack of steps' taken by Canberra to remedy the 'sheer obliteration of the rights of Australian citizens resulting from their arbitrary deprivation of liberty'.

AFP

Israel government faces new split amid Jerusalem violence

Jerusalem - Israel's fractious governing coalition faced a new split on Sunday when Arab-Israeli party Raam 'suspended' its membership, after violence around a flashpoint Jerusalem holy site that wounded 170 people over the weekend.

The government - an ideologically disparate mix of left-wing, hardline Jewish nationalist and religious parties, as well as Raam - had already lost its razor-thin majority this month when a religious Jewish member quit in a dispute over leavened bread distribution at hospitals.

Since then, days of violence around Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, sacred to both Muslims and Jews, put Raam under pressure to quit too.

"If the government continues its steps against the people of Jerusalem... we will resign as a bloc," Raam said in a statement.

The declaration came hours after more than 20 Palestinians and Israelis were wounded in incidents in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount.

The latest clashes take the number of wounded since Friday to more than 170, at a tense time when the Jewish Passover festival coincides with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.



A Palestinian man prays in front of the Dome of Rock mosque at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City on Sunday (AFP)

They also follow deadly violence in Israel and the occupied West Bank starting in late March, in which 36 people have been killed.

Early on Sunday morning, police said 'hundreds' of Palestinian demonstrators inside the mosque compound started gathering piles of stones, shortly before the arrival of Jewish visitors.

Jews are allowed to visit but not to pray at the site, the holiest place in Judaism and third-holiest in Islam.

Israeli police said its forces had entered the compound in order to 'remove' the demonstrators and 're-establish order'.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 19 Palestinians were injured, including at least five who were hospitalised. It said some had been wounded with rubber-coated steel bullets.

'Free hand' -

An AFP team near the entrance to the compound early on Sunday morning saw Jewish wor-

shippers leaving the site, barefoot for religious reasons, and protected by heavily armed police.

Outside the Old City, which lies in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, Palestinian youths threw rocks at passing buses, smashing their windows, resulting in seven people being treated for light wounds, Shaare Zedek hospital said.

The police said they had arrested 18 Palestinians, and Public Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev

said Israel would 'act strongly against anyone who dares to use terrorism against Israeli citizens'.

Bennett had said that the security forces 'continue to receive a free hand... for any action that will provide security to the citizens of Israel', while stressing every effort should be made to allow members of all religions to worship in Jerusalem.

Political sources told AFP that, after Raam's withdrawal from his coalition, Bennett would likely seek to calm the situation.

King Abdullah II of Jordan on Sunday called on Israel to 'stop all illegal and provocative measures' that drive 'further aggravation'. The kingdom serves as custodian of holy places in east Jerusalem, which Israel captured in 1967 and later annexed in a move not recognised by most of the international community.

Senior Palestinian official Hussein Al Sheikh said on Sunday that 'Israel's dangerous escalation in the Al-Aqsa compound ... is a blatant attack on our holy places', and called on the international community to intervene. The chief of the Hamas Islamist movement, which controls the Palestinian enclave of Gaza, had earlier warned Israel that 'Al-Aqsa is ours and ours alone'.

"Our people have the right to

access it and pray in it, and we will not bow down to (Israeli) repression and terror," Ismail Haniyeh said. Weeks of mounting tensions saw two recent deadly attacks by Palestinians in or near the Israeli coastal city of Tel Aviv, alongside mass arrests by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank.

A total of 14 people have been killed in attacks against Israel since March 22.

Twenty-two Palestinians have been killed over the same period, including assailants who targeted Israelis, according to an AFP tally. On Friday morning, police clashed with Palestinians in the Al-Aqsa compound, including inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque, drawing strong condemnation from Muslim countries. Some 150 people were wounded during those clashes.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in a call Sunday with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, said he would make contact with all sides to 'end the Israeli escalation', Abbas's office said in a statement.

Pope Francis on Sunday - with Christians marking Easter at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where they believe Jesus died and was resurrected - prayed for peace.

AFP

Locked-down Shanghai reports COVID deaths

Three people aged 89 to 91 have died from COVID-19 in Shanghai since a gruelling lockdown began last month

Shanghai, China - China said on Monday that just three people have died from COVID-19 in Shanghai since a gruelling lockdown began last month, despite recording hundreds of thousands of cases of the fast-spreading Omicron variant in the eastern megacity.

Authorities said the first deaths from China's biggest outbreak since the virus wave in Wuhan over two years ago were three people aged 89 to 91, all of whom had underlying health issues and had not received COVID vaccines. Beijing insists that its zero-COVID policy of hard lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines has averted fatalities and the public health crises that have engulfed much of the rest of the world.

But some have cast doubt on official figures in a nation with low vaccination rates among its vast elderly population. Shanghai health officials noted on Sunday that less than two-thirds of residents over 60 had received two

COVID jabs and less than 40 per cent had received a booster.

Unverified social media posts have also claimed unreported deaths - typically before being scrubbed from the internet. Hong Kong, meanwhile, has attributed nearly 9,000 deaths to COVID-19 since Omicron first surged there in January.

The three reported victims in Shanghai 'deteriorated into severe cases after going into hospital', according to a government account, with city health official Wu Qianyu telling a Monday press conference that 'underlying disease' was the direct cause of death. The eastern business hub has simmered under lockdowns since March, with many of its 25mn residents confined to their homes as daily caseloads have topped 25,000 - a modest figure by global standards but virtually unheard of in China.

Many inhabitants have flooded social media with complaints of food shortages, spartan quarantine conditions and



Community volunteers guide residents queuing to get tested for COVID-19 in a compound during a lockdown in Pudong district in Shanghai on Sunday (AFP)

heavy-handed enforcement, circulating footage of rare protests faster than government censors can delete them.

But officials have vowed to continue isolating anyone who tests positive regardless of whether they show signs of the disease - with asymptomatic infections accounting for nearly 90 per cent of the more than 22,000 new local cases on Monday. China last reported new COVID-19 deaths on March 19 -

two people in the northeastern rustbelt province of Jilin - the first such acknowledged deaths in more than a year.

Political play

China's ruling Communist Party has touted its hardline pandemic approach as proof that it places human life above material concerns - unlike many Western democracies, which it argues have sacrificed lives by failing to stop the virus. Beijing has also

acknowledged that dropping restrictions could let the pathogen run amok through its under-resourced healthcare system, potentially causing millions of deaths - particularly among the elderly, who are at risk of developing more severe disease.

But experts say political considerations are also at play, with the party staking popular legitimacy on crushing emerging outbreaks in a year that will likely see President Xi Jinping secure a

precedent-busting third term in office. "This is a sensitive and critical year for the regime," said Lynette Ong, associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto.

"China has always given so much prominence to social stability, and a health crisis is a potentially big disrupter."

Desperation

Those concerns may have motivated officials in Shanghai to

zealously implement curbs 'to the point that it becomes silly', even as the highly transmissible Omicron strain refuses to be quelled, Ong said.

Videos on social media have illustrated creeping public desperation, with clips showing residents scuffling with hazmat-suited police and bursting through barricades demanding food.

Internet users have also blasted the filmed killing of a pet corgi by a health worker and a now-softened policy of separating infected children from their virus-free parents.

Other posts - not verified by AFP - and overseas media outlets have previously said that elderly patients in the city had died after contracting COVID-19 even as no fatalities appeared in official figures.

The United States Embassy in Beijing said on Monday it had 're-configured operations' to assist more than 40,000 Americans in its Shanghai consular district.

Chinese officials accused Washington of making 'groundless accusations' about its COVID policy earlier this month after the surge prompted the consulate to evacuate non-essential staff.

AFP

Cruise ships return to Australia first time in more than 2 years

Sydney, Australia - A cruise ship docked in Sydney Harbour on Monday for the first time in more than two years, after a 2020 ban sparked by a mass COVID-19 outbreak was lifted.

On a bright morning, the Pacific Explorer made a dramatic entrance, flanked by tugboats spraying plumes of water and with a large banner that read 'We're home' draped across its bow.

Crowds gathered at the base of the Sydney Harbour Bridge to watch the arrival of the ship, which began its 18,000km journey back to Australia nearly a month ago.

International cruise ships were banned from Australian waters in March 2020 after a COVID-19 outbreak that spread from the Ruby Princess ship, which was linked to hundreds of cases of the virus and 28 deaths, many in aged care homes.

The Pacific Explorer and two other cruise ships owned by P&O were moored off the coast of



The Pacific Explorer makes its way to dock at the overseas passenger terminal on Sydney Harbour on Monday (AFP)

Cyprus for much of the past year waiting for Australia to lift its ban - a reprieve delayed by successive waves of COVID-19.

Bookings for P&O's Australian cruises are now close to pre-pandemic levels, spokesperson Lindsey Gordon told AFP.

"We now see the prospect of near normal summer cruise sea-

son for 22-23."

Before the pandemic, some 350 cruise ships travelled to Australia carrying more than 600,000 passengers - making the industry worth Aus\$5.2bn (US\$3.8bn) to the national economy, according to the Cruise Lines International Association.

AFP

Mexican lawmakers reject power reforms

Mexico City, Mexico - Mexican lawmakers on Sunday rejected constitutional electricity reforms at the centre of diplomatic tensions with the United States, in a blow to President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

Lopez Obrador promoted the changes to strengthen the state-owned electricity provider and roll back the effects of liberalisation under previous governments that he says favored private companies.

But his plans alarmed the United States and Canada, prompting warnings that Mexico is in danger of violating its trade commitments by favoring state-run entities heavily dependent on fossil fuels.

After a marathon session in the lower house of Congress on Easter Sunday, Lopez Obrador's Morena party failed to secure the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution.

There were 275 votes in favour and 223 against the bill, with no abstentions, the president of the lower house, Sergio Gutierrez, announced.



Deputies celebrate after the Electricity Reform failed to reach the majority of votes at the Chamber of Deputies, in Mexico City on Sunday (AFP)

Gutierrez had earlier accused the opposition of wanting to remain 'imperialist lackeys' at the service of foreign companies.

But Jorge Romero of the conservative National Action Party argued that the bill would put the country 'back 50 years' in efforts to protect the environment.

Lopez Obrador's Morena party and its allies only have 277

seats out of a total of 500 in the Chamber of Deputies, and the opposition bloc had vowed to vote against the legislation.

Earlier during the debate, supporters of Lopez Obrador held a rally outside the Chamber of Deputies calling for the reforms to be passed, with one carrying a sign that said 'Don't sell out the nation'.

'A big defeat'

The bill's failure represents 'a big defeat for Morena and Lopez Obrador because it is one of the central axes of their project to nationalise energy', Jose Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, told AFP.

The United States had warned that Mexico's reforms risk bringing 'endless litigation' that would impede investment and undermine joint efforts to fight climate change. "Mexico's energy policies damage the environment, US business and investor interests in multiple sectors, and hamper joint efforts to mitigate climate change," US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said last month.

Canada and Spain are also concerned about the consequences for their energy companies that have invested in Mexico. The changes would have ensured that the state-owned Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) has at least 54 per cent of the electricity market.

AFP

Firing squad or electrocution? US death penalty in spotlight

Houston, US - A Death Row inmate in South Carolina forced to decide whether he wants the electric chair or a firing squad.

In Texas, an ailing 78-year-old man scheduled to die for a murder he committed three decades ago and a mother of 14 children to be put to death despite serious doubts about her guilt.

Capital punishment has been on the wane in the United States but an upcoming slate of executions has refocused attention on the use of the death penalty.

Richard Moore, a 57-year-old African-American man, is to be executed in South Carolina on April 29 for the 1999 murder of a convenience store clerk during a robbery. It would be the first execution in the southern state in over a decade.

Recent US executions have been carried out by lethal injection but South Carolina has been forced to abandon that method because drug manufacturers are refusing to supply the necessary ingredients.

So Moore had the choice between the electric chair and a firing squad made up of three rifle-toting volunteers from the Corrections Department.

He chose the firing squad on Friday.

Moore's lawyers have challenged both methods of execution, however, claiming they violate a constitutional ban on 'cruel and unusual punishment', and a judge agreed on Thursday to hear their arguments.

"The electric chair and the firing squad are antiquated, barbaric methods of execution that virtually all American jurisdictions have left behind," said Lindsey Vann, a lawyer for Moore.

Electrocution has been used for seven of the 43 executions carried out in South Carolina since 1985. The last time was in 2008.

A firing squad has been used only three times in the United States - all in the western state of Utah - since 1976, when the US Supreme Court reinstated capital



This file photo shows the witness room facing the execution chamber of the 'death house' at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio on December 4, 2009 (AFP)

punishment.

'Unreliable confession'

There have been three executions in the United States this year and there were 11 in 2021, down from 17 in 2020.

Only one of the executions in

2021 was of a woman and of the more than 1,540 people executed in the United States since 1976, only 17 have been women.

Melissa Lucio, 53, could be the 18th. Lucio, a Mexican-American mother of 14 children, is scheduled to be executed by lethal injection in Texas on April

27 for the 2007 death of her two-year-old daughter, Mariah.

Lucio claims a confession was coerced by police during a five-hour interrogation and that the toddler's death was actually caused by an accidental fall down a staircase.

Her case has been champi-

oned by the Innocence Project, which fights for the wrongly convicted, and reality TV star Kim Kardashian, who has urged Texas Governor Greg Abbott to grant clemency for Lucio. "The state extracted an unreliable 'confession' and used false scientific evidence to convict Melissa Lucio of a crime she did not commit and in fact never occurred," said Vanessa Potkin, an attorney.

"What we know today is this: Mariah died from medical complications after an accidental fall. She was not murdered."

'Cruel punishment'

Also scheduled to be executed in Texas in the coming days is Carl Wayne Buntion, who was sentenced to death in 1991 for the murder of a Houston police officer. Buntion, who does not dispute his guilt, is scheduled to die by lethal injection on April 21.

At 78, he is the oldest man on Death Row in Texas and his lawyers have argued that executing him now - over 30 years

after the crime - would constitute 'cruel and unusual punishment'.

Texas law also requires it be established that Buntion would 'likely harm others if he is not executed', his lawyers said.

Buntion, they said, poses no danger to anyone and suffers from multiple ailments including arthritis, vertigo, hepatitis, sciatic nerve pain and cirrhosis.

"Mr. Buntion is a frail, elderly man," his lawyers said in a petition to the Texas Board of Pardons and Parole, 'and will not be a threat to anyone in prison if his sentence is reduced to a lesser penalty'. Buntion has also been in solitary confinement for the past 20 years, restricted to his cell for 23 hours a day.

"When someone's sentenced to death, the jury isn't agreeing to sentence them to 30, 40, 50 years of solitary confinement and then death," Burke Butler, executive director of the Texas Defender Service, told AFP.

AFP

Airstrikes hit western Ukraine as Russian forces mass in the east

The airstrikes in Lviv came just hours after Moscow was accused of wanting to ‘destroy’ the entire region of Donbas

Lviv, Ukraine - Airstrikes killed at least seven people in Ukraine’s western city of Lviv on Monday, as Russia pounded targets across the country and massed forces for an expected all-out assault in the east.

The airstrikes in Lviv came just hours after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Moscow of wanting to ‘destroy’ the entire eastern region of Donbas bordering Russia.

Russia’s defence ministry said it had hit 16 military targets at various locations across Ukraine.

Following the attack on Lviv, black smoke billowed from the gutted roof of a car repair shop in the northwest of the city as air raid sirens wailed. “Fires were set off as a result of the strikes. They are still being put out. The facilities



Smoke rising in Rubizhne city, on Monday, on the 54th day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

were severely damaged,” Lviv regional governor Maksym Kozlytsky said on social media.

In the south, Russia continued its push to capture the besieged port city of Mariupol where the last remaining Ukrainian forces prepared for a final stand.

Ukraine has pledged to fight on and defend the strategic city, defying a Russian ultimatum for remaining fighters inside the encircled Azovstal steel plant to lay down their arms and surrender.

Russian state TV on Monday broadcast a video of what it de-

scribed as ‘Britons’ captured fighting for Ukraine and demanding that Prime Minister Boris Johnson negotiate their release.

The two haggard-looking men asked to be exchanged for Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian tycoon close to President Vladimir Putin,

who was recently arrested in the pro-Western country.

Ukraine then aired its own video featuring Medvedchuk calling for his exchange in return for an evacuation of civilians and troops from Mariupol.

“I want to ask Russian Presi-

dent Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to exchange me for Ukrainian defenders and residents of Mariupol,” he said in the video published by Kyiv’s security services, wearing black clothes.

AFP

Sri Lanka leader trims Cabinet of relatives

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka’s embattled leader dropped two of his brothers and a nephew from his Cabinet on Monday, following public anger over the ruling family’s mismanagement of a crippling economic crisis and calls for his resignation.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has presided over the island nation’s most painful downturn in memory and his government is preparing for imminent bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund.

Dozens of lawmakers have turned against the administration and opposition parties have rebuffed invitations to join a unity government from the president.

Protests have nonetheless demanded Rajapaksa stand down, including thousands of people camped outside his seafront office for more than a week.

The new Cabinet retains Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya’s older brother and the head of Sri Lanka’s ruling clan, while leaving out eldest sibling Chamal and younger brother Basil, the former finance minister.

AFP



Members of various law enforcement agencies search for a missing person in Bellair, north of Durban on Monday (AFP)

10,000 soldiers deployed in SA flood relief effort

Durban, South Africa - A week after deadly storms started lashing South Africa’s east coast, the army said on Monday 10,000 troops were on the ground to help restore key services and aid the search for 63 people who remain missing.

The death toll stands at 443, but with each passing day, hopes diminish of finding more survivors. “The tragedy currently unfolding in our province is one of the worst natural disasters in the recorded history of our country,” KwaZulu-Natal provincial government said. Funerals were being held across the city of Durban, which bore the brunt of the storms, as grim tales of the catastrophe continued to emerge.

One woman was found dead with her three grandchildren after their car was washed away, while rescuers reported finding bodies washed into dams, local media reported. Swathes of eThekweni, the municipality that includes Durban, remain without power or water, and the province said it could take time before services are restored.

“There are areas that have suffered extensive damage which will take longer to repair,” it said in a statement.

Many streets remain slathered with mud, although the main roads have been cleared enough to allow water tankers to the hardest-hit areas. But eThekweni deputy mayor Philani Mavundla said in a television interview that 80 per cent of the city’s water works were down, making it difficult to even fill the tankers.

Some of the troops include plumbers and electricians who joined the mammoth task of trying to get life back to normal.

Soldiers are also providing field accommodation and water purification systems, the army said.

The deadliest storm on record dumped apocalyptic levels of rain on Durban and surrounding areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Some 40,000 people were left homeless and more than 550 schools and nearly 60 health care facilities have been damaged, according to government tallies.

South Africa is winding down a long weekend for the Easter holidays. Many children are due to return to school on Tuesday, but authorities warned that 271,000 students may not be able to attend due to damaged schools.

AFP

Dozens hurt in days of unrest in Sweden

Stockholm, Sweden - Several days of unrest in Sweden, sparked by a far-right group’s plans to burn Q’urans, have injured several dozen people, police said on Monday, calling for more resources to deal with the violence.

Protests have turned violent in several cities since Thursday, leaving 26 police officers and 14 civilians injured, police said at a press conference on Monday.

The unrest has been sparked by the leader of the anti-immigration and anti-Islam group Hard Line, the Danish-Swedish politician Rasmus Paludan who is aiming to drum up support ahead of September elections.

Rasmus Paludan - who intends to stand in the September poll but does not yet have the necessary signatures to secure his candidacy - has gone on a declared ‘tour’ of Sweden, visiting cities and towns with large Muslim populations with the intent of burning copies of the Muslim holy book Q’uran as the faithful mark the holy month of



Cars burning near Rosengard in Malmo on Monday (AFP)

Criminals have profited from the situation to show violence toward society

ANDERS THORNBURG

Ramadan.

Clashes with police have erupted during protests against the group since Thursday evening, starting in the cities Linköping and Norrköping.

They spread to the city of Malmö, where a school was set alight during a second night of unrest Saturday-Sunday.

‘Too few of us’

“Criminals have profited from the situation to show violence toward society, without any link to the demonstrations,” national police chief Anders Thornberg said at a press conference on Monday.

“There are too few of us. We have grown, but we have not

grown at the same pace as the problems at the heart of society,” he said, asking for more resources for the police.

As protesters burnt cars and lobbed rocks at the police in Sunday clashes, officers responded, head of police special forces Jonas Hysing said.

AFP

France’s presidential rivals gird for face-off

Paris, France - Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen traded barbs on Monday as they returned to campaigning for the French presidency ahead of a prime-time debate that is likely to prove decisive ahead of Sunday’s second-round run-off.

The two rivals held low-key events after a brief Easter pause as they paced themselves before Wednesday’s face-off, when the centrist Macron will defend his record over the past five years against his combative far-right rival. It will be a rematch of their debate in 2017, when the same two finalists clashed at the same stage of the campaign, but which most analysts say was handily won by Macron, who was making his first-ever attempt at public office.

Le Pen, making her third run



Members of the public sit next to a statue bearing a graffiti which reads as ‘Neither Le Pen, nor Macron’ in Paris on Sunday (AFP)

for the presidency, insists she is better prepared this time around.

“I’m very confident, and I think I’m going to win,” the National

Rally candidate said during a visit to the sunlit village square in Saint-Pierre-en-Auge in Normandy, western France.

“I hope this debate is carried out calmly... I hope it won’t be what I’ve been hearing for the past week, a series of insults, fake news and excesses,” she said.

“She knows her programme perfectly, and she knows very well how Macron is going to try to attack her,” Le Pen’s close ally Louis Aliot, the far-right mayor of Perpignan in southern France, told France Inter radio.

The latest opinion polls suggest that Macron has the edge, giving him scores of 53 to 55.5 per cent against 44.5 to 47 per cent for Le Pen.

But allowing for margins of error, Macron knows there is no room for complacency, and polls have often underestimated the results of far-right candidates in the past - most notably in 2002, when Le Pen’s father Jean-Marie

Le Pen reached the presidential run-off against Jacques Chirac.

Macron took aim at Le Pen’s proposal to hold constitutional referendums on tougher immigration laws and her plan for ‘national priority’ for French citizens for jobs and welfare benefits, and to create the possibility for citizens’ initiatives to propose and vote on legislation.

“She is implying that once elected, she believes she’s above the Constitution since she can decide not to respect it by changing the rules,” he told France Culture radio in an interview published on Monday.

But instead of focusing on immigration and the threat of extremism, Le Pen has insisted mainly on her plans to tackle rising prices.

AFP



Saudi model Ziad al Mesfer's stylist fixes his hair before posing for his private photographer, in Tahliya street in the capital Riyadh

ANDROGYNOUS ATTIRE

MAKING HEADS TURN

Male Saudi model experiments with androgynous fashion, despite mixed reactions on social media

With his hot pink hair extensions and leopard print pantsuit, model Ziad al Mesfer was bound to turn heads during his recent public photo shoot in deeply conservative Saudi Arabia. Passers-by began sneaking pictures on their mobiles merely minutes after Mesfer emerged from his white luxury car onto the cobbled sidewalks of a high-end cafe district in Riyadh, his stylist and photographer in tow.

Such appearances have helped Mesfer, 25, build a massive social media following while blazing a trail for the handful of Saudi male models brave enough to don garments widely seen as appropriate for women only - thereby pushing the boundaries of their country's famously rigid gender norms.

In the process, he has endeared himself to expensive brands keen to profit from a spectacle that would have been unthinkable before Saudi Arabia embarked on a whirlwind series of social reforms ushered in by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Yet Mesfer's approach carries considerable risks.

Along with ardent fans - mostly bubbly teenage girls who follow him on Snapchat - the crowd gawking at the recent Riyadh shoot included one irate middle-aged man who got out of his car to denounce Mesfer's activities. The desert monarchy also traditionally forbids men who 'imitate women' or wear women's clothing, and vice versa.

According to Mesfer, he is simply following global brands' embrace of androgynous fashion. And despite occasional harassment in-person and online, he told AFP he has no plan to leave Saudi Arabia or modify his look.

"It is better for me to stay in my country and wear these clothes," he said, "Not wait for a trip abroad to go outside in a bold outfit."

Fashionable following

Born into a Riyadh-based family, the eldest of six children, Mesfer started to develop his own sense of style from a young age.

"I used to dress my mom, my aunts, and my relatives. I used to love styling them," he said. "My mom used to consult me regarding these things, so I became more interested in women's fashion."

He only dreamt of going public with his talents after Prince Mohammed began trying to soften the kingdom's image, includ-

ing by expanding entertainment options and easing rules that required women to wear the abaya and hijab.

Around two years ago, Mesfer started modelling outfits online using the relatively safe medium of Snapchat, which automatically deletes posts once they are viewed.

Today he boasts more than two million Snapchat followers and another 200,000 on Instagram - the kind of clout that has captured the attention of brands including Prada and Dior.

When Gucci opened a new boutique in Riyadh last month, staff made sure to invite Mesfer to view the inventory, said senior saleswoman Loulwa Mohammed.

"It's very important to invite him, because when we invite him and take a video or picture of him wearing any item, it sells directly," Mohammed said. "All Saudis - old women, young girls - all of them, they are watching him."

A kind of artist

Even as other male models and would-be influencers follow his lead, Mesfer remains in a class by himself.

"He is number one," said a sales associate at Prada who, like others interviewed for this story, declined to be named because of the topic's sensitivity.

Yet several fashion professionals said Saudi's limited acceptance of Mesfer should not be misconstrued as a blanket endorsement of his behaviour.

Instead, they said, Mesfer, who earns money partly through online ads, enjoys protection because he works with luxury brands and mingles with local celebrities who invite him to their events.

"We see him as a model, as a kind of artist, so we can't judge him," Gucci's Mohammed said. But she added, "Sometimes the reaction is negative. Saudi is a Muslim country. I wouldn't want to see my brother doing the same thing."

This conflicted perception of Mesfer is on vivid display in the comments on his Instagram page. In response to a February post, in which Mesfer paired a bright red coat with a skin-tight purple turtleneck, one user wrote "may God forgive us" while another wrote "I am deleting Instagram after seeing this."

Another user, though, was encouraging. "Ziad, keep going, I love you, take care of yourself for the people who love you and do what you love, and do not care about any words."

AFP

Saudi model Ziad al Mesfer is pictured in Tahliya street in the capital Riyadh



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KEY WEST TOURISTS

Cruise crossroads

Many businesses depend on the tourist throngs in the island city of Key West while some residents find the cruise ships to be a nuisance and believe they cause untold environmental harm

The island-city of Key West off the southern tip of Florida invites visitors to stroll slowly, enjoy turquoise waters and take in the sunset. But according to some residents, that idyllic peace is endangered - by lumbering, tourist-filled cruise ships.

The huge vessels bring thousands of visitors every day to the small city of 26,000 inhabitants, whose quaint, often pastel-coloured Victorian homes line leafy, walkable streets. Following a drawn-out local battle, the cruise tourist numbers are now down, but many residents say more still needs to be done.

While many businesses depend on the tourist throngs, residents such as Arlo Haskell find the ships to be a nuisance and believe they cause environmental harm. As a result, he founded the Safer Cleaner Ships non-profit.

"These cruise ships are an extraction industry that is profiting off the beauty in Key West while harming that beauty and degrading the experience for everyone else," Haskell said.

In 2020, his association put forth three local referendums: one to limit the size of cruise ships, another to allow no more than 1,500 people a day to

disembark and a third to be able to prohibit boats that do the most damage to the environment.

The three proposals, each approved by between 60 to 80 per cent of voters, were ratified by the city council. It was a victory for Haskell - or so he thought.

Then in June 2021, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a law suspending the measures, arguing that voters could not meddle in matters of maritime trade.

Local businesses, including ones also owned by the owner of Pier B - a huge beneficiary of the cruise ships as one of the city's main docking locations - had donated almost \$1 million to a political campaign committee supporting the governor, according to the Miami Herald.

Public docks closed

Relying on a bit of unexpected economic data, Safer Cleaner Ships returned to battle following DeSantis' move. The info showed that cruise ship suspensions during the pandemic did not sink local finances. To the contrary, in 2021, the city collected 25 percent more sales taxes than in 2019, before COVID-19.

Hotels and restaurants seem to have taken advantage of the fact that Florida promoted its open businesses in the middle of the pandemic while other states imposed rules and closings.

The city administration last month decided that since Key West cannot limit the number of cruise ships, it would close its two public docks. Now cruises can only park at private Pier B, which welcomes only one cruise ship per day. The era of two to three ships arriving daily is over. The move has been a blow to some businesses.

Although cruise tourists spend only a few hours in the city and usually eat before disembarking - generating little income for restaurants and hotels - they do buy souvenirs and snacks.

The visitors support the likes of tchotchke shops, ice cream parlours and tourist destinations, such as the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum where the US writer lived between 1931 and 1939, according



Tourists await a ride on a boat at Key West

These cruise ships are an extraction industry that is profiting off the beauty in Key West while harming that beauty and degrading the experience for everyone else

ARLO HASKELL

to Mayor Teri Johnston.

Finding balance

One morning this week, the streets of Key West were nearly deserted. Vanessa Wilder manned her downtown bike rental stand, waiting for the first passengers to disembark from a newly arrived cruise.

"The main shops and the bars down here, we thrive off of these cruise ships," she said. "If we didn't have them, a lot of businesses around here would have to shut."

Despite his victories, Haskell maintains that things should move one step further, with cruise ships at the private dock not allowed to exceed a size specified by residents.

The boats, according to Haskell, "do tremendous damage to our ecosystem" by clouding the water, which endangers the survival of corals. But Scott Atwell, spokesman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Key West, said the evidence wasn't so clear.

"We do not have specific studies on whether the cruise ship turbidity is any different than natural turbidity and whether turbidity from the ships' channel reaches our coral reefs in a detrimental way," he said.

In the meantime, Key West's city council has decided to monitor water quality and also support coral restoration under an initiative that charges a fee to Pier B for disembarking passengers.

"We don't want to get rid of the cruise ships but bring them into a moderate level so that we have good economic conditions and we also have good quality of life for our residents," Johnston said.

AFP



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema (C) celebrates with team-mates after scoring the winner against Sevilla at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in Seville on Sunday (AFP)

Karim Benzema scores in added time as Real Madrid fight back again to stun Sevilla, Atletico scrape past Espanyol

Madrid, Spain - Karim Benzema completed another incredible Real Madrid comeback on Sunday as they fought from two goals down to defeat Sevilla 3-2 in La Liga.

After trailing Chelsea 3-0 on Tuesday only to secure their place in the Champions League semi-finals, Madrid stunned Sevilla to seal the victory that has surely won them La Liga.

Defeat would have given fresh hope to the chasing pack, with Sevilla and Barcelona both beginning the day 12 points behind,

Barca with two games in hand.

Instead, goals in the second half from Rodrygo, Nacho Fernandez and Benzema in the 92nd minute mean Madrid extend their advantage to 15 points with six games left to play.

An Ivan Rakitic free-kick and Erik Lamela's smart finish had put Sevilla two up at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan.

"It's difficult to understand why we played like that in the first half and to be honest how we played as well as that in the second," said Carlo Ancelotti.

It's difficult to understand why we played like that in the first half and to be honest how we played as well as that in the second. In the second, the intensity was spectacular.

CARLO ANCELOTTI

"In the first half we looked tired. In the second, the intensity was spectacular."

Benzema's goal finished Chelsea off on Tuesday after Rodrygo had forced extra-time at the Santiago Bernabeu and those

two, along with Vinicius Junior, were crucial again. Benzema now has 44 goals in 46 appearances this season and 15 in his last 10.

Rakitic gave Sevilla the lead in the 25th minute, curling a free-kick into the corner after Luka

Modric had brought down Papu Gomez.

Lamela doubled the advantage four minutes later, slotting after Tecatito drew out Thibaut Courtois and left the net open.

But a superb Vinicius back-heel for Dani Carvajal allowed Rodrygo to pull a goal back in the 50th minute.

Vinicius thought he had made it 2-2 in the 74th minute, only for the goal to be ruled out, the referee deciding the Brazilian had controlled with his arm and not his chest. Madrid though were

undeterred as Rakitic headed away a corner, only for Carvajal to drive to the line and pull back for Nacho to finish.

And then in the 92nd minute, Benzema completed another remarkable revival, collecting Rodrygo's pass, controlling and firing past three Sevilla defenders on the line.

Last-gasp Carrasco

Ten-man Atletico Madrid left it late too as Yannick Carrasco scored the winning penalty with the last kick of the game for a 2-

1 win over Espanyol.

Atletico looked set to drop another two points at the Wanda Metropolitano when Geoffrey Kondogbia was sent off in the second half and then three minutes later Raul de Tomas cancelled out Carrasco's opener, his free-kick squirming through the fingers of Jan Oblak.

But De Tomas handballed deep into added time, the referee awarding the spot-kick after a long consultation with VAR, before Carrasco held his nerve.

AFP

Chelsea's Loftus-Cheek has sights set on Liverpool revenge in FA Cup final

London, United Kingdom - Ruben Loftus-Cheek said Chelsea have their sights set on revenge over Liverpool in the FA Cup final after the midfielder's goal inspired a 2-0 win against Crystal Palace on Sunday.

Chelsea will face Liverpool on May 14 in a repeat of this year's League Cup final, which Jurgen Klopp's side won on penalties after a goalless draw.

The Blues are desperate to avenge that Wembley shoot-out loss, in which Chelsea keeper Kepa Arrizabalaga blazed over to hand the trophy to Liverpool.

It will be the first time since 1992-93 season that the same two teams have competed in the League Cup final and the FA Cup final. On that occasion, Arsenal twice beat Sheffield Wednesday and Loftus-Cheek is determined to avoid history repeating itself with a second Liverpool triumph.

"We want to get them back,



Ruben Loftus-Cheek (R) celebrates with Cesar Azpilicueta after the win

simple as that. It was a fantastic game in the League Cup final and could have gone either way," Loftus-Cheek said.

Loftus-Cheek's role in Chelsea's semi-final win against Palace at Wembley was a cathartic moment for the midfielder.

The 26-year-old spent the 2017-18 season on loan at Palace and has struggled to hold down a regular place at Chelsea.

Even this season he has been in and out of Thomas Tuchel's side, but the England international is finally showing signs of fulfilling his potential.

"It has been a tough road with injuries and going on loan to find my form again," Loftus-Cheek said. "I always wanted to play for Chelsea. I have played quite a lot this season.

AFP

Bayern Munich one win from 10th straight Bundesliga title

Berlin, Germany - Bayern Munich can secure a 10th straight Bundesliga title next weekend after they bounced back from their Champions League exit with a 3-0 win at Arminia Bielefeld on Sunday.

An own goal by Bielefeld's Jacob Laursen and strikes by Serge Gnabry and Jamal Musiala saw Bayern move nine points clear.

Bayern returned to winning ways five days after conceding a last-gasp equaliser at home to Villarreal to crash out of the Champions League with a 2-1 aggregate defeat in the quarter-finals.

"I've had a hard time dealing with it," Bayern midfielder Joshua Kimmich, who was outstanding Sunday, said. "It's still in the back of your mind."

AFP

PSG on brink of Ligue 1 title

Paris, France - A Kylian Mbappe penalty proved decisive as Paris Saint-Germain beat bitter rivals Marseille 2-1 on Sunday, meaning they could clinch the Ligue 1 title this week.

Mbappe converted from the spot in first-half stoppage time after the referee awarded a penalty for handball on a VAR review, restoring PSG's lead following Neymar's early opener and a Duje Caleta-Car equaliser.

PSG are 15 points clear of second-placed Marseille with six games remaining and Mauricio Pochettino's side - who also have a far superior goal difference - stand poised to reclaim the trophy they relinquished to Lille last season. If Marseille fail to beat Nantes on Wednesday then PSG can clinch their eighth Ligue 1 title in 10 seasons if they have a better result against Angers.

Despite the apparently high stakes for the biggest fixture in French football, there was a dis-



PSG's Kylian Mbappe in action against Marseille (AFP)

tinctly flat atmosphere at the Parc des Princes.

Authorities banned Marseille fans from the game over concerns of possible violence, a recurring theme in France in recent months.

Meanwhile PSG 'ultras', the most vocal members of their support, have decided to stay silent until the end of the season in protest at the club's manage-

ment and at results in a campaign marked by the Champions League exit to Real Madrid.

In any case, a record-equalling 10th French championship in their history has never really been in doubt for PSG, even before their current run of three straight wins in which Neymar and Mbappe have each scored six times.

AFP

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IPL 2022



RR V KKR

Buttler, Chahal help Royals beat Knight Riders in run-fest



BRIEF SCORES:

Rajasthan Royals 217 for 5 in 20 overs (Jos Buttler 103 (61) 9x4, 5x6, Sanju Samson 38 (19) 3x4, 2x6, Shimron Hetmyer 26 (13) 2x4, 2x6; Sunil Narine 2 for 21) beat Kolkata Knight Riders 210 in 19.4 overs (Aaron Finch 53 (28) 9x4, 2x6, Shreyas Iyer 85 (51) 7x4, 4x6, Umesh Yadav 21 (9) 1x4, 2x6; Yuzvendra Chahal 5 for 40) by 7 runs

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



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VS



ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE

'Coming in at the powerplay allowed me to shine'

Pune, India - South Africa's David Miller on Sunday said coming in to bat early made him "shine" as his unbeaten 94 led Gujarat Titans to a thrilling three-wicket IPL victory over holders Chennai Super Kings.

Chasing 170 for victory, Gujarat slipped to 48-4. But Miller put on an attacking 70-run sixth wicket stand with Afghanistan's Rashid Khan (40) and propelled his team to their target with one ball to spare in Pune.

Rashid, an ace leg-spinner who stood in as captain in place of injured Hardik Pandya, smashed three sixes and a four off Chris Jordan in a 25-run 18th over.

Rashid fell after his 21-ball blitz but Miller completed the job, taking 13 runs in a dramatic final over from Jordan.

Miller hit a six after two dot balls, was caught at short third man only for the delivery to be called no ball for height, and then hit a four and finished the match off with a two.

"I wanted to see the ball, hit ball," said man of the match Miller.



David Miller

"Coming in at the powerplay (inside six overs) allowed me to shine, when the ball is harder than normal. Got more time too, so that was cool."

Miller praised Rashid's cameo. "Rashid's batting releases a lot of pressure. Exceptional over, in my opinion that over was the game-changer and he struck it beautifully," he said.

Miller, who struck eight fours and six sixes in his 51-ball knock said he was delighted to be a part

of Titans.

"It has been really, really encouraging to be part of Titans and just know that I am 100% backed. We have a nice environment, we enjoy each other's success and I think that goes a long way to doing well. But more importantly, it has been really nice to play every game," he said.

Gujarat, one of the two new franchises in the expanded 10-team IPL, consolidated their position at the top with five wins from

six matches. Chennai slipped to five losses in six games.

Ruturaj Gaikwad's 73 went in vain after the opener guided Chennai to 169 for five.

Skipper Ravindra Jadeja, who took over the captaincy ahead of the season after Mahendra Singh Dhoni stepped down, provided a late blitz with his unbeaten 12-ball 22, but Miller's knock overshadowed every other innings in the match.

AFP

Mitchell Marsh hospitalised as Delhi suffer COVID outbreak

New Delhi, India - Australia all-rounder Mitchell Marsh has tested positive for Covid-19, along with several other members of his IPL side Delhi Capitals, and admitted to hospital, said a statement on Monday.

The Delhi Capitals medical team is closely monitoring the condition of Marsh, who played his first match of the Indian Premier League season on Saturday.

Other positive cases, including in the support staff, are all "asymptomatic", according to the statement.

All remaining members of the bio-bubble are currently in isolation and will be tested regularly, with Delhi scheduled to play their next match on Wednesday against Punjab Kings in Pune.

Delhi physio Patrick Farhart tested positive for the virus last week but no other cases were reported as Delhi went on to play their game against Royal Challengers Bangalore at the weekend.

AFP

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Frustrating start for Al Harthy

European Le Mans Series season opener ends in disappointment for Oman Racing at Paul Ricard after first lap retirement

Muscat - Front-row qualifier Ahmad al Harthy did not get an opportunity to battle for an opening-round GTE podium at the European Le Mans Series on Sunday as team-mate Sam De Haan was forced into retirement on the very first lap at Circuit Paul Ricard.

After Oman Racing's Al Harthy put in a sensational effort in his maiden ELMS qualifying session on Saturday afternoon at the French track, hopes were justifiably high of a very strong challenge for silverware at the 4 Hours of Le Castellet.

And things began well when the race got underway, with British driver De Haan maintaining second position off the start in the black and silver No.69 Aston Martin Vantage GTE and then taking the GTE race lead.

At the end of lap one, though, a multi-car tangle at the final corner among the LMP3 class contenders resulted in the Oman



Oman Racing's Sam De Haan was forced into retirement in the very first lap, denying team-mate Ahmad al Harthy a chance to show his mettle

Racing car receiving hard contact to the front-right, forcing De Haan off the track with a broken steering.

Although managing to rejoin the track, albeit a long way down the GTE order, the damage meant De Haan had no option

We have some time to get back and re-prep for Imola now but from what we've seen in qualifying here, the car was really strong and our pace as a team is really strong.

AHMAD AL HARTHY

but to park the Aston Martin at the side of the track on the start/finish straight.

"It's really unfortunate what happened in the race", said a disappointed Al Harthy, "After we had taken the lead, an LMP3 car just completely lost control and

contact was made on the front-right of our car which broke the steering arm. From there we had to retire the car. Sam did a great job with the start, he did a great job gaining the lead and everything was going as planned.

"Our strategy was very solid,

based on our race runs in testing and practice, and we did learn a lot over the last week at Paul Ricard testing and analysing the car.

"We have some time to get back and re-prep for Imola now but from what we've seen in qualifying here, the car was really strong and our pace as a team is really strong," he said.

"I'm really looking forward to all of that materialising in round two," said Al Harthy.

While the dejection will take time to process, double GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup Pro-Am Champion Al Harthy already has his sights fixed on race two of the season at Imola in Italy which will take place on May 15.

Determined to hit back in style, not least for long-time partners Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS, Oman's number one racing driver says no stone will be left unturned when preparing for next month's ELMS contest.

"Everyone worked so hard over the past week and everything had gone to plan up to the incident, it's a major disappointment for us all but we'll be back! I have to say a huge thank you to everyone at Oman Racing, to the TF Sport guys who prepare the car, and to all of the partners who are an integral part of this journey into European Le Mans Series this year," said Al Harthy.

Spieth beats Cantlay in playoff to win US PGA Heritage title

Washington, United States - Three-time major winner Jordan Spieth defeated Patrick Cantlay with a par on the first playoff hole to win the US PGA Heritage title on Sunday after a final-round shootout.

Spieth pitched from a bunker to within inches of the hole at the par-4 18th and tapped in for par while reigning FedEx Cup champion Cantlay blasted from the same bunker to 25 feet past the cup and couldn't make the long comeback putt to extend the playoff.

"I felt in a good place. Just needed to give myself a chance," Spieth said. "It feels amazing."

Cantlay could only rue the wind after his 9-iron shot from the fairway followed Spieth's ball into the bunker and plugged.

"It caught a different wind than what I was expecting," Cantlay said. "The wind was supposed to be off the right. I must have caught a little burst."

"Obviously with it plugged like that, it was darn near impossible to get it close."

The Americans each finished 72 holes on 13-under 271 at Harbour Town Golf Links in Hilton



Jordan Spieth poses with the trophy after winning the RBC Heritage in a playoff at Harbor Town Golf Links on Sunday (AFP)

Head, South Carolina.

World number 20 Spieth fired a five-under par 66, matching his best final round this year, and sixth-ranked Cantlay shot 68.

Sharing third on 272 after a shootout in which many of them shared the lead were Ireland's Shane Lowry, Australian Cam Davis, Austrian Sepp Straka and Americans J.T. Poston, Cameron Young, Matt Kuchar and Harold Varner.

Spieth won the 2015 Masters and US Open and the 2017 British Open and can complete a career Grand Slam by winning next month's PGA Championship at Southern Hills.

It was the 16th worldwide victory for Spieth and his 13th US PGA triumph, his first since last April's Texas Open in his home state.

It marked back-to-back Easter Sunday wins for Spieth, who was

happy to learn Easter in 2023 is on the final day of the Masters.

"That's good vibes," said Spieth, whose missed cut last week at Augusta National inspired extra effort at the Heritage.

"Last week was really a killer for me. My favorite tournament in the world and not getting to play the weekend," Spieth said. "So I tried to come in here and work a little extra hard this week."

It paid off. Spieth eagled the par-5 second, holing out from a greenside bunker from 57 feet, and par-5 fifth holes, sinking an eagle putt from 24 feet, to grab a share of the lead at 12-under.

From there it was a battle as rivals took turns atop the leaderboard.

South Africa's Erik van Rooyen made four birdies in a row to seize the lead but Spieth answered with a 15-foot birdie putt at the par-4 eighth and Straka and Lowry, the 2019 British Open winner, went on birdie binges to lead at times.

Spieth rolled in a 10-foot birdie putt at the 18th and reached the clubhouse one stroke behind Lowry.

AFP



Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates with his trophy after winning the Monte-Carlo title (AFP)

'I think I have a great chance of finishing the year in the top 2'

Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco - Stefanos Tsitsipas said he is aiming to finish the season in the world's top two after successfully defending his Monte Carlo Masters title with a hard-fought 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) victory over Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in Sunday's final.

"I can definitely have a great season and maybe finish it in the top two," said the world number five, whose triumph in Monaco was his fourth tournament success on clay.

"This year I really want to

have good results on grass and on hard courts because I'm sure I can score big ATP points there.

"If I manage to win matches there with as much consistency as on clay, I think I have a great chance of finishing the year in the top two. It's one of my big goals."

Novak Djokovic, Daniil Medvedev, Alexander Zverev and Rafael Nadal currently sit above Tsitsipas in the ATP rankings.

Tsitsipas became the sixth player to win back-to-back Monte Carlo Masters in the Open era, emulating Nadal, Juan

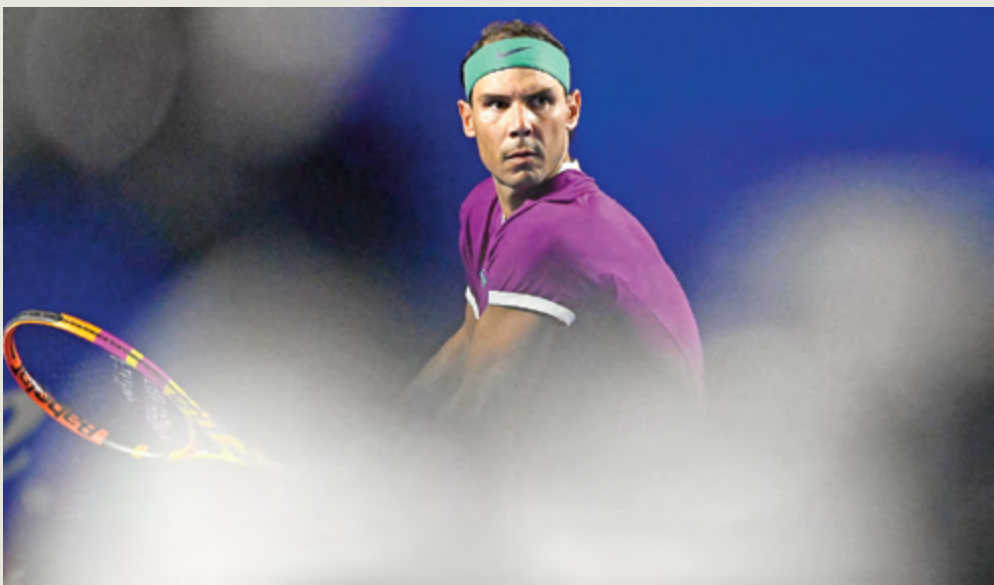
Carlos Ferrero, Thomas Muster, Bjorn Borg and Ilie Nastase.

He is gearing up for another tilt at the French Open title after losing last year's final at Roland Garros to Djokovic despite leading by two sets.

"I think my tennis is excellent on all surfaces, although it adapts better to clay," added Tsitsipas.

Davidovich Fokina had knocked out world number one Djokovic earlier this week but could not repeat those heroics in his first ATP final.

AFP



With French Open just over a month away, Rafael Nadal said he was excited to step onto clay (AFP)

'King of clay' Nadal back in training after four-week rib injury layoff

Madrid, Spain - Rafael Nadal returned to training on Monday following a four-week rib injury layoff, with just over a month to go before the French Open in Roland Garros.

"Today's first gentle workout after four weeks without stepping on a tennis court. What excitement to step onto clay again!" the world number four wrote on Twitter alongside two photos showing him training in-

doors on clay.

Nadal picked up the injury in his loss to American Taylor Fritz in the Indian Wells final on March 22, announcing at the time he expected to be out for between four and six weeks.

That defeat ended his perfect 20-0 run to start 2022 which had included winning the Australian Open title.

The 35-year-old missed last week's Monte Carlo Masters

and the Barcelona Open, currently underway, but could potentially return for the Madrid Masters on May 1-8.

His main focus will be on being fit for the French Open which begins on May 22. Nadal has won the title at Roland Garros 13 times.

Nadal beat Daniil Medvedev in an epic final in Melbourne after Novak Djokovic was deported from Australia over his

Covid vaccination status.

That victory gave him a men's record 21st Grand Slam title, moving him out of a tie with Djokovic and Roger Federer.

During the Spaniard's absence, teenage compatriot Carlos Alcaraz emerged with a Miami Open triumph while Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas claimed a second consecutive Monte Carlo title.

AFP

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