

NEWS BRIEF

SAYYID SHIHAB INSPECTS SAF TRAINING REGIMENT

Muscat - H H Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, went on a tour of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) Training Regiment on Monday. Upon his arrival at the regiment's headquarters, H H Sayyid Shihab was greeted by Maj Gen Mattar Salim al Balushi, Commander of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO), and Brig Said Zaid al Habsi, Commandant of the RAO Academy.

H H Sayyid Shihab was briefed on the march of modernisation witnessed by the regiment, as well as the military training system and plans.

The Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs also toured the shooting range in Ghala.



ROP reopens Mughsail Beach for tourists

19 shelters ready to provide relief in case of emergency

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The tropical depression in the Arabian Sea weakened on Monday morning to a low air pressure system, the Directorate General of Meteorology announced. However, emergency teams are on alert and relief shelters are ready for any eventuality.

Despite the weakening of the tropical depression, the National Committee for Emergency Management (NCEM) said it was prepared for any impact from the tropical condition.

The committee has prepared 19 relief shelters in four governorates - North Sharqiyah, South Sharqiyah, Dhahirah and Muscat. "All centres are ready to receive people at any time depending on the development of the tropical situation," said Hammoud bin Mohammed al Mandhari, coordinator of the Relief and Shelter Sector, NCEM.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Mandhari said, "The shelters have been prepared in four governorates, although there is no danger expected from the current weather situation. It will only lead to rain in some governorates."

He informed that six shelters

MSC continues to review inclement weather, impact



Muscat - The Maritime Security Centre (MSC) is continuing its daily reviews of the latest developments of the tropical system in the Arabian Sea and its effects on navigation and traffic in commercial and fishing ports.

MSC reviews also address ways of activating roles and tasks of different military, security and civil units during the tropical system. MSC's Operations Chamber has been active since the preliminary formation of the tropical depression.



All centres are ready to receive people at any time depending on the development of the tropical situation

HAMMOUD AL MANDHARI

have been prepared in South Sharqiyah, including two in the wilayat of Sur, and one each in Ras al Hadd, Masirah, Al Ashkarah and Jalan Bani Bu Ali. In North Sharqiyah, shelters have been provided in Wadi Bani Khalid, Mudhaibi and Dima wa al Taein. Dhahirah has four shelters

- two each in Dhank and Yanqual - while Muscat governorate has six centres - in the wilayats of Seeb, Quriyat, Muscat, Muttrah, Bausher and Amerat.

Four children saved in Azaiba Beach

Several wilayats had light to

moderate rains over Sunday and Monday. Jabal Akhdar received 35mm rainfall, the maximum in the country over two days.

According to data collected from the rain monitoring stations of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Bidyah received 15mm of rain, Nizwa 12mm, Izki 11mm, Bidbid 10mm, Seeb 10mm, Sur 9mm and Bausher 8mm over Sunday and Monday.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) informed that four children, who were swept away into the sea at

Azaiba Beach in Muscat on Sunday, were rescued.

The CDAA warned all against crossing overflowing wadis as most governorates witnessed rains in the last few days. Many parts of the sultanate are likely to continue receiving rain till Tuesday.

The authority urged parents to exercise caution, supervise their children and not permit them to swim in undesignated and dangerous conditions.

Water shortage in Sur

CDAA informed that it is pressing services of water tan-

kers to provide drinking water to citizens and residents in South Sharqiyah in coordination with the Sub-Committee for Emergency Situations Management.

Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company reported malfunctions in the main pipeline feeding Sur city and called for rationalisation of water consumption on Sunday.

The company warned of shortage in water supplies in the areas served by the pipeline in Sur Assahil, Al Aija, Al Murtafa, Al Shar'ya, Al Shaabiya and Bilad Sur.

HEATWAVE GRIPS EUROPE

Britain and France went on heatwave alert on Monday bracing for record temperatures as southwest Europe wilted under a scorching sun and ferocious wildfires devoured forests (AFP)

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Omani scientists develop Alzheimer's diagnosis programme

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An Omani research team has developed a smart programme that helps diagnose and determine the degree of severity of Alzheimer's with the use of arti-

ficial intelligence.

Researcher Salma Sulaiman al Hinai said, "The team applied Fourth Industrial Revolution techniques to help patients who suffer from the disease, which leads to exacerbated nervous disorder, waste-away (atrophy) and death

of brain cells - the most common manifestations of dementia."

The research project has been funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation to help provide practical solutions for the health sector, limit the scope of the disease and

ameliorate patient conditions, Salma said.

Through up-to-date resonance imaging, the research team determines the extent to which brain tissues are affected. The programme reveals cells' neuronal death and saves the

time and efforts of radiologists.

The programme helps measure the volume of the three fragmented tissues of brain - white matter, grey matter and cerebrospinal fluid - helping in diagnosing if a patient has Alzheimer's or not.

Oman crude rises by \$4 to breach \$100 mark again



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman crude price for September delivery went up by US\$4.24 on Monday to once again breach the US\$100 mark to reach US\$102.68 per barrel.

Oman oil futures on Wednesday, July 13, had closed under US\$100 per barrel for the first time in three months as global recession worries clouded the near-term outlook for oil demand.

The average price of Oman oil for July delivery, however, has stabilised at US\$107.22, which is US\$4.82 per barrel higher than June delivery.

Internationally, oil prices extended gains on Monday, boosted by a weaker dollar and tight supplies that offset concerns about a recession and the prospect of widespread COVID-19 lockdowns in China again reducing fuel demand.

Brent crude futures for September settlement rose by US\$2.14, or 2.1 per cent, to US\$103.30 a barrel.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures for August delivery were up US\$1.72, at US\$99.31 after rising by 1.9 per cent in the previous session.

The average price of Oman oil for July delivery has stabilised at US\$107.22, which is US\$4.82 per barrel higher than June delivery

Both Brent and WTI last week registered their biggest weekly declines in about a month on fears of a recession that would hit oil demand. Mass COVID-testing exercises continue in parts of China this week, raising concerns over oil demand from the world's second-largest oil consumer.

However, supplies remain tight. As expected, US President Joe Biden's trip to Saudi Arabia last week failed to yield any pledge from the top OPEC producer to boost oil supply.

Global markets are focused this week on the resumption of Russian gas flows to Europe via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, which is scheduled to end maintenance on July 21.

With inputs from agencies

SHABAB OMAN II LEAVES HARLINGEN



Royal Navy of Oman's *Shabab Oman II* set sail from Port of Harlingen in the Netherlands on Monday. A statement issued by *Shabab Oman II* on Twitter said, 'The ship is scheduled to arrive in the port of Amsterdam as part of its sixth international voyage - Oman, the Land of Peace.' The ship's international voyage will conclude on October 23. At the end of the first stage of the Tall Ships Race in Harlingen, *Shabab Oman II* won the award for best ship (Supplied photo)



ROP sets checkpoints to guide khareef visitors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) has deployed patrol teams and set up special checkpoints on roads leading to Dhofar to guide khareef visitors.

The Directorate General of Police Aviation has been supporting operations and providing air ambulance service in emergency cases, especially in the event of accidents which require urgent transportation.

ROP has urged all visitors to obey traffic rules and regulations and stay within speed limit for their own and others' safety.

'Drivers are in particular alerted to look out for sudden occurrences, like the presence of stray animals on the road at night and sand collecting on the road in desert areas. Other safety formalities to be observed include keeping a first aid kit in the vehicle, checking



brakes and tyre air pressure,' ROP stated.

Citizens and tourists heading to Dhofar can request service and assistance by calling the emergency phone (9999) or directly contacting police personnel at checkpoints.

PHONE NUMBERS	
Hamra al Duru -	91391664
Ghaba -	93503053
Umm al Zayem -	99354629
Al Ghafin -	91738459
Qatbit -	91160124
Seeh al Khairat -	92084581

ROP reopens Mughsail Beach for tourists

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Mughsail Beach in Dhofar has been reopened, Royal Oman Police (ROP) announced on Monday.

The beach was temporarily closed after a tragic accident in which eight Asians were swept away by waves into the sea during the Eid holidays.

In a statement, ROP said, 'The Dhofar Governorate Police Command announces that visitors will be allowed to visit the tourist site of Mughsail Beach starting at 9am, Monday.'

ROP urged visitors to follow safety guidelines, not cross the protection barricade, not leave children alone and pay attention to them, and stay away from dangerous places and rocky edges.

On July 10, the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) was alerted of eight people falling into the sea after they crossed the safety fence at Mughsail Beach. Three of them were rescued immediately, while



three others were found dead in search operations.

Rescue teams of ROP and CDAA continue to search for two others missing in Mughsail Beach.

MoCIIP extends deadline for liquidation of companies without fines to Dec 31

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) announced an extension of the deadline for liquidation of companies on Monday in order to limit multiple commercial registrations (CRs).

In a statement, MoCIIP said, 'The ministry announces an extension of the period for rectification of commercial records (of companies) wishing to be liquidated until December 31, 2022.'

In June 2021, the ministry ap-

proved a set of measures to facilitate liquidation of companies and merger of commercial registrations for a period of one year to correct their status.

According to the ministry, merger of CRs will help public organisations deal with single legal entities instead of multiple ones. Additionally, mergers may result in single legal entities with solid capital, which will enhance competitiveness.

According to MoCIIP, simplification of procedures to obtain CRs through the Invest Easy portal is one of the factors for im-

provement of the investment climate in the sultanate.

Facilities to make running businesses easier include exempting owners of liquidated companies from paying any fines owed to the government and liquidation procedures continuing even if the company owes money or has absconding workers.

The ministry also informed that those wishing to liquidate can submit applications electronically through the Invest Easy portal or Sanad centres after paying RO50 for the liquidation procedure.

Cardiologist to hold exhibition of art created during COVID-19 lockdown

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Forty paintings by a noted cardiologist of Muscat will be on display at City Seasons Hotel from July 20 to July 30.

Art from the Heart, a collection of paintings by cardiologist Dr Benny Panakkal of Badr al Sama'a Group of Hospitals, is a ten-day exhibition supported by Bhavalaya, which holds art and cultural events in Oman and India.

The paintings are the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns. Reviving lost creative impulses and taking advantage of the extra time, Dr Panakkal used oil, water and acrylic to paint landscapes and abstracts.

Addressing a press conference held at City Seasons Hotel on Sunday, Dr Panakkal said, 'The lockdown and free time enabled me to explore my passion and rediscover a new life through art. A blessing in disguise, it helped me release stress in a constructive manner.'

'Nature is what inspires me. I enjoy watercolours the most. Many of the watercolour paint-



Dr Benny Panakkal and one of his paintings to be exhibited on July 20

ings are works inspired by photos taken by friends and some from the digital space. Some of the acrylic paintings that will be presented are of landscapes from Oman and the United Kingdom, while some of the abstract oil paintings reflect the uncertainty of life - COVID-19 - and subsequently rays of new hope.'

He added that though he was passionate about painting, with time and responsibilities, a stethoscope replaced the brush. 'In college, I was actively involved in every form of creative art, including painting and cinema. I was highly inspired by Sal-

vador Dali and his surrealist style of painting. I loved classic movies and designed posters for classics like *Bicycle Thieves* and *Pathar Panchali*,' he said.

Art from the Heart will open on Wednesday evening under the patronage of H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, with well-known Omani artists Maryam al Zadjali and Tahira al Mawali, director of Omani Society for Fine Arts, in attendance.

Dr J Retnakumar, chairman and founder of Bhavalaya, said, 'Dr Panakkal is an artistic cardiologist; for him painting is a form

of medication. Every art is clean and pure when done with honesty and passion. The pandemic had several negative aspects, but here is a positive one that gives us inspiration and hope.'

'We at Bhavalaya are here for all who believe in serving the global society through various medium - ancient and modern art and culture.'

He informed that Bhavalaya's vision is to create a universal platform for artists from all over the globe with no barriers.

Art from the Heart will be open to the public from 10am to 7pm at City Seasons Hotel.

MoL interviews aspirants for government jobs

Muscat - The Ministry of Labour (MoL) is conducting personal interviews for job vacancies in the public sector in the governorates of Muscat and North Batinah.

A statement issued by MoL said, 'The ministry is conducting personal interviews for citizens to fill vacant government positions in Muscat and North

Batinah for three days.'

MoL continues its efforts to provide job opportunities to aspirants in accordance with the set vision and coordination between the ministry and various private sector and government institutions.

According to MoL, 23, 271 jobseekers have been employed in the public and private

sectors in the first six months of 2022.

Of the total, 17,200 were employed directly or through replacement opportunities, and 6,16 through training and rehabilitation.

MoL is aiming to provide 35,000 jobs through recruitment, replacement and training for citizens in 2022.

First surfing contest for youth in Sur a big success; plans for more on the anvil

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Brimming with pride and confidence, 16 Omanis showcased their skills in the first Surfing Championship held in Ras al Hadd in the wilayat of Sur, South Sharqiyah.

Darrbak Company, in cooperation with the Oman Surfers School and Soarhouse Company, organised the event on July 12.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Fadhela al Maamari, marketing specialist at Darrbak Company, said, "The 2022 Surfing Championship aimed to spread the culture of surfing in the community, among young people in particular, while attracting surfers and watersports enthusiasts from inside and outside the sultanate and promoting Omani tourism and our beaches for watersports, especially in the monsoon season."

The tournament targeted surfers in the age group of ten to 16 years and was held in five rounds of 20 minutes each. It was conducted by International Surfing Association certified Omani and international judges. The association sets the standards internationally for safety at surf events and the quality and efficiency of coaches and



(Supplied photo)

We are planning to hold surfing competitions in other beaches of the sultanate to attract more tourists, promoting Oman as adventure tourism hub

FADHELA AL MAAMARI

instructors in the surf industry.

The winner of the championship received RO150, while second and third place winners took home RO100 and RO50 respectively.

Darrbak Company, established in 2020 with the support

of Oman Technology Fund, operates a portal providing technical solutions to facilitate the process of online booking of trips in various regions of the sultanate for adventure lovers from all over the world.

The platform also aims to



raise the efficiency and professionalism of Omani youth who are interested in engaging in adventure tourism activities in a safe manner. "The platform seeks to establish the sultanate as the first destination that adventure tourists choose to

spend their vacation," Fadhela said.

"We are planning to hold surfing competitions in other beaches of the sultanate to attract more tourists, promoting Oman as adventure tourism hub."

Farmers to be given free seedlings to boost fruit cultivation

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) will distribute free seedlings as part of its efforts to encourage Omani farmers to establish commercial model farms and grow various types of fruits.

According to an official of MAFWR, the ministry has announced implementation of a project to create model fruit farms.

"The ministry has set some conditions for farmers to benefit from the project financed by the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund," the official said.

"The farmer must be an Omani national and the area of land that will be cultivated should not be less than one acre," he said.

"The farmer must provide a permanent source of irrigation, and the soil of the farm should be suitable for cultivation. He must also use the seedlings provided by the ministry."



(Supplied photo)

Farmers will be given seedlings of mango and Omani lemon for free, while seedlings of other fruits will be given at nominal price.

"Bananas and sidr seedlings will cost 250bz each, while quince, guava, fig, grape, date palm and papaya seedlings will be given for 500bz each."

The deadline to submit applications to receive seedlings is July 31. Distribution of seedlings will begin in October.

According to ministry data, the total production of fruit seedlings in agricultural nurseries from 2011 to 2019 was more than 1.4mn of 24 varieties of fruits.

MHT to offer free training to tourist guides

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to stimulate the tourism sector, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) will organise a training programme for tourist guides.

According to an MHT official, the ministry - in cooperation with the National Museum of Oman - will organise the training programme from July 24 to 28 and targets 20 licensed tour guides.

The five-day programme will be free and held on the premises of National Museum and MHT. The last date for submission of applications is July 20.

In May 2019, the ministry amended the age limit criterion for tourist guide licence. Omanis who are 18 years or older can now apply for a licence, while for expatriates, the age limit is 25 years.

Earlier, the age limit for both Omanis and expatriates was 21 years.

Licences are issued for three types of tour guides in the sultanate - general tour guide, local tour guide and specialised tour guide.

The number of visitors to Oman jumped an astounding 602 per cent with 794,000 ar-



The ministry, in cooperation with the National Museum of Oman, will organise the training programme from July 24 to 28 and targets 20 licensed tour guides

rivals registered this year till May, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

In the first five months of 2021, Oman had recorded 113,000 visitors, while in the 12 months of 2021, 652,000 people visited the sultanate, which is 22 per cent less than the figure this year till May.

The number of visitors to the Land of Frankincense sites in the

Governorate of Dhofar was 17,155 in the first quarter of 2022 compared to 16,679 reported in the same period of 2021, according to MHT statistics.

The statistics indicate that the increase in the number of visitors during the first quarter of this year was due to the reopening of the Land of Frankincense sites to visitors after they were closed in January and February of 2021 due to the pandemic.

Omani adventurer scales Italian Alps in preparation of Seven Summits

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Chasing his dream of scaling the Seven Summits, Omani adventurer Khalid bin Said al Anqoodi, 50, scaled the Italian Alps last month.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Anqoodi said he began his ascent on June 13 and reached Torino Hut on June 15 at 10am. "We were a group of mountaineers from several countries, including Bulgaria, Australia and Lithuania."

Anqoodi informed that he submitted the Italian Alps with

the aim of promoting Omani tourism, besides preparing for Denali, the highest mountain peak in North America, which he is planning to scale next year.

To date, Anqoodi has climbed 14 mountains, including three of the Seven Summits - Kilimanjaro in Africa, Elbrus in Russia and Aconcagua in Argentina. "I am striving to fulfil my dream of scaling the remaining four Seven Summits."

The Seven Summits are the highest mountains of each of the seven continents. Climbing all seven is regarded a moun-



Khalid al Anqoodi (left) and his climbing partners atop the Italian Alps (Supplied photo)

taineering feat, first achieved by Richard Bass in 1985.

Determination was the key, Anqoodi said, explaining the challenges encountered on his way up the Italian Alps. "The climb was tough as the weather was unpredictable. We walked four to five hours every day for three days to reach the top."

According to Anqoodi, apart from physical training, mountaineers need to be prepared mentally for such challenges. "We practised walking for about two months, four to five hours daily, to prepare for this climb. We learnt about the topography

of the area from the locals."

Following the Italian Alps, Anqoodi's list of conquered peaks now include Ararat in Turkey, Toubkal (4,167m) in Morocco, Kala Patthar and Everest Base Camp Trek (5,364m) in Nepal, Apo (2,954m) in Philippines, Fuji (3,776m) in Japan, Cheget (3,150m) in Russia, Kinabalu (4,095m) in Malaysia, Bromo (3,229m) and Semeru (3,667m) in Indonesia.

Anqoodi, who has visited more than 72 countries, said these journeys help him promote Oman and its tourism potential.

MARKET WATCH

MSX304,201.05
SENSEX54,521.15

FOREX RATES
(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	207.68
Pakistani Rs	560.03
Bangladeshi taka	244.01
Philippines peso	146.17
Sri Lankan Rs	929.79

* Rates as on JULY 18

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Haleon \$36bn listing London's biggest in over decade

Haleon, the consumer healthcare unit spun off by British drugs giant GlaxoSmithKline, began trading Monday in London's biggest stock market listing for more than a decade.

The new independent company - which owns brands including Sensodyne toothpaste, pain relief drug Panadol and cold treatment Theraflu - was worth around £30bn (US\$36 bn).

It was the capital's biggest listing since Swiss mining giant Glencore was valued at £38bn on entry in 2011. Haleon had expected to debut, however, with a market capitalisation of around £40bn. The demerger overseen by GSK chief executive Emma Walmsley is aimed at allowing the pharmaceuticals group to focus on its core business.

Omani banks have strong capital buffers to withstand shocks: CBO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani banks have maintained sound assets quality and strong capital buffers which are sufficient to withstand any potential shocks, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

In its Financial Stability Report 2022, CBO said the Omani banking sector continues to be on the growth trajectory, supporting the real economy.

'Banks' maintained sound asset quality illustrated by the low non-performing loans and remained resilient with strong capital buffers that are well above the Basel III requirements. The capital of the banks is assessed to be sufficient to withstand plausible shocks,' the central bank said in the report which was released on Sunday.

The prudential liquidity indicators showed that Oman's banking system continued to maintain stable short-term and longer-term liquidity requirements and can withstand any potential liquidity shocks, CBO added.



As the sultanate's economy recovers from the pandemic along with the resumption of economic activities in a favourable oil price environment, the banks have posted improved profits that allowed them to strengthen their capital.

Oman's banking sector demonstrated its resilience during the past two years. Banks were instrumental in providing financial relief to the borrowers by suspending loan repayment from borrowers affected by the pan-

demic. The moratorium on loan repayments, allowed by CBO since March 2020, ended in December 2021.

"As the exit from regulatory forbearance was timed to coincide with a robust recovery, the asset quality indicators are expected to stay strong. The profitability and liquidity of the banks improved during 2021 and they continue to hold adequate capital buffers," H E Tahir Salim al Amri, executive president of CBO, said in the foreword of the

Financial Stability Report 2022.

"Our stress tests show that the banking system remains resilient and retains the capacity to absorb a variety of shocks without adverse spillover effects on credit supply and the real economy," he added.

Omani banks' profitability indicators significantly improved in 2021 as the sultanate's economy embarked on a growth trajectory.

Banks posted pre-tax profits of RO382mn in 2021 as compared to RO303mn in 2020, the CBO data showed. The rise in profits was largely due to an increase in net interest income by RO25mn and a drop in provision and write-offs by around RO50mn.

"With a strong economic recovery, banks were set to further improve profitability during 2022, which would also help them accumulate more capital. Nevertheless, the heightened political and economic uncertainties and monetary policy tightening are bound to counterweigh on potential gains,' the central bank noted.

CBO to introduce Islamic money market instruments

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) said it is working to introduce a range of Islamic money market instruments to meet the liquidity needs of Islamic banking sector.

'These (Islamic money market instruments) included, among others, providing Sharia'a-compliant emergency liquidity support and LOLR (lender of last resort) facility and offering Wakalah-based remunerative deposit facility to Islamic banking entities,' CBO said in its Financial Stability Report 2022.

To ensure robust and sustained growth of Oman's Islamic banking sector, CBO is also finalising its medium-term Islamic banking strategy, which is built on five pillars,

namely (1) sustain the momentum, (2) enhance the stability, (3) expand the outreach, (4) nurture the talent, and (5) boost the awareness.

Each pillar of the Islamic banking strategy is supported by several 'goals', with a total of 40 'initiatives' in the strategy, about half of which are to be undertaken by CBO and rest by Islamic banking sector, the report added.

Oman's Islamic banking sector, which comprises of two Islamic banks and five Islamic banking windows, has continued its double-digit growth despite the adverse economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of December 2021, the total asset base of Islamic banking sector reached RO5.9bn, recording an year-on-year growth of 13.6 per cent.

Macron talks diesel with UAE leader

Paris, France - French President Emmanuel Macron hosted United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan for lunch in Paris on Monday, with increased diesel supplies on the menu for their official talks.

The UAE has emerged as a key partner for Western countries as they scramble for energy supplies worldwide to replace imports from sanction-hit Russia.

Sheikh Mohamed, also known as MBZ, was on his first overseas state visit since taking office in May following the death of his half-brother.

The visit is expected to conclude with "the announcement of guarantees given by the UAE on quantities of hydrocarbon supplies to France," Macron's office announced before the visit.

The deal will cover diesel in particular, which the UAE does not supply at present.

France is seeking "to diversify its sources of supply in the context of the conflict in Ukraine," the Elysee source added, referring to EU sanctions on Russian oil.

Sheikh Mohamed's decision to make his first official visit to



President Emmanuel Macron (right) welcomes UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan for a working lunch at the Elysee presidential Palace in Paris, on Monday (AFP)

France "is a conscious one that acknowledges the historic ties between the two nations but also the potential for even greater cooperation and growth with France," his diplomatic advisor Anwar Gargash said on Friday.

"The UAE is determined to remain a reliable partner and source of energy," he added. "We have sold our oil to the far-east for 40 years and now we are

directing it toward Europe in this time of crisis."

The UAE president's visit to France came after Joe Biden's first Middle East tour as president, which included a visit to Saudi Arabia for energy talks.

Macron and Biden were overheard talking about energy supplies from the Middle East at a G7 summit at the end of June in Germany.

Macron told Biden that he had spoken to Sheikh Mohammed who had said he was at his "maximum" in terms of oil production, but that the Saudis had some spare capacity.

After his lunch with Macron, Sheikh Mohamed is set to be guest of honour at a dinner at the former royal palace in Versailles outside Paris.

AFP

Bahrain-based Shariyah Review Bureau to supervise OIA's real estate investment fund

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Bahrain-based Shariyah Review Bureau on Monday said that it has signed an agreement with Oman Investment Authority (OIA) to certify and supervise its Shariah-compliant real-estate investment fund (REIF). Shariyah Review Bureau has been assigned to support the Shariah compliance requirements of the REIF structure as per the AAOIFI guidelines.

The service will pair the functionality of reviewing contracts and fee mechanism, and monitoring all activities with an annual Shariah audit while administering the Shariah supervisory board functions, Shariyah Review Bureau said in a press statement.

Shariyah Review Bureau is regulated by the Central Bank of Bahrain and has become a global leader in professional



Shariah advisory and Shariah audit services, serving clients from various industries including banking, asset management, insurance, and Fintech industry.

The CEO of Shariyah Review Bureau, Yasser Dahlawi, said, "Our latest assignment as a Shariah advisor to the REIF reinforces a sense of trust and expectation that clients have when they engage with Shariyah Review Bureau."

"Our Shariah advisory and audit services are well-positioned to address the necessary Shariah control requirements needed to en-

sure compliance and meet robust expectations of the regulated Islamic industry in which we operate. We wish their REIFs structures a successful listing on the Oman exchange," he added.

Muzna Abdullatif, acting manager - real estate investments at Oman Investment Authority, said, "We are very pleased with our partnership with SRB with its international track record of handling Sharia consultation, certification, and audit services. We are looking forward to our partnership and the role they will play as Shariah advisors for the REIF."

Boeing wins \$13bn MAX jets deal as Farnborough opens

Farnborough, UK - US aerospace giant Boeing on Monday fired the first shot in an orders battle with European rival Airbus at Farnborough airshow, clinching a US\$13.5bn deal for 100 MAX planes from Delta Airlines in a huge vote of confidence for the crisis-hit jet.

The deal marks a huge turnaround for the MAX jet which had suffered two deadly crashes in 2018 and 2019.

Outgoing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson meanwhile opened the prestigious five-day event as the aviation sector plots its recovery from heavy Covid fallout.

US carrier Delta lodged its first ever order for medium-haul MAX aircraft, with options for 30 more of the fuel-efficient planes as it seeks to replace its ageing

fleet and cut damaging emissions.

Boeing revealed also that Japanese airline ANA had agreed to purchase 20 of its smaller MAX 8 jets - worth US\$2.4bn - plus two 777-8 freight planes.

"The Boeing 737-10 will be an important addition to Delta's fleet as we shape a more sustainable future for air travel, with an elevated customer experience, improved fuel efficiency and best-in-class performance," said Delta chief executive Ed Bastian.

The news comes as airlines worldwide seek to replace ageing fleets with fuel-efficient planes that emit less carbon dioxide.

The first visitors to Farnborough, southwest of London, were meanwhile hit by scorching temperatures amid Europe's on-



Visitors walk past a Boeing board during the Farnborough Airshow, in Farnborough, on Monday (AFP)

going heatwave.

Defence aerospace companies are also expected to emerge as big winners, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine boosting spending on nations' armed forces.

Russian companies have

been banned from Farnborough due to the war.

The event coincides with fast-moving political turmoil in Britain after Johnson's recent announcement that he is stepping down as Conservative party leader, sparking a fractious con-

test to replace him also as prime minister.

"This government believes in aviation and its power to bring jobs and growth to the entire country," Johnson said Monday as the event opened.

"After three years in the cock-

pit... I am now handing over the controls seamlessly to someone else. I don't know who," he added, sparking laughter from delegates.

Johnson also said that the government was "investing massively in defence".

This year's event - one of the world's largest civilian and defence shows - is the first global aviation get-together since the Paris airshow in 2019, before Covid hit.

Farnborough was cancelled in 2020 as the Covid health crisis grounded aircraft and ravaged the sector.

Global air traffic is gradually recovering and in May reached more than two-thirds of its pre-pandemic level, according to the International Air Transport Association.

That recovery has however faced headwinds from rocketing inflation fuelled by historically high energy prices and higher wages, while staff shortages constrain airports and spark flight cancellations.

Ahead of the event, Britain issued a historic red warning for extreme heat, with southern England temperatures potentially exceeding 40C on Monday or Tuesday for the first time.

It comes as visitors to Farnborough will witness air displays by Britain's Red Arrows and South Korea's Black Eagles, as well as from the US-made F-35 stealth fighter.

Airbus and Boeing are showcasing their latest twin-aisle passenger aircraft, the A350-900 and the 777X.

AFP

ECB set to hike interest rates as inflation pressure mounts

Frankfurt, Germany – The European Central Bank (ECB) will raise its interest rates on Thursday for the first time in over a decade, but the bank is already under pressure to do more amid record inflation.

The ECB has for months been preparing the end of the era of cheap money that supported the economy through a series of crises in recent years.

To try and counteract a steep rise in prices the central bank has said it intends to raise its interest rates by a quarter point, the first such move since 2011.

The ECB already stopped its bond-buying stimulus programme at the beginning of July, as it laid the groundwork for the rise.

The lift-off in rates comes in response to an unprecedented surge in prices, driven higher by supply chain bottlenecks and the rising cost of energy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Inflation in the eurozone sat at 8.6 per cent in June, the highest ever recorded for the currency club and well above the ECB's two-per cent target.

The Frankfurt-based institution continues playing catch up with its peers, like the US Federal Reserve, which started hiking earlier and more aggressively.



The ECB deposit rate has been negative for the past eight years, with the key rate currently at minus 0.5 per cent.

The punitive interest rate, which effectively charges banks to park their money with the ECB overnight, was designed to encourage more lending, more economic activity and higher inflation rates.

Stubbornly low for years, prices are now soaring as a result of scrambled supply chains from the coronavirus pandemic and the burst in the price of food and energy caused by the war in Ukraine. The inflation surge caught central banks, not least the ECB, off guard.

Now, the central bank is aiming to lift interest rates out of

negative territory by the end of September as part of a "gradual but sustained" series of hikes, according to President Christine Lagarde.

In hindsight, the "cautious normalisation process the ECB started at the end of last year has simply been too slow and too late," said Carsten Brzeski, head of macro at the ING bank.

With each new data release causing new consternation, the ECB's cautious quarter-point step could lead to a feeling of "disappointment", Brzeski said.

Some ECB policymakers may push for faster action but "it will be a balancing act between the ECB's credibility as being predictable and its credibility as a determined inflation fighter," he

said.

'Impossible equation'

The ECB was faced with an "impossible equation to solve", said Frederik Ducrozet, head of macroeconomic research at Pictet Wealth Management.

Central bankers were determined to squash inflation while "the euro area economy is on the brink of recession", circumstances under which they would normally hesitate to raise interest rates.

The outlook for the economy was clouded by the war in Ukraine with eurozone members bracing for a winter in which energy could be scarce and planning to ration supplies

if Russia halts gas deliveries to the continent. Add a weak euro against the dollar, which touched parity recently for the first time in nearly 20 years, and a political crisis in Italy and the monetary calculations became even harder, Ducrozet said.

The withdrawal of a key party from former ECB chief and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi's governing coalition has unnerved investors, sending borrowing costs up again.

The quickly rising strain in bond markets had already prompted the ECB to respond in mid-June by speeding up the design of an instrument to fight "fragmentation" in the eurozone.

The new tool was "critical" to avoid "excessive divergence" in the borrowing costs faced by different countries and make sure monetary policy moves were felt evenly across the eurozone, ECB vice-president Luis de Guindos said in early July.

But the idea has been met with scepticism by some governing council members.

Any crisis tool should only be used in "exceptional circumstances" and under strict conditions, warned Joachim Nagel, head of the traditionally conservative German Bundesbank.

AFP



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev meets with European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in Baku on Monday (AFP)

Europe seeks to double gas imports from Azerbaijan

Baku, Azerbaijan – European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Monday said the European Union is seeking to double gas imports from Azerbaijan as it seeks non-Russian suppliers after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Natural gas supplies have emerged as a weapon between Russia and Europe since Moscow's February 24 invasion of Ukraine.

"The EU is turning to more reliable energy suppliers. Today I'm in Azerbaijan to sign a new agreement," von der Leyen said on Twitter.

"Our goal: double the gas delivery from Azerbaijan to the EU in a few years. Azerbaijan will be a crucial partner for our security of supply and on our way to climate neutrality."

Ahead of the visit, the European Commission said: "Amid

Russia's continued weaponisation of its energy supplies, diversification of our energy imports is a priority for the EU."

Last year, Azerbaijan supplied some eight billion cubic metres of natural gas to Europe through pipelines running via Georgia and Turkey.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said last week that "an important document on energy security will be signed between the European Union and Azerbaijan."

In May, EU leaders agreed to stop most Russian oil imports by the end of the year, as part of unprecedented sanctions they slapped on Moscow over the military action in Ukraine.

But the bloc put off an outright ban on Russian gas, which in 2021 amounted to 155bn cubic metre – nearly 40 per cent of EU's needs.

AFP

Oil prices increase, stock markets climb as risk appetite returns

London, UK – Stock markets rallied and the dollar slid against the euro and pound on Monday on returning risk appetite as recession fears eased slightly.

Oil prices jumped over around four per cent, even though investors continued to fret over Russia's war in Ukraine, a Covid spike in China and central banks quickly raising interest rates.

"After a volatile week which ended on a high note, the positive momentum has spilled over across the major global markets," noted Richard Hunter, head of markets at Interactive Investor.

"Investors will nonetheless remain on high alert this week, as further economic data provides further colour, while the need for caution against a further possible supply shock for oil and the likelihood of an interest rate hike from the ECB (European Central



A man walks past an electronic share price board showing the numbers on the Tokyo Stock Exchange (AFP)

Bank) increases."

Both Asian and European stock markets enjoyed strong gains following a positive session Friday on Wall Street after June retail sales came in above forecasts and banking giant Citigroup's April-June results beat expectations.

Wall Street continued to move

higher at the opening bell on Monday, with investors cheered by investment bank Goldman Sachs posting a big jump in revenue even if profits slid like at its competitors.

Earnings season continues and investors "will want to be comforted with reassuring earnings guidance" given the con-

cerns about the risk of recession due to rising interest rates to tame inflation.

"That is the key more so than the actual results," he added.

While a strong set of economic data has of late boosted bets on the US Federal Reserve lifting borrowing costs more, the latest figures were not seen as being large enough to warrant a sharper rate hike next week -- easing recession fears.

Market analysts widely expect the US central bank to announce a 75 basis-point lift after its meeting next week, though some have suggested a one percentage-point increase could be on the cards to try and cool decades-high inflation.

The ECB is set on Thursday to raise its interest rates for the first time in more than a decade.

AFP

Italy PM in Algeria to secure more gas

Algiers, Algeria - Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi visited Algeria on Monday to sign several agreements, including an energy deal to boost gas supplies and reduce his country's reliance on Russian gas.

Draghi was received by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, ahead of the two leaders chairing a ministerial meeting at which several deals are expected to be signed.

"Tomorrow, an important agreement between (US energy firm) Occidental (Petroleum), (Italian energy giant) Eni and (French oil company) Total providing significant volumes of natural gas" to Italy will be signed, Tebboune told reporters at a joint news conference with Draghi.

He was referring to a deal reported on Friday by Algeria's APS news agency to raise gas deliveries to Italy by an extra 4bn cubic metres this year.

Italy buys the majority of its



Mario Draghi

natural gas from abroad, with some 45 per cent of its imports historically coming from Russia.

But Rome has increasingly looked to Algeria, historically its second biggest supplier, to reduce that dependence after the war in Ukraine sparked sanctions against Moscow and sent energy prices soaring.

Algeria has therefore supplanted Russia to "become in recent months the biggest supplier of gas" to Italy, Draghi told reporters on Monday.

The two countries also expect to sign accords to bolster judicial, industrial and cultural cooperation, according to Draghi's office.

According to APS, Algeria was set to furnish Italy with a total of around 20bn cubic metres of gas in 2022 as a whole, before the latest deal.

Draghi previously visited Algeria in April, when he concluded a deal increasing Algerian deliveries to Italy through the Transmed pipeline by up to nine billion cubic metres per year in 2023-24.

In May, Eni signed a memorandum of understanding with Algeria's Sonatrach to boost gas exploration in the North African country.

The MoU "will allow Sonatrach and Eni to evaluate the gas potential and opportunities for accelerated development at specific fields already discovered by Sonatrach in Algeria", Eni said at the time.

Algeria is Africa's biggest gas exporter and supplies around 11 percent of the natural gas consumed in Europe.

AFP

Oil dispute sharpens Baghdad-Kurd tensions amid deadlock

Baghdad, Iraq – Iraq's oil wealth is rekindling tensions between federal authorities and the autonomous Kurdish region, in a row that could compromise the lifeline industry and keep investors away, analysts say.

The long-simmering dispute came to a head in February – at a time of political deadlock in Baghdad – when the federal supreme court ordered Kurdistan to hand over oil extracted from its territories to the federal authorities.

Then earlier this month, a commercial court in the Iraqi capital annulled contracts between the Kurds and foreign firms, after the oil ministry in Baghdad filed a judicial complaint.

Authorities in the Kurdistan capital Erbil have cried foul, accusing Baghdad of heaping "unjust pressure" on them and announcing their own legal action.

Iraq, the second largest producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), sits on enormous oil reserves, and revenues from the sector feed 90 per cent of the federal government budget.

It exports an average of 3.3mn barrels of crude oil per day (bpd), while production in Kurdistan amounts to just over 450,000 bpd.

The February ruling stated that a 2007 law adopted by Erbil to regulate oil and gas was unconstitutional.

But analysts say politics play a major role in the dispute in Iraq, whose political barons have failed to reach agreement on choosing a president and a prime minister since October legislative elections.

"When it comes to oil, each side uses their respective powers as carrots and sticks depending on the political atmosphere of the day," said Bilal Wahab of The



In this file photo a worker is seen at the Tawke oil refinery in the autonomous Iraqi region of Kurdistan (AFP)

Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"At times when there was political accord, the courts were rather quiet. When there was political discord, however, the reverse was true," he told AFP.

'Reputation being damaged'

The nullification of oil contracts

between the Kurds and four international oil companies (IOCs) from Canada, Britain, Norway and the United States at the start of July has inflamed the row.

"For Baghdad to be chasing IOCs out of Iraqi Kurdistan does not serve to show Iraq as a major producer welcoming of foreign investment," cautioned Yesar al-Maleki, an analyst at the Middle

East Economic Survey.

In a fightback, the Kurdish regional authorities in June initiated judicial proceedings against the federal government.

One lawsuit targets Oil Minister Ihsan Ismail, accused by the Kurds of trying to "intimidate" foreign firms operating in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. The Kurdish autonomous government has accused Baghdad of taking "illegal" and "politically motivated" actions.

For Wahab, Kurdish and federal government officials fail to appreciate "how much they are damaging the overall reputation of Iraq's energy industry".

"Questioning the sanctity of contracts ... adds legal risk to a slew of other regulatory and governance risks that ail the Iraqi energy industry," he added.

The dispute, he said, "repels much-needed foreign investment".

Oil revenues are critical for

Iraq, a country faced with widespread corruption but also mired in a financial crisis and in need of funds to rebuild infrastructure after decades of conflict.

Despite the legal actions, Kurdistan says it is open to a negotiated solution.

It is working on setting up two companies specialised in oil exploration and marketing that would coordinate with Baghdad, a spokesperson for the Erbil government said.

Baghdad's oil ministry, meanwhile, marked a small victory after oil giants Baker Hughes, Halliburton and Schlumberger committed not to initiate new projects in Kurdistan.

The ministry says the companies are also working to "liquidate and close" existing contracts.

Baghdad has fought to regain control of output from lucrative oil fields in Kurdistan since the autonomous region began mar-

keting oil independently more than a decade ago.

But under a current deal, the Kurdish region delivers 250,000 barrels per day to Baghdad, in return for a share of federal funds to pay the salaries of Kurdish civil servants.

In recent weeks, tensions have risen further after a series of unclaimed rocket attacks targeting oil and gas installations in Kurdistan. Experts say the assaults aim to put pressure on the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the largest in Kurdistan.

The KDP is allied to Shiite leader Moqtada Sadr, whose bloc won 73 seats in the October polls, making it the largest faction in the 329-seat parliament.

The party is eyeing the Iraqi presidency for one of its members, although traditionally the job has been held by a member of the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

AFP



Alizz Islamic Bank holds 2nd SSB meeting of 2022

The Sharia'a Supervisory Board (SSB) of Alizz Islamic Bank held its second meeting for the current year at the bank's headquarters in the Central Business District of Ruwi, said a press statement.

The meeting was held in the presence of Sulaiman Bin Hamad al Harthi, the bank's CEO, the SSB Chairman and the other members of the board; besides some directors, the Internal Sharia'a Auditors and the bank's Internal Auditors.

During the meeting, Alizz Islamic Bank CEO presented and discussed the bank's performance during the second quarter of this year, highlighting the key indicators of the bank's growth and the enhanced services and products offered by the bank to its customers after obtaining SSB's approval.

Moreover, the meeting discussed the Sharia'a Audit Report for the second quarter of the year and the Sharia'a Compliance and Risks Report, as well as a number of issues of interest, including the new products approved or rejected by the SSB. The meeting also discussed some of the requests to reschedule corporate finance and issued the appropriate decisions in this respect.

The meeting witnessed the introduction of a training programme to the bank staff on drafting Sharia'a contracts, a key component of Islamic Banking practices.

The programme was delivered by Sheikh Dr Ahmed Subhi Ayadi, member of the SSB. The head and members of the SSB also previously attended a training programme on Anti Money-Laundering and the applicable

laws.

The Sharia'a Compliance and Audit Department performs various key roles in order to achieve its overarching goal of ensuring compliance with Sharia'a Principles in all aspects related to customer service, products and services. To that end, it regularly reviews documents relating to the bank's products, operations and procedures to check their compliance with Sharia'a principles.

It presents reports on its findings to the SSB and bank's management which in turn take the required actions to offer support to ensure compliance of the bank's products and services with Sharia'a Principles.

The Sharia'a Compliance and Audit Department had other significant contributions, such as proposing Sharia'a-compliant

solutions that meet the requirements of the corporate customers who usually benefit from more sophisticated solutions. Guided by the SSB, the Department took part in the development of several products that were launched last year, as well as the products to be launched in 2022. It also performed a Sharia'a audit on consumer and Wholesale banking services.

It is worth nothing that in 2021, the Sharia'a Supervisory Board held seven meetings, with a full quorum; reviewed a number of products and documents; and issued 162 decisions on several inquiries, in addition to reviewing monthly reports, policies, investment proposals, and Sharia'a Audit reports. It also offered appropriate guidance in accordance with Sharia'a Principles.

Bank Muscat's FIFA match packages gain attention

Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has been greatly encouraged by the excellent customer feedback regarding the special promotion wherein the bank will give away 51 match packages to FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, courtesy of Visa.

All Bank Muscat Visa Credit and Prepaid cardholders will be automatically entered into raffle draws to select winners once they use their cards to make a minimum cumulative spending of RO50. It must also be noted that customers will get multiple chances to participate in the draws till August 31, 2022 for every additional RO50 spent using their card.

Customers of the recently launched Bank Muscat Limited Edition FIFA World Cup Visa



secure online payments apart from PoS payments and ATM withdrawals.

Customers can easily apply for 3 Prepaid Cards for their family via Mobile Banking and Internet Banking and can customise the names on two of their cards for their relevant family members. For more details on the Limited-Edition FIFA World Cup Visa Prepaid card, one can go to <https://bm.click/2022football>.

It is important to note that customers can enter the draws even when they are on holiday by using their cards for transactions during their travels. Each winner will receive a Hospitality package for two to FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, courtesy of Visa. The package includes airline tickets, hotel accommodation and tickets to exciting matches.

Prepaid Card are also eligible to participate in the draws. These cards feature contactless payment technology and customers can load funds and top them up instantly. In addition, the cards can be used for

Ooredoo offers unlimited Snapchat, extra data during Khareef in Salalah

Enjoy all the fun of the Khareef with an exclusive Tourist Plan from Ooredoo. For just RO5, customers will receive 6GB of data, 50 minutes of talk time and 50 SMS, as well as unlimited free Snapchat to use within ten days, to share magical moments from Salalah.

For RO10, users will receive 100 minutes of free talk time and SMS as well as 15GB of data and unlimited Snapchat to use within 15 days.

From July 7 to October 5, cus-



tomers can sign up for this great value offer simply by visiting any of the Ooredoo stores in Muscat International Airport, Salalah International Airport or within the Governorate of Dhofar during this period. Customers can check their usage using the Ooredoo app or by dialling '555'800#.

Ooredoo is the first in Oman to offer a generous data, social data and minutes package for visitors to Dhofar and will keep customers connected as they explore and take part in the exciting array of events and activities in Salalah and across the governorate during this season.

Mall of Muscat launches its spectacular summer festival

Maabela, Oman's most Luxurious Mall has collaborated with Oman Aquarium and launched its two month long 'Summer Festival' where customers get a 'Free Summer Kids' pass to Oman Aquarium when they shop in the mall for RO20 and above.

The summer pass will allow kids to enter Oman Aquarium unlimited number of times till September 30 and explore, learn and enjoy the different marine life along with a 'Free Summer Camp' inside the Aquarium for kids every Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 4.00pm to 8.00pm, said a press statement.

In addition to this never before offer in Oman, the Mall will be organising free entertainment shows, kids activities

and other exciting events for both kids and adults during the weekends at The Walk Area located at the second floor of the mall.

The fun filled Free Summer camp within Oman Aquarium is the ideal place for Kids who are on their summer break as there are multiple activities such as workshops, games and play areas which are educational as well as fun and will help the kids in multiple ways. Workshops on topics such as sea life, calculation skills, human body, science, arts and crafts are all part of the summer camp within the Aquarium.

There will also be a toddlers area for age group two to four years which includes ball pit, motor skills, doll house

which will help in the mental development of the youngsters. There will also be face painting and Minute to win games as add-on to the summer camp.

Every weekend, from 8.00pm onwards there will be free kids entertainment at The Walk Area located in the second floor of the mall.

Fun activities like magic show, roaming acts by different superheroes, Frozen sisters stage show and many other performances will keep children & adult entertained at all times.

Shopping lovers will get to enjoy an array of discounts and sizzling offers from various brands across the mall which will last till September 15, the statement added.

Al Maha launches app for NSS card users

In a first of its kind, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG announced the launch of its GoSmart app for NSS (National Subsidy Scheme) card holders.

This app enables users of Al Maha NSS Fuel cards to carry out fast, simple, error-free, cardless fuel purchases. The app also allows customers to better control their costs by reporting the fuel purchased and the balance available for the month after each transaction.

Speaking at the launch of the NSS GoSmart application, the Division Head of Marketing, Ahmed Bakhit al Shanfari, said, "Al Maha has always and will always be committed to initiatives that support the needs of the community.

Additionally, we always prioritise the convenience of customers using our products and services. Our new GoSmart app is a product of these two principles, as well as a part of our



larger digitalisation effort to be more customer-centric organisation."

The Fuel Subsidy applies to all Omani Nationals who meet the

criteria set by the Government of Oman - that is, those who are over the age of 18, own a vehicle or a boat, and have a total monthly income of no more than

RO950. Those who fit within these criteria are eligible to receive up to 400 litres of M91 petrol at a special subsidised price.

One millionth export MG rolls off the production line

MG Motor has celebrated a major milestone, with the one millionth vehicle destined for international export rolling off the production line. The historic model was a new MG ZS, a symbol of the impressive achievements of the British-born car brand since it commenced exports following its acquisition by SAIC Motor in 2007.

MG now sells its cars in 84 countries around the world, and the Middle East is one of its key markets. In just eight years, since the brand was officially launched at the Dubai International Motor Show, MG has sold over 120,000 cars across the region.

As a result of its remarkable growth in popularity, the company is now ranked sixth in the

Middle East table of manufacturers, said a press statement.

This success is replicated in numerous other global markets with customers from across the world enjoying the high-quality driving experience offered by MG cars. The brand is now ranked among the top ten brands in 18 countries, including Australia, New Zealand and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

MG owners benefit from the work of the company's highly qualified specialists at its Research and Development centres, with the models renowned for their stylish looks, great value for money, and for being equipped with the latest technologies. One example of MG's success is the MG ZS, which is now the biggest-selling SUV in



Australia and Chile among other countries.

In the Middle East, recently launched models such as the ZST, RX8 Black Edition and GT have all made their mark by expanding the reach and appeal of the MG line-up.

Tom Lee, Managing Director of MG said, "This latest milestone is a further confirmation of the remarkable rise of the MG brand across the world."

"It illustrates the commitment MG has to its customers, both globally and regionally, ranging from the support provided by our Advanced Design Studio in London, our extended support team in Head Quarters to that delivered by our dedicated partners across the Middle East," he added.

ahlibank launches new Visa debit card for corporate, SME clients

ahlibank has partnered with Visa, the world leader in digital payments, to launch its Business Debit Card to cater to its corporate and SME clients.

The new Visa debit card will provide the Corporate and SME sector round-the-clock access to the company's account, with convenient and easy-to-use payment options, with higher spending limits.

It will facilitate quicker transactions and empower corporate and SME clients to conduct business without facing any financial delays or mismanagement that is commonly associated with the direct handling of cash.

Account holders will also have the option of separating company and personal expenses and enjoy transparency in their business operations.

Heralding ahlibank's partnership with Visa as a prominent landmark in Oman's growing business horizon, Hana al Kharusi, General Manager of Corporate Banking, ahlibank, said, "This partnership will augment our ongoing initiatives targeting the corporate and SME sector."

"It will instil an element of financial confidence in the sector, while demonstrating our intent to assist and support our customers with relevant financial interventions," she added.



interventions," she added.

"We have, over the years, established our commitment to serve our business clients with viable products and services," Hana said, adding that this partnership would corroborate "our endeavours to foster and facilitate sustainable growth with an enhanced portfolio of banking solutions".

"We continue to rely on market trends and customer feedback to assess immediate and future needs of our customers and, accordingly, improve our products to meet specific requirements."

"This partnership will act as a toolkit to shape the growth trajectory of businesses in the country; it will generate business opportunities and cultivate a dynamic economic environment, serving both SMEs and our Corporate Banking clients," she added.

Manish Gautam, Visa's Country Manager for Oman, said, "For SMEs and corporates in Oman to thrive, it is critical that important elements of doing business, such as expense management are managed with efficiency and transparency to avoid mismanagement, fraud and other errors, which are often costly."

"We are therefore delighted to partner with ahlibank to introduce a Business Debit Card targeting the Corporate & SME sector in the country; it will equip them with the requisite tools necessary for growth."

"This new Visa business debit card supports the Oman government's digitisation efforts and reflects our committed to extending the benefits of digital commerce to more businesses in the country."

The bank will leverage its Business Visa Debit Card to encourage smooth transition from cash to digital payments and to provide solutions that help the SME and corporate sector to plan, budget and track their spending.

It will further bolster these sectors with better controls to track expenditures and stay abreast of the market trends.

ESG is more than a compliance need, it's a growth strategy: ICAEW

As environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting moves into the mainstream, organisations should move away from viewing it as simply a compliance requirement and embrace it as a business growth driver. That was the view of speakers at a recent ESG expert discussion jointly led by ICAEW and PwC Middle East.

According to PwC, 55 per cent of publicly listed companies worldwide are committing to voluntary ESG disclosures, with 78 per cent of Middle East businesses indicating that they would welcome increased ESG regulation, believing it will strengthen and accelerate their organisation's ESG strategy.

As consumers and investors become more environmentally and socially conscious, ESG reporting presents an opportunity to reframe internal sustainability agendas into growth engines.

ESG is the evaluation of risks to the enterprise value of an organisation with specific focus on environmental, social and governance factors such as having a circular approach to waste, localising your supply chains, pledging a commitment to transparent reporting and a focus on diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Its importance among key business stakeholders is growing, as ESG becomes an essential means of safeguarding businesses against future risks.

The speakers highlighted the climate crisis, investor interest in non-financial performance and new business opportunities as the key drivers behind its growing popularity.

The experts leading the ESG discussion were, Richard Spencer, Sustainability Director, ICAEW; Azzah Fawzi, Partner - Assurance, Risk, ESG Reporting Leader, PwC Middle East; Rashid Khursheed, Partner - Assurance, Dubai, PwC Middle East and Alaisha Dossa, Director - Assurance, PwC Middle East.

They emphasised that most companies are still in the compliance stage of the ESG framework, due in part to the complexity and ongoing development of ESG reporting standards. Yet for the true benefits of ESG to be realised, organisations need to incorporate the practice into their business strategies.

Amid heightening climate and social challenges, governments are acting to instigate change through regulation, consumers are becoming more environmentally and socially conscious and investors are responding to a shifting market landscape.

Badr Al Samaa Medical Centre, Mabella marks its first anniversary in gala event

Badr Al Samaa Medical Centre, Mabella marked its first anniversary in a glittering event which witnessed motivational and encouraging speeches by the management and an excellent cultural event.

All the doctors were felicitated in recognition of their contributions, on World Doctors Day. On this occasion an anniversary special discount card was also launched, the group said in a statement.

Introduction of Badr Al Samaa Medical Centre, Mabella was an important milestone which was achieved in the challenging times of COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the immense need of quality healthcare facilities for the people of Mabella and surrounding regions, the facility was completed in record time by overcoming many challenges. This facility hosts all major specialties and advanced diagnostic facilities.



Speaking on the occasion, Dr P A Mohammed, Managing Director said that we are happy with the quality healthcare services delivered at Badr Al Samaa, Mabella. "We have already introduced many advanced modalities and we'll continue to upgrade this facility by introducing new medical programmes," he added.

Dr Mohammed congratulated and appreciated all the staff of the centre for their hard work and commitment. Abdul Latheef, Managing Director said, "Since we started the centre during the pandemic, the challenges were many. But we are satisfied to successfully complete one year." He said in growing patient expectations "we

have also grown in our service standards".

"This medical centre is getting referrals from other parts of Oman which speaks a lot about the quality of medical professionals and care."

Moideen Bilal, Executive Director said the staff of Mabella branch has worked extraordinarily to serve the needs of the growing patients.

Kempinski Hotel Muscat names two top team leaders

Kempinski Hotel Muscat has named Abhishek Ray as the new director of revenue and Claudia Arnhardt as the new executive housekeeper of the property at a press statement on Monday.

Ray is joining the Kempinski Hotel Muscat team from the UAE, where he has most recently held the position of Consultant - Revenue Optimisation at Insight Out Consultancy from November 2021 until the present.

His experience includes having worked in the hospitality sector for prestigious brands around the region, starting in India, moving to Qatar, then to the UAE and now in Muscat.

In his new role, Ray will be overseeing the Revenue Management as well as spearheading the Reservations Team to drive the hotel's financial performance



Claudia Arnhardt



Abhishek Ray

through strategic planning and pricing of key initiatives and the proper positioning of Kempinski Hotel Muscat.

Ray's an Indian national, and his professional development includes CHBA, Certified Managerial skills and much vocational and industrial experience gained at the Taj Hotels and The Oberoi Grand in India.

Claudia will be spearheading the Housekeeping team ensuring the five-star standards of European luxury that Kempinski Hotels are known for around the world are upheld.

She joins the Kempinski Hotel Muscat team from Hotel Bareiss, where she held the position of Executive Housekeeper from 2020 until the present.

EVs hold key to zero-emission automotive industry in region

The first of a two-part Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Intelligence report, produced by Oxford Business Group (OBG) in partnership with General Motors (GM), explores the key role that electric vehicle (EV) production could play in cutting carbon emissions and creating viable sustainable mobility solutions across Africa and the Middle East.

Titled 'Gearing up for the green automotive transition', the first report focuses on the environmental component of ESG. Overseen by OBG's ESG Intelligence division, the analysis charts the seismic shifts under way in the global automotive industry, and the implications for production and consumption in Africa and the Middle East in an easy-to-navigate and accessible format, supported by data and infographics.

The role of research and development (R&D) activities in



developing the technologies and innovations required for low-carbon and zero-emission vehicles are among the other topics explored.

The ESG Intelligence report also considers the importance of ensuring EVs and automated vehicles meet the expectations of consumers, with safety, reliability and affordability among the criteria requiring satisfaction. It also notes the importance of ensuring that related infrastructure development, such as EV charging facilities, keeps pace with vehicle production in markets across the Middle East and Africa.

In addition, subscribers will find coverage of the potential for EV and AV technologies to be integrated into the region's smart city developments, thereby helping to reduce both emissions and traffic congestion. Here, the report includes a case study of how green automated taxis could revolutionise transport in Dubai.

The report contains in-depth coverage of GM's sustainability journey, said a press statement.



Sumukhas X1 clinch MOCL title

Sumukhas X1 beat Titans to win MOCL 2022 Trophy in Rumais on July 15.

The tournament organised by DS Sports had kicked off in February this year.

According to a press release, top 20 teams in Oman took part in this tournament.

Titans locked horns with Sumukhas X1 in the grand finale, where Sumukhas X1 registered

a six-wicket victory.

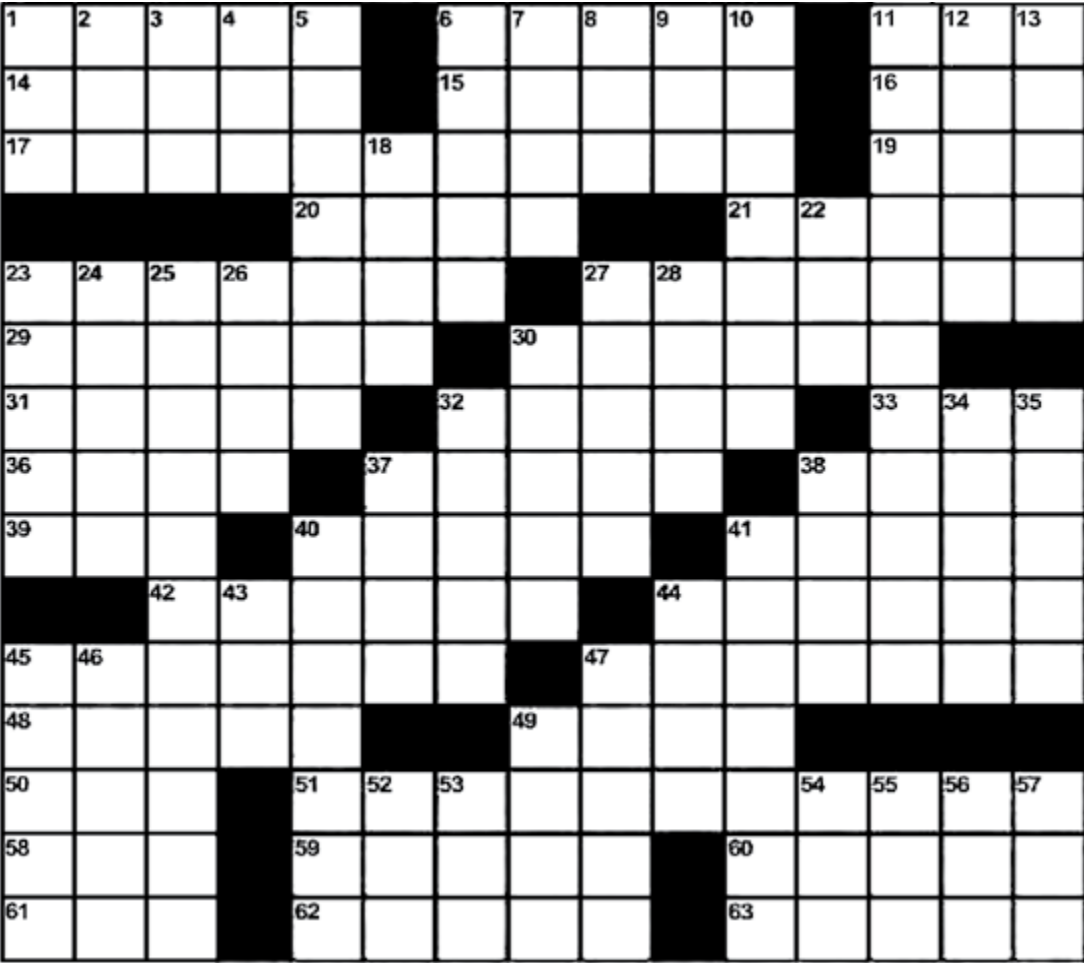
Batting first Titans scored 138 runs. Sumukhas reached the target in just 11.1 overs losing only four wickets.

Saqib Akhtar was the highest

scorer for Sumukhas X1 (84 not out in 31 balls).

Umer Aslam declared man of the match in the final for taking five wickets in his allotted four overs.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Smart_ (wise guy)
6) Sickens with sweet-ness
11) "La-di-_"
14) New_, India
15) "Gulliver's Travels" brute
16) "Long_ and far away ..."
17) Continually
19) Pekingese bark
20)_serif
21) Throw, as a shot put
23) Dulls
27) Gave too much food
29) "Norma" and "Don Carlo"
30) Ark landfall
31) Mr. Bean portrayer
32) "Filthy" money
33) Tokyo, once
36) Short descriptive poem
37) "Without delay," facetiously
38) Part of EA
39) Take notice of
40) Desert spring
41)_over (assisted through difficulty)
42) Decorative band

44) Surface of the mouth
45) One skilled at dead reckoning?
4 7) In the initial phases
48) A Japanese-American, perhaps
49) Target of obscenity laws
50) Wander aimlessly (about)
51) French national holiday
58) Letters preceding an alias
59) Wedding party attendant
60) Clear from memory
61) Comic actor Romano
62) Distorts, as results
63) Cause cravings

DOWN

1) Word heard in math class
2) Fanner's field
3) Culbertson of bridge
4) Sox city
5) One of the family
6) Greenish-blues
7) Minstrel songs
8) "And what have we here?"
9) "Yeah,_"
10) "Na na na-na na!"
11) Continually

12) Tequila plant
13) Had a wish
18) Cotton ball applications
22) Memorable time in history
23) Contemporary of Bela and Lon
24) Long verse followed by a short one
25) It starts with parties galore
26) Asian border range
27) Black-and-white sea predators
28) Do something different
30) Accounting inspection
32) One who finishes last
34) "___ circumstances beyond ..."
35) City near Great Salt Lake
37) Fishennan's whopper
38) Pickle type
40) Volume ofreprints
41) Miniature dessert
43) School of the future
44) Beatie name
45) Panatela, e.g.
46) Japanese site of Expo '70
4 7) Arab chieftains

49) Slumgullion or mulligan
52) Seek some answers
53) Yonder woman
54) Literary "before"
55) Aswan or Hoover
56) Viper
57) "Is it soup_?"

NOTE PAD

ACT CUTER CYSTS
BOO OFAGE HOOHA
EMU ROUGHHOUSED
TIGER SAIL
SCHMEAR BREAST
ESCHEW ERRORS
LEN TORAH GUAM
OWEN YUKON OGLE
REDO NEVER HAW
DRUIDS DEVOUT
SPRITS LEAKAGE
SETS DEFER
FOUGHT IT OUT TEN
UNTIE LLAMA ESS
NOEND LORAX RET

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Living on dreams isn't your style. They're only dreams if you choose not to act on them, and that almost never applies to you.

Right now you're ready for a change, a big, active, self-motivated change. You'd never admit it in a million years, but there is something you've been secretly thinking about that might

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Try to be as expressive as you can today. Unleash your emotions and let the whole world know what you're feeling! Wearing your heart on your sleeve can make for a charming fashion accessory, especially when you want a certain someone to get to know the real you. Step out of your "official" mode and get down to real feelings and honest interactions. Timid conversations will leave you yawning. You need debate, vulnerability, and revelations today!

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You're awfully proud of yourself today when you say or do something that shocks and amazes the throngs around you, so much so that you aren't embarrassed. The more the merrier! When you give in to the urge to just say or do whatever crosses your mind, no matter where you are or who you happen to be with, make sure to tell your people to relax and smile for the camera. It might be your moment in the spotlight, but it's only fair to share.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

You've done everything right, even in the eyes of the superiors who may have been looking to find fault. You've been tested and found to be at the top of your game and on top of everyone else's too!

If those in charge seem to be acting a bit oddly at the moment, you need to force yourself to stop worrying. Who knows what's going on in their minds?

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You're not exactly known for recklessness, so you're totally correct to feel a little worried about what might come out of today's situation, especially because things have been so erratic lately. You don't need to take your worries any further, though. Things are so unlike anything you have ever experienced before that it might be that your dreams are close to coming true!

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You could wake up with the feeling that you're going to be lucky, though not in the monetary sense. And you might also have the urge to spend some cash to grease the karmic wheels. There will be no talking you out of it! Still, take a loved one with some common sense along for the ride. They can convince you to think twice before whipping out the plastic at the drop of a hat!

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

You're all too familiar with irritation and frustration, especially due to things that are beyond your control. Of course, you can always make the best of just about any situation, and the good news is that today's energy takes you well beyond mere luck.

Go about your business with confidence, and know that no matter what happens next, it should turn out to be positive.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Whether or not you're ready for love, it is going to come looking for you. It might be someone who is unusual but also somehow gives off reassuringly grounded vibes. Whether you're interested in them for friendship or romance, you're fascinated enough to invest some time and energy into seeing what happens. Relationships come naturally to you, so get to work. And don't forget to smile when you introduce yourself!

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Whatever you're feeling is pretty obvious to those around you, so don't bother trying to hide it. That just makes them wonder what you're up to. Of course, your behavior might also be a bit off, more so than usual, in the minds of those you see every day.

Get them ready for something big, and spend some time in the mirror preparing yourself as well.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Now that someone who was pretty much nothing but trouble has officially moved on and out of your life, you might be a bit worried that the other shoe is just about to drop. Though you never know what the Universe has up its sleeve, there's really no doubt that things are getting better, if not instantly, then at least in the long run. Keep your hopes up high where they belong.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You are an undisputed expert when it comes to secrets. Still, when a particularly delicious mystery comes your way today, the kind you're sure can make the people you care about happy, you might need to ask a good friend for a rather unusual favor. You need them to tape your mouth closed so you can keep that secret safe. Some others might still be able to spot that rather smug look on your face. If they do, try your very best to keep quiet.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If you can imagine it, you can make it come true, or at least that's what you've always been told.

You're about to prove something similar to those of your friends who've never really believed in the concept of luck. If your already substantial psychic powers aren't enough to convince them, another friend with serious intuition is about to let them know how it all works.

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

G	S	E	Y
L	E	O	K
N	H	E	O
N	O	L	R

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

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

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

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

Iran, Russia, Turkey presidents to talk on Syria war in Tehran

Tehran, Iran - With the war in Ukraine still raging, Russian President Vladimir Putin travels on Tuesday to Tehran for talks with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts on the Syria conflict.

Russia, Turkey and Iran have in recent years met to discuss Syria as part of the so-called 'Astana peace process' to end more than 11 years of conflict in the Arab country.

All three are involved in Syria, with Russia and Iran supporting the Damascus regime against its opponents, and Turkey backing rebels.

Tuesday's summit comes as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to launch a new offensive in the northern Syria against Kurdish militants.

Iran, whose President Ebrahim Raisi is hosting the meeting, has already warned that any Turkish military action in Syria could 'destabilise the region'.

The Tehran summit will also enable Erdogan to hold his first meeting with Putin since Russia invaded Ukraine in February.

The Turkish president has for months been offering to meet the Russian leader in a bid to help resolve heightened global tensions since the war began.

"The timing of this summit is not a coincidence," Russian analyst Vladimir Sotnikov told AFP.

"Turkey wants to conduct a 'special operation' in Syria just as Russia is implementing a 'special operation' in Ukraine," he said.

Turkey has launched waves of



L-R: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and Russian President Vladimir Putin (AFP)

attacks on Syria since 2016, targeting Kurdish militias as well as Islamic State group militants and forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Green light?

The Turkish president's planned military offensive targets Kurdish fighters which Ankara regards as 'terrorists'.

They include the US-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which formed a crucial part of an international coalition against the Islamic State group in Syria.

Ankara fears a strong Kurdish presence along its border with Syria will embolden the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, which for decades has been waging an insurgency against the Turkish state that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Syria's government has re-

peatedly condemned Turkish threats to mount a new incursion. Sinan Ulgen, a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe who specialises in Turkish foreign policy, said Ankara wants the blessing of Moscow and Iran before launching its operation.

"It's particularly important because the two potential target regions are under the control of Russia, and Turkey wants to be able to use the airspace... so as to minimise the risks," he said.

Iran 'also has an indirect presence in the region through Shiite militias that it controls', said Ulgen.

Ultimately, Erdogan is hoping to get 'the green light' from Putin and Raisi, he added.

Russia has already expressed the hope that Turkey would 'refrain' from launching an attack on Syria.

Iran, whose foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited both Ankara and Damascus in recent weeks, has also urged caution.

'Destabilising'

Late last month, Iran's top diplomat said in Ankara that 'we understand that... maybe a special operation might be needed'.

"Turkey's security concerns must be tackled fully and permanently," Days later, Amir-Abdollahian said in Damascus that Turkish military action in Syria 'would be a destabilising element in the region'.

Mazloun Abdi, chief commander of the YPG-linked Syrian Democratic Forces, has urged Russia and Iran to restrain Turkey.

"We hope (the attacks) will not take place and that the Kurds... will not be forsaken dur-

Russia, Turkey and Iran have in recent years met to discuss Syria as part of the 'Astana peace process' to end more than 11 years of conflict. While Russia and Iran are supporting the Damascus regime, Turkey is backing the rebels

ing the talks between the big powers," he said. The SDF has warned that an invasion by Ankara would undermine efforts to combat Islamic State group militants in Syria's northeast. Nicholas Heras of the Newlines Institute said Iran and Russia 'want to prevent another Turkish military campaign in Syria'.

"Iran is building a presence in and around Aleppo that concerns Turkey, and Russia is for all intents and purposes ceding ground to Iran throughout Syria," he added. For Iranian political analyst Ahmad Zeidabadi, 'new differences' have emerged between Russia, Iran and Turkey following the Ukraine war.

This and an 'uncertain future', he said, means the three leaders will try to 'coordinate' their views on Syria to avoid further tensions.

AFP

Iran has 'technical ability to build a nuclear bomb'

Tehran, Iran - Iran has the technical capacity to build a nuclear weapon but has not taken a decision to do so, an official told the Al Jazeera broadcaster on Sunday.

Iran 'has the technical ability to build a nuclear bomb' said Kamal Kharrazi, who heads an advisory board linked to Iran's leadership.

But Tehran has 'not made a decision to build an atomic bomb', he added.

The comments come after US President Joe Biden visited the Middle East this week and signed a security pact with Israel vowing to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It also comes as efforts to revive a 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers remain stalled.

Kharrazi, a former foreign minister, also told Al Jazeera that Tehran had carried out extensive drills to be able to strike deep inside Israel 'if sensitive (Iranian) installations are targeted'. He did not specify when the drills took place.

The 2015 nuclear deal offered Iran sanctions relief in exchange for imposing limits on its nuclear programme and sought to guarantee Tehran could not develop a nuclear weapon, something it has always denied wanting to do.

The United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018 under then president Donald Trump and reimposed biting sanctions, prompting

Tehran to step away from many of its own commitments under the deal.

Iran has held direct talks with remaining parties to the accord - and indirect talks with the United States - in a bid to restore the deal, but negotiations have been at an impasse since March.

The new security pact signed this week by Israel and the United States commits Washington to 'never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon', stating that the US 'is prepared to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome'.

Asked on Thursday how long the US was prepared to give efforts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, Biden said 'we're not going to wait forever'.

Tehran earlier on Sunday accused Washington of provoking tensions in the Middle East, after Biden vowed that the United States would not 'tolerate efforts by any country to dominate another in the region through military buildups, incursions, and/or threats', in a transparent reference to Iran. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said earlier this month that Tehran had started 'feeding... a cascade of... centrifuges' at a fuel enrichment plant. The techniques facilitate the process and would make it easier for Iran to switch to a different level of enriching uranium.

AFP

Australian boy feared dead in Syrian jail

Sydney, Australia - An Australian teenager is believed to have died in a Syrian jail after being held for three years, his family said on Monday as they pleaded for the return of other detained women and children.

Yusuf Zahab, 17, died from 'uncertain causes' in northeast Syria at the Al-Sinaa prison, Human Rights Watch said.

Kurdish-led forces have held Islamic State suspects at the prison, which was the site of intense fighting between IS fighters and US-backed troops earlier this year. "We are heartbroken and angry," Zahab's family said in a statement released by HRW.

"Yusuf didn't need to die. The previous Australian Government knew about Yusuf's predicament for more than three years," they added. Born in Sydney, Zahab was 11 when he was taken to Syria by relatives before being detained by Syrian Democratic Forces in 2019.

He had previously begged for help in audio messages released by the human rights group, and described watching fellow child prisoners being killed in front of him during a raid on the prison.

"There's a lot of bodies, dead bodies, and there's a lot of injured people screaming from pain," he had said. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs said it was still seeking to confirm the death but was offering consular assistance to the family. "The Australian Government remains deeply concerned about the situation of Australians in Syria, including the welfare of those detained in prisons and other detention centres," a department spokeswoman said.

AFP

Pakistan's Khan calls for early election after state assembly victory

Lahore, Pakistan - Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan called again on Monday for an early national election after his party seized control of the state assembly in Punjab, the country's most populous province.

Twenty seats were up for grabs in the Punjab by-election, which was seen as a popularity test for the former international cricket star dismissed by a no-confidence vote in April.

His Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won 15, with the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) of current Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif taking four, and one going to an independent.

Sunday's vote was also seen as a bellwether for national elections that must be held by October next year, although Khan has campaigned across the country for an earlier poll since being dismissed.

"The only way forward from



Political activists shout slogans outside a polling station during the by-election in Punjab province assembly seat in Lahore on Sunday (AFP)

here is to hold free and transparent elections," Khan tweeted early Monday after the Punjab votes were tallied.

"Any other way will only lead

to increased political uncertainty and further economic chaos."

Khan has drawn thousands to rallies since being ousted, giving lengthy speeches claiming the

government was imposed on Pakistan by a US-led conspiracy.

He also blames the current government for soaring inflation, although most analysts agree

Sharif inherited the country's economic woes - which were given some relief last week by an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to resume

a rescue package.

Pakistan newspapers suggested the Punjab result was a consequence of the economic hardships currently felt by the country, which is spending nearly half its income to service dire foreign debt.

To meet IMF conditions for a resumption of a US\$7.2bn aid package, Sharif had to remove subsidies on fuel - effectively raising prices by more than 50 per cent in less than two months.

'A bitter taste of unpopular decisions', read a headline in the influential Dawn newspaper over a front-page analysis.

The Punjab assembly vote was called after the election commission disqualified 20 members of the PTI for switching party loyalties. The result means the likely end of a short reign as Punjab Chief Minister by Hamza Sharif, the prime minister's son.

AFP

Pacific Islands ask international court to rule on climate

Suva, Fiji - Climate-threatened Pacific islands called on Monday for the International Court of Justice to rule on countries' legal duties to stop climate change, a move designed to ratchet up pressure on polluting nations.

In a statement released after a summit in Fiji last week, Pacific leaders issued a joint call for the Hague-based court to make clear states' obligations 'to protect the rights of present and future generations against the adverse impacts of climate change'.

The islands - many low-lying and already buffeted by climate change - hope the move will introduce a heightened level of legal jeopardy for high carbon-emitting countries and spur action. Leaders also declared the



Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama (left) and PIF Secretary General Henry Puna speak during a press conference after the launch of the 2050 Strategy at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in Suva last week (AFP)

region was in a climate emergency that posed an 'existential' threat.

The plan will need the backing of a majority at the United Nations General Assembly in Sep-

tember to be put to the ICJ.

The initiative began in a classroom at the University of the South Pacific in 2019. About 27 law students wrote to Pacific leaders asking them to take up

the campaign - and Vanuatu answered the call.

Fijian university student Vishal Prasad, 26, was one of those involved. He told AFP during the Suva summit last week

that even a non-binding 'advisory opinion' from the International Court of Justice would have 'wide-reaching impacts'. Prasad said he hoped the court weighing in would put polluters on notice.

For young people in the Pacific, 'the existential threat, the reality' of climate change 'is quite scary', he said.

'Australia, NZ to do more'

Rising sea levels and stronger storms are already causing serious problems across the Pacific.

"We are already seeing impacts on a daily basis. We are seeing the onset of cyclones," said Prasad. "We are seeing communities being relocated."

Tuvaluan Foreign Minister Simon Kofe told AFP that he

would like to see Vanuatu's campaign supported as it was 'consistent with our efforts to protect our people that are impacted by climate change'.

Smaller islands are also looking to fellow Pacific Island Forum members Australia and New Zealand to do more.

Australia is one of the world's largest coal and gas exporters.

"I've been clear and consistent in our ask for more ambitious climate commitments," said Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama following the summit, which wrapped up on Thursday.

"We need to end our fossil fuel addiction, including coal. That is our ask of Australia, New Zealand' and all high emitting countries, he added.

AFP

US school shooter faces death penalty

Jurors to hand down either death penalty or life sentence to the young man who gunned down 17

Miami, US - A young man who gunned down 17 people at his former high school in Parkland, Florida goes on trial on Monday, with jurors set to hand down either the death penalty or a life sentence.

Nikolas Cruz took an AR-15 assault rifle into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day in 2018 and killed 17 students and staff members.

Cruz - who was 19 at the time - has already pleaded guilty to 17 counts of first-degree murder and 17 counts of attempted murder for those wounded during the massacre.

The trial is being held to determine his sentence. The death penalty requires a unanimous decision by the jury. Cruz will otherwise be handed life without parole.

The Florida shooting stunned a country accustomed to gun violence and sparked new efforts, led by students from the school itself, to get lawmakers to pass tougher gun control laws.

Parkland survivors founded 'March for Our Lives', organising a rally that drew hundreds of thousands of people to Washington, DC in 2018.

Thousands turned out for demonstrations organised by the group last month following two other mass shootings: one at a Texas elementary school that killed 19 young children and two teachers, and another at a New York supermarket that left 10 Black people dead.

Those shootings helped galvanise support for the first significant federal bill on gun safety in



This file photo shows Florida school shooting suspect Nikolas Cruz looking down during a hearing in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on April 27, 2018 (AFP)

decades.

More than 24,000 dead

President Joe Biden signed the bill into law in late June. It included enhanced background checks for younger buyers and federal cash for states introducing 'red flag' laws that allow courts to temporarily remove weapons from people who are considered a threat.

Nikolas Cruz bought the weapon he used in the 2018 attack legally, despite having a documented history of mental health problems.

Expelled from school for disciplinary reasons, Cruz was known to be fixated on firearms - and had reportedly been identified as a potential threat to his classmates.

On the day of the attack Cruz arrived at the school in an Uber, began shooting indiscriminately at students and staff, and fled nine minutes later, leaving behind a scene of carnage.

He was arrested nearby shortly afterward. Footage recovered from his phone showed he had filmed his plans to attack his former school, saying his goal was to kill 'at least 20 people'.

Cruz told a detective after his arrest that he heard demons ordering him to 'buy weapons, kill animals and destroy everything'.

According to the Gun Violence Archive website, more than 24,000 people have been killed by firearms in the United States so far this year, including more than 13,000 who died by suicide.

AFP

Three slain in US shooting before passer-by kills gunman: Officials

Washington, US - A man opened fire at a mall in the US state of Indiana on Sunday killing three and injuring two, officials said, the latest armed rampage in a country plagued by gun violence.

The attack ended when a 'good Samaritan' shot the gunman dead, police said.

"We experienced a mass shooting this evening at the Greenwood Park Mall," Mark Myers, mayor of Greenwood, Indiana, said in a statement.

The town is about 16km south of downtown Indianapolis, the state capital.

The gunman, who has not been identified, entered the mall's food court at about 6pm (2200 GMT) carrying a rifle along with several magazines of ammunition and opened fire, said Chief Jim Ison of the Greenwood Police Department.

Those injured included a 12-year-old girl, Ison said, adding that no motive had been established.

"Four have been confirmed deceased," he said, noting that that included the initial shooter.

Chief Ison praised the intervention of the armed passer-by who ended the attack, calling the 22-year-old man a 'good Samaritan'.

"The real hero of the day is the citizen that was lawfully carrying a firearm in that food court and was able to stop this shooter almost as soon as he began," he said.

"This has shaken us to our core. This isn't something we have seen in Greenwood before," he said. "It's absolutely horrendous."

It is the latest attack in a

wave of gun violence plaguing the United States.

It comes just weeks after a gunman opened fire on a July 4 parade in an affluent Chicago suburb, killing seven people and injuring at least three dozen.

That incident followed two massacres in May that saw 10 Black people shot dead at an upstate New York supermarket, and 19 children and two teachers slain at an elementary school in Texas. The recent surge in gun violence has reignited the divisive debate over firearm regulation. A US House of Representatives' committee is set this week to discuss a bill that would ban assault weapons for the first time in nearly 20 years.

A 10-year federal assault weapons ban expired in 2004.

AFP

J Lo and Ben Affleck tie the knot in Vegas

Los Angeles, US - Celebrity couple Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck got married this weekend in Las Vegas, 18 years after their first romance failed, court records showed.

The couple tied the knot on Saturday, according to a marriage license they filed in Clark County, Nevada, that was seen by AFP.

It lists the parties to the nuptials as Affleck, Benjamin Geza and Lopez, Jennifer and gives the latter's 'new name' as Affleck, Jennifer.

The pair - he is 49 and she is 52 - first met on the set of the widely panned movie *Gigli* in 2002.

They became a media sensation as they dated but postponed their planned 2003 nuptials, then announced their relationship was over in early 2004.

'Bennifer' - the couple's public nickname from their first highly publicised relationship - set the internet alight last year when photos of them together again



This file photo shows Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck arriving for a special screening of 'Marry Me' in Los Angeles on February 08, 2022 (AFP)

began circulating.

Lopez and Affleck announced their engagement in April.

Lopez posted a video of herself appearing emotional and admiring a green ring in her newsletter, 'On The JLo'. US

media reported that the ring was an emerald-cut pale green diamond.

This is the fourth marriage for Lopez and the second for Affleck.

Lopez discussed her renewed relationship with Affleck in an in-

terview with People in February.

"It's a beautiful love story that we got a second chance," she said.

Lopez was previously married to actor Ojani Noa, dancer Cris Judd and singer Marc Anthony, with whom she shares 14-year-old twins Max and Emme.

Affleck was married to actress Jennifer Garner and they are the parents of Violet, 16, Seraphina, 13, and Samuel, 10.

The gossip news outlet TMZ said the couple have been 'seemingly inseparable' since they got back together, shopping together for a house and sometimes bringing their kids along.

TMZ said that last month Lopez's car was seen outside a huge mansion in Beverly Hills, with several moving trucks outside it and also at each of their current homes.

Of the wedding, TMZ put it this way: "They did it like a couple of kids looking to elope, saying 'I do' out in the desert."

AFP

Sudan's gold rush wreaks havoc on health

Banat, Sudan - Sudanese mother Awadya Ahmed has long wondered why her youngest child Talab was born blind and unable to walk; now she suspects the piles of poisonous waste left by gold miners. In recent years, a growing number of traditional miners have flocked to her village hoping to strike it rich.

But they leave behind hazardous white-powdered waste laden with toxic chemicals including mercury used in the gold extraction process.

The waste is dumped near farmland, water sources and residential areas.

"His four brothers were born in good health, but Talab is the only one born after mining residues spread," Ahmed, 45, told AFP at her home in Banat village, in River Nile state north of Khartoum. The four-year-old lay beside her, unable to move.

Artisanal gold mining is widespread across much of Sudan, employing more than two million people and producing about 80 per cent of the gold extracted nationwide, according to experts.

Sudan is one of the world's poorest countries, and mining remains a source of fast profits attracting many.

The industry has flourished since oil-rich South Sudan broke away in 2011 during the rule of now-ousted president Omar al-Bashir, a period marked by economic hardship, government mismanagement, corruption and international sanctions.



Gold mining residues are piled up near a residential area, in the village of Banat in River Nile state, north of the Sudanese capital Khartoum (AFP)

'Harmful to health'

But chemical contamination from artisanal gold extraction poses clear health dangers.

Mercury damages the nervous, digestive and immune systems and can be fatal. It also threatens the development of children in the womb and early in life, according to the World Health Organization.

Ahmed is not the only one of Banat's 8,000 residents to have observed birth defects and miscarriages. In a nearby house, Awad Ali says his daughter was 'a very normal child', until she turned two. "Then she became unable to move or walk, stand up or sit down," he said.

Community leader Algaily Abdelaziz said the problems began five years ago.

"Since we saw these waste deposits appear, children have been born with deformities, and there have been still-births," Abdelaziz said, noting 22 children had been born in the village with deformities including blindness and brain damage.

Saleh Ali Saleh, from Khartoum's Neelain University's Faculty of Petroleum and Minerals, notes that it is well known 'that mercury is harmful to health'.

A January report by Saleh and other Sudanese researchers found that around 450,000 tonnes of mining waste - rife with

mercury - dot the lush green landscape of River Nile state.

Samples of blood, urine, drinking water and soil from several parts of the state have shown high levels of mercury traces, according to the report.

"People, frankly, are not concerned with removing the waste," said Ali Mohammed Ali, head of the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society.

The process 'requires special treatment' and is 'ideally carried out away from residential areas or water sources', he added.

Such safety measures are far from the minds of miners.

Around 50km from Banat, Mohammed Issa mixed mer-

cury with sand in a large metal bowl with his bare hands, hoping to separate gold from other minerals.

"That's how people do it here," the 25-year-old said.

Issa said he abandoned a meagre life of farming and herding in North Kordofan state to search for the precious metal.

Years to fix

In 2019, Sudan's now-deposed transitional government issued a decree banning the use of mercury and cyanide after protests against their use at gold mines.

The decision has rarely been enforced and miners continue to

use the chemicals in more secluded outlying areas, Saleh said.

Political and economic turmoil in Sudan has piled pressure on households already struggling to make ends meet.

The country's economic crisis worsened after an October military coup led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The coup triggered cuts to crucial international aid and fed into spiralling prices of basic commodities. Sudan is one of Africa's top gold producers, generating 30.3 tonnes of gold in the first half of 2021 alone, according to official figures - which do not include the artisanal output.

The Central Bank puts Sudan's gold revenues in the first quarter of this year at US\$720mn, reflecting the official output.

The state-run company supervising mining activities declined multiple requests for comment by AFP. The lucrative business has long been controlled by shadowy companies with links to the security services which flourished under Bashir. Saleh warns there will be no quick fix.

"The damage already done to the environment cannot be treated easily," said Saleh.

"If we managed to stop today, it will still take us years and years to contain the impact of artisanal mining."

For little Talab, it is already too late.

AFP

First cases of Marburg disease in Ghana

Accra, Ghana - Two cases of the deadly Marburg virus have been identified in Ghana, the first time the Ebola-like disease has been found in the West African nation, health authorities announced on Sunday.

Earlier in the month, blood samples taken from two people in the southern Ashanti region suggested the Marburg virus.

The samples were sent to the Pasteur Institute in Senegal which confirmed the diagnosis, the Ghana Health Service (GHS) said. "This is the first time Ghana has confirmed Marburg Virus Disease," said GHS head Patrick Kuma-Aboagye said in a statement.

No treatment or vaccine exists for Marburg, which is almost as deadly as Ebola. Its symptoms include high fever as well as internal and external bleeding.

A total of 98 people identified as contact cases are currently under quarantine, the GHS statement said, noting that no other cases of Marburg had yet been detected in Ghana.

The WHO said Guinea had confirmed a single case in an outbreak declared over in September 2021. Previous cases were reported in Angola, DR Congo, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda.

AFP



South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin (left) and Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi attend a meeting in Tokyo on Monday (AFP)

South Korean envoy visits Japan in bid to mend ties

Tokyo, Japan - South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin kicked off a three-day visit to Japan on Monday as the two nations explore ways to warm their icy ties, seen as the worst in decades.

Relations between the two neighbours have long been overshadowed by bitter memories of Japan's brutal colonial rule of the Korean peninsula between 1910 and 1945.

Newly elected South Korean leader Yoon Suk-yeol has made active efforts to improve his ties with Japan, including sending a diplomatic mission to Tokyo before his inauguration in May.

Shortly after arriving in Tokyo, Park met his Japanese counterpart Yoshimasa Hayashi.

Officials are also reportedly trying to arrange for Park to pay a courtesy visit to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and express condolences for former Japanese leader Shinzo Abe, who was assassinated earlier this month.

Park and Hayashi posed for photos but stayed silent in front of the cameras and there was no schedule to address the media on Monday.

Both Japan and South Korea are seen by the United States as linchpins in Washington's push-back against rising Chinese commercial and military power, as well as crucial partners in dealing

Relations between the two neighbours have long been overshadowed by bitter memories of Japan's brutal colonial rule of the Korean peninsula

with an unpredictable North Korea.

But Tokyo and Seoul have been locked in a bitter trade and diplomatic row as they remain suspicious of each other over how to address emotional issues including compensation for World War II sex slaves and forced labour.

South Korea says Japan hasn't atoned enough, while Tokyo argues that a 1965 bilateral treaty resolved claims between the two nations.

As ties deteriorated under Abe and Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in, Japan in 2019 toughened South Korea-bound export rules for materials necessary to produce semiconductors. South Korea also warned to terminate a bilateral military agreement to share defence secrets. AFP

Russian shelling kills 6 in Donbas as Kyiv replaces security chief

Zelensky said he was firing Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova and security chief Ivan Bakanov

Kyiv, Ukraine - Russian shelling in battle-scarred east Ukraine on Monday left six dead, Kyiv said, as the country was reeling from President Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to sack two senior law enforcement officials.

EU foreign ministers were convening meanwhile to discuss toughening sanctions against Moscow and the bloc's foreign policy chief warned of the 'life and death' consequences of Russia's blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea grain exports.

Rescue workers in blue helmets could be seen digging through debris and clearing rubble from the collapsed remains of a two-storey building in Toretsk in the industrial east that was struck by Russian artillery early on Monday.

"Rescuers found and recovered the bodies of five dead people in total. Three people were rescued from the rubble and one of them died in hospital," the emergency services said, adding their rescue operations had concluded. Toretsk, a town with of around 30,000 residents lies some 50km south of Kramatorsk, a key target for Russian forces that were ordered into Ukraine in February.

They initially failed to capture the capital Kyiv early in the invasion but have made gains in the eastern region of Donbas recently, capturing the sister cities



Police experts check a place of explosion outside a building partially destroyed in the outskirts of Ukrainian city of Kharkiv on Monday (AFP)

of Lysychansk and Severodonetsk.

Zelensky said late on Sunday that he was firing Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova and security chief Ivan Bakanov amid widespread cases of suspected treason by law enforcement officials. He cited 'a great number of crimes against the foundations of national security and the connections established between Ukrainian law enforcement officials and Russian special services', making the announcement.

'Life and death'

Deputy Head of the Presidency Andriy Smirnov told local media the two were suspended to prevent them 'potentially influencing criminal proceedings against employees of the Security Service of Ukraine'.

Zelensky on Monday ap-

pointed 39-year-old Vasyl Maljuk - first deputy head of the SBU security services since March - as acting security chief, according to a presidential decree. In Brussels, the EU's foreign policy chief warned that Russia's blockade of Ukrainian ports was threatening grain supplies to tens of thousands of people vulnerable to starvation and said it must end.

"It's an issue of life and death for many human beings. And the question is that Russia has to de-block and allow Ukrainian grain to be exported," Borrell told reporters.

His comments came as Russian and Ukrainian negotiators are due to meet UN and Turkish diplomats in Istanbul on Wednesday to discuss a possible agreement to end the months-long blockade of Ukraine's ports.

Ukraine Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said in an address to the officials that 'weapons to Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, and accountability for Russia are the three ways to restore peace, enhance security, and protect stability in Europe'.

A Ukrainian counter-offensive in the direction of those Black Sea ports has been gaining momentum and Kyiv said on Monday that Russia was digging in along frontlines in the Kherson region where Kyiv's army are attacking.

'Massive missile fire'

Ukraine meanwhile accused Russia of again carrying out bombardments on civilian infrastructure in nearby Mykolaiv, a battered city near the Black Sea coast, that has been targeted repeatedly in recent days.

"Mykolaiv again was under massive missile fire," the regional governor Vitaliy Kim announced on social media, specifying that premises showcasing agricultural machinery had been hit.

Battlefield dynamics in the south - and in the east - have shifted, Kyiv and observers of the conflict say, with delivery of long-range precision artillery to Ukraine by its Western allies.

Those weapons are a key concern for Russia, and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu during a recent troop inspection said Moscow's forces must set about neutralising systems like the US-supplied Himars. "Shoigu gave orders to prioritise the destruction - with high-precision weapons - enemy artillery and long-range missiles," the Russian defence ministry said. AFP

India's parliament votes for new president

New Delhi, India - India's parliament began voting on Monday for a new president, with a female politician from the country's marginalised tribal community the favourite for the post.

Droupadi Murmu, from the Santhal tribe, has been nominated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party for the largely ceremonial position.

If elected, she would be India's first tribal president and second female president. The incumbent, Ram Nath Kovind, is the country's second president from the Dalit community, the bottom of the Hindu caste system.

Murmu, 64, began her career as a schoolteacher in the eastern state of Odisha before going into politics. She has held ministerial positions in the state government, and been governor of the neighbouring state of Jharkhand.

Murmu 'has devoted her life to serving society and empowering the poor, downtrodden as well as the marginalised', Modi tweeted after her candidacy was announced.

Her main opponent for the presidency is veteran politician Yashwant Sinha, an ex-BJP member and former finance and external affairs minister, who has been backed by opposition parties including Congress.

AFP

Sri Lanka renews state of emergency ahead of poll

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's acting president renewed the country's state of emergency on Monday ahead of a parliamentary vote to pick a new head of state - a poll in which he is a leading candidate.

Ranil Wickremesinghe automatically became acting president when Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned last week after fleeing to Singapore.

A state of emergency allows troops to arrest and detain suspects, and the president to make regulations overriding existing laws to deal with any unrest.

One was already in place but parliament had not met to ratify the declaration as required, and Wickremesinghe extended it



A man wears a headband with a slogan against interim Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe as he waves the Sri Lankan national flag near the Presidential secretariat in Colombo on Sunday (AFP)

from Monday 'in the interests of public security', he said.

Police and the military, armed with emergency powers, stepped up security in the capital ahead of Wednesday's election of a new president. Wickremesinghe, a six-time former prime minister, is being backed for the position by Rajapaksa's party, which remains the largest in the legislature.

In what was seen as a possible appeal to 14 Catholic legislators for their support, Wickremesinghe said he had asked Britain's help to complete investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings that killed 279 people. Sri Lanka's small but influential Catholic minority believes the coordinated suicide

attack against three churches and three hotels was a 'political plot' to bring Rajapaksa to power, and has long sought an independent investigation.

Wickremesinghe was 'requesting the assistance of the UK government and their intelligence services', his office said.

There was no immediate comment from the British High Commission.

The bombings were blamed on local militants and 25 men were indicted in October over alleged involvement. But the Church and opposition parties claim state intelligence officers loyal to Rajapaksa directly or indirectly supported the bombers. AFP

Britain, France face hottest day as wildfires rage in Europe

London, UK - Britain and France went on heatwave alert on Monday facing record temperatures as southwest Europe wilted under a scorching sun and ferocious wildfires devoured more forests.

Forecasters in Britain warned of havoc in a country unprepared for the onslaught of extreme heat that authorities said was putting lives at risk.

The mercury was set to rise to 38 Celsius in London Monday - not far below Britain's all-time record of 38.7C - and could breach the 40C mark for the first time by Tuesday, meteorologists

said. Scientists blame climate change and predict more frequent and intense episodes of extreme weather.

Across the Channel firefighters failed to contain two massive fires in France's southwest that have created apocalyptic scenes of destruction.

For six days, armies of firefighters and a fleet of water-bombing aircraft have struggled against blazes that have mobilised much of France's entire firefighting capacity.

Forecasters have put 15 French departments on the highest state of alert for extreme

temperatures, including in the western Brittany region where the Atlantic coastal city of Brest was expected to hit 40 Celsius on Monday, nearly twice its usual July temperature average. By early afternoon, Brest had already beaten its all-time record of 35.2 C set in 1949.

The European heatwave, spreading north, is the second to engulf parts of the southwest of the continent within only weeks.

Blazes burning in France, Greece, Portugal and Spain have destroyed thousands of hectares of land and forced thousands of residents and holidaymakers to



Commuters wait for their trains at Victoria Station in London on Monday amid disruption warnings over extreme heat (AFP)

flee.

In France's Landes forest, in the southwest Aquitaine region, temperatures 'will be above 42 degrees Celsius' on Monday, forecaster Olivier Proust said.

In the Gironde region, firefighters on Monday continued their battle against forest blazes that have devoured nearly 35,000 acres since Tuesday.

An area of nine kilometres long and eight kilometres wide was still ablaze near the Dune de Pilat, turning landscapes, campsites and beaches into a scorching mess.

AFP

FABRIC OF PATRIOTISM

WARDROBE

In a large fashion store in central Kyiv, a mother and her young daughter flick through T-shirts depicting a cartoon dog in a flak jacket and sunglasses.

"We have several like this," says Tatiana, adding that they may pick up something new.

"We love clothes like this so we shop here often."

The T-shirts by Kyiv-based label J.Cook depict Patron, a Jack Russell dog skilled at finding landmines, who was awarded a medal by President Volodymyr Zelensky in May.

"I like little Patron," Tatiana's daughter Valeriya says, as her mother nods.

A trend for patriotic clothing in Ukraine sees T-shirt designs and slogans swiftly pick up on the latest weaponry and war developments.

J.Cook's founder, Serhii Fiut, says the Patron T-shirt is 'currently the most popular' for the brand, named after British explorer James Cook, which sews garments in western Ukraine.

"In 90 per cent of cases, people choose military-themed T-shirts," the 34 year old businessman says, sitting in a Georgian cafe in Kyiv.

"It's like a means of expression. People want to show that 'this is close to me'."

Sales of T-shirts are growing, Fiut said. "I have a niche where people are ready

to buy."

Many who buy online are women getting T-shirts for partners and relatives fighting in the war, he adds.

At the large store Vsi Svoi (All Ours) on Kyiv's main shopping street - which showcases Ukraine designers - there is a wide choice of war-themed clothing.

A mannequin near the entrance wears a T-shirt showing a US Javelin anti-tank missile on a background of stylised flowers, designed by another Kyiv-based label, SIL' wear.

Mariya Iakniunas (31), the brand's co-owner says the design, known as 'Talisman', is one of the brand's most popular.

It is inspired by the Ukrainian peasant tradition of hanging up towels embroidered with bright flowers to ward off bad luck, she said.

"Today, the Javelin in the hands of our warriors is the talisman of every Ukrainian," she says, hence the idea to surround it with flowers.

She insists that the popularity of such designs "is not a trend, it's our voice... This is our unity. To be Ukrainians and to win this war."



A trend for patriotic clothing in Ukraine sees T-shirt designs and slogans swiftly pick up on the latest weaponry and war developments

While SIL' wear saw its sales drop in the first month of the war, they are now 'recovering powerfully', she says.

Both J.Cook and SIL' wear donate part of their proceeds to the armed forces.

'People get it'
Several T-shirt designs mock Russia's wilder propaganda claims - such as re-

ports of genetically modified geese and pigeons being used as biological weapons.

One by J.Cook shows aggressive-looking pigeons wearing tank helmets and a cartridge belt, while a gaggle of geese tout rifles and peer through binoculars in another design from the label.

"They (Russians) themselves give us ideas for drawings," says Fiut.

"Where are these pigeons and biological laboratories? What are they talking about? We are trying to show this irony, to mock it. People get it."

Customers are eager to wear their sup-

port for the war on their chests.

"There's a lot of beautiful T-shirts," says 14-year-old Mykola, shopping at Vsi Svoi, saying he and his friends wear them.

They send 'a certain message and that's why it's important to wear them', he says.

'So patriotic'

At a pop-up event at a trendy Kyiv showroom called Kapsula, or capsule, T-shirts, sweaters, hoodies and jewellery by Ukrainian designers feature the national flag colours, blue and yellow.

"Everything is so patriotic now," says administrator Anna Perebynos (22).

"We hold such events so people know more about our Ukrainian designers who are working now, who are putting out new collections despite what is happening now in our country."

On display is a soft hoodie by MY x MY featuring an embroidered map of Ukraine with the slogan: 'Places for happy people'.

A T-shirt by Balcony Garment shows a Russian rocket with nuclear symbols juxtaposed on doves and flowers with the slogan: 'Here and now'.

Perebynos shows clothes to be shipped online including folk-embroidered blouses and linen items in blue and yellow. "We get a lot of international orders: It's people who may have been born here in Ukraine and it's their home but for some reason, they've gone abroad."



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IMPACT OF SANCTIONS

PINCH ON BEAUTY

Soon after President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine, Russia’s flourishing aesthetic market is increasingly getting wrinkled due to the fact that the products are largely imported from countries such as the US and Germany



“We are also forced to say goodbye” to fillers from Abbvie, Vlasova said, hoping that European producers can fill in the gap.

It is also getting harder to get breast implants - due to a lack of Russian producers.

All breast implants in Russia are imported, with 60 per cent coming from the United States and 13 per cent from Germany, according to industry estimates.

The sanctions do not target the supply of implants, but the disrupted logistics and other factors affected both breast reconstruction and aesthetic operations.

In March, prices of implants rose threefold, before stabilising at a level 20 per cent higher than before the start of Moscow’s military intervention in Ukraine, plastic surgeon Evgeny Dobreikin told AFP.

Patriotic implants

Alexander Saversky, president of the League of Patient Advocates, fears that cheap but potentially dangerous products could soon start arriving in clinics, recalling the scandal of the French firm PIP’s poor quality breast implants.

Saversky predicted that the problems will soon apply to the rest of the health industry.

“In a few months, the shortages of medical equipment in Russia, 80 per cent of which is imported from abroad, will be critical,” he said.

Soaring inflation and uncertain future also create problems for beauty professionals, as Russians have begun to tighten their belts.

In Saint Petersburg, Vlasova has already seen a drop in her clientele.

“The population’s income has gone down,” she said.

“People are reducing their expenses.”

But in the midst of dark times, plastic surgeon Dobreikin sees an opportunity.

He wants to win new clients with patriotic themes.

In late May, he floated the idea of ‘RosGrud’ (Russian Breasts) implants, which in-

stead of being translucent are in the colours of the Russian flag or military fatigues.

One of his clients, Nastella Sokolova, a 28 year old designer, is enthusiastic.

“It’s my way of defending my homeland,” she said.

The surgeon is now looking to find a supplier abroad who is willing to create such implants for him.

Dobreikin warns wits against mocking his project, alluding to harsh penalties introduced in the country for anyone criticising the army.

“Perhaps those who are against our patriotic implants are also against our country?”

AFP

In March, prices of implants rose threefold, before stabilising at a level 20% higher than before the start of Moscow’s military intervention in Ukraine

EVGENY DOBREIKIN

When it comes to looking good, Russian women are happy to splash out, even on a bit of nip-and-tuck plastic surgery.

But Western sanctions in the wake of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine mean that supplies of products such as botox and breast implants - largely imported from countries such as the United States and Germany - could become increasingly hard to get hold of.

Anastasia Yermakova (37) is worried: She had her last injection of botox (botulinum toxin) in February to reduce facial wrinkles.

“My beautician assures us that she still has stocks of botox,” she told AFP.

“But I worry,” she said, arguing that local botox replacements are of inferior quality.

Russia ranks ninth globally in the number of aesthetic procedures carried out annually - 621,600 in 2020, according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

And the Russian aesthetic medicines sector was worth US\$969mn in 2021, up two per cent from the year before, according to the Russian consultancy Amiko.

Soon after President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine on February 24, US drugmaker AbbVie, which is behind the wrinkle treatment Botox, withdrew from the flourishing Russian market over what it called ‘tragic events’ in Ukraine.

As a result, Botox stocks are ‘melting’, Yuliya Fran-

gulova, co-founder of the National Association of Aesthetic Medicine Clinics, told AFP.

Frangulova said it is ‘causing concern of clinic managers accustomed to using this reference product’.

‘Say goodbye to fillers’

“In March, we saw a panic among patients, doctors and suppliers,” said Oksana Vlasova, director of development at the Grandmed beauty clinic in Russia’s second city Saint Petersburg.

“The demand exploded, the stocks of botox were emptying.”

In April and May, there were no botox imports at all, said Nikolay Beshpalov of RNC Pharma which analyses the Russian pharmaceutical market.

He hopes supplies could resume ‘towards the end of the summer’.

Russians are also running out of some Western-made face fillers, in particular injections of hyaluronic acid to plump up lips -- a very popular procedure in the country.



AFP

Hardik Pandya proud to fill Jasprit Bumrah's shoes as India win England series

"He was telling me that I

HARDIK PANDYA

"The past is the past, the Manchester semi-final has

"If you give good players a second chance there's a good



AFP

OLD COURSE GETS NEW STAR

Mullet-sporting Smith storms St Andrews to break down major door

St Andrews, United Kingdom - Cameron Smith's mullet and moustache may not meet the approval of members at the Old Course, but the Australian's golf had St Andrews in raptures as he claimed the Claret Jug in style on Sunday.

Smith's first major will be a hard one to match as the man from Brisbane produced a scintillating 64 when it mattered most to match a British Open record of 20-under-par.

"To win an Open Championship in itself is probably going to be a golfer's highlight in their career," said Smith. "To do it around St Andrews, is just unbelievable."

The stage appeared set for Rory McIlroy to end his eight-year wait to win another major as the Northern Irishman shared the overnight lead with Viktor Hovland, four shots clear of Smith.

But Smith's eight-under-par fourth round, with eight birdies -- including five in a row from the 10th - and not a single dropped shot, allowed him to finish a shot clear of Cameron Young of the United States, with a frustrated McIlroy, despite not dropping a shot all day, ending another stroke back in third after a 70.

"I got beaten by the better player this week. To shoot 64 to win an Open Championship at St Andrews is one hell of a showing," said McIlroy. "Hats off to Cam, he's had an unbelievable week."

Yet, Smith's performance over the past four days was no shock from one of the best players in

the world this year.

The 28-year-old won the Players' Championship, considered the fifth major, in March and set a new PGA record by winning the Tournament of Champions on 34-under-par in January.

"I knew it wasn't going to be too long before I got one of these. I've knocked on the door, I think, maybe one too many times now. So it's nice to get it done."

To win an Open Championship in itself is probably going to be a golfer's highlight in their career

CAMERON SMITH

As a rising star of the PGA Tour, Smith may soon find himself at the centre of golf's civil war.

The shadow of the rebel LIV Golf tour hung over St Andrews early in the week with the last Australian to lift the Claret Jug, Greg Norman, uninvited to the champions' dinner due to his role in helping launch the Saudi-backed project.

The exploits of Smith and McIlroy, one of LIV's most outspoken critics, meant the focus was on the golf come Sunday with little prospect of a LIV winner.

Yet, Smith refused to quash speculation he could be the next big name to move to LIV.

AFF



Cameron Smith celebrates after holing his final putt on the 18th green at the British Open on Sunday (AFP)



Robert Lewandowski

Lewandowski promises to take Barca back to top

Madrid, Spain - Polish striker Robert Lewandowski said Monday he was raring to go at new club Barcelona and determined to help them "return to the top and win as many titles as possible".

"I'm finally here. I'm delighted to be at Barca," the former Bayern Munich star told Barca TV after joining his new teammates in Miami where Barcelona are starting a four-match US tour this week.

"The last few days have been long, but finally an agreement has been reached. I'm ready to take on this new challenge," continued the 33-year-old. "I've always wanted to play in La Liga and in the big teams, so Barca is a great opportunity for me."

"I'm here to help Barca get back to the top and win as many titles as possible."

Barcelona's last domestic title was in 2019 and their last Champions League trophy in 2015.

On Saturday, Bayern Munich announced that they had reached an agreement with Barcelona for Lewandowski after two months of endless negotiations between the clubs.

The two-time FIFA men's player of the year has reportedly agreed a four-year deal worth 50 million euros (\$50.4m), including five million in potential add-ons.

He is the club's fourth summer transfer after Ivory Coast midfielder Franck Kessie from AC Milan and Chelsea defender Andreas Christensen on a free transfer, and Brazil winger Raphinha, recruited for 70 million euro from Leeds.

AFF

Sweden thrash Portugal to march into Euro 2022 quarter-finals

Sheffield, United Kingdom - Sweden thrashed Portugal 5-0 to reach the quarter-finals of Euro 2022 on Sunday as holders the Netherlands needed a flurry of late goals to beat Switzerland 4-1 to ensure their place in the last eight.

Silver medallists at last year's Olympics, Sweden are the highest ranked team in the tournament, but failed to hit top gear in drawing with the Dutch and squeezing past the Swiss 2-1 in their opening two games.

Peter Gerhardsson's women clicked into gear in Leigh to claim top spot in Group C and were 3-0 up by half-time.

Manchester City's Filipa Angeladal struck twice before Carole Costa headed into her own net in first half stoppage time.

Kosovare Asllani's penalty made it 4-0 before Arsenal striker Stina Blackstenius finally got on the scoresheet after having two earlier efforts ruled out.

Sweden will face whoever fin-



Sweden's Kosovare Asllani celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Portugal on Sunday (AFP)

ishes second in Group D with Belgium, Iceland and Italy all in with a chance.

"We were really satisfied that we did enough to win the group. That was something we hoped for when we started," said Ger-

hardsson.

The Netherlands lie in wait for the French in the last eight as they had enough to get through despite missing star striker Vivianne Miedema for the second consecutive game due to a posi-

tive case of coronavirus.

"We're playing a big opponent and so are they. I don't think they want to play us," said Netherlands boss Mark Parsons, whose side lost 3-1 to France in February.

AFF

Four nations vie to host Asian Cup after China withdrawal

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Australia, South Korea, Qatar and Indonesia are bidding to stage the 2023 Asian Cup after China withdrew citing the Covid pandemic, with a decision to be announced in October, officials said Monday.

China had pulled out in May as the host of the 24-team competition as it pursued a zero-Covid policy - a strategy that makes staging sports events a major challenge.

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) unveiled the new contenders to host the tournament after the deadline for submissions closed on Friday.

Australia are aiming to host the competition for a second time, after staging it in 2015.

South Korea have also staged the Asian Cup once before, in 1960. Qatar - the 2022 World Cup hosts - have staged the Asian Cup in 1988 and 2011.

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FRASER-PRYCE STARS IN JAMAICAN RHAPSODY



History-making Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce bags fifth 100m title in Jamaican sweep at World Athletics Championships, United States win four crowns

Eugene, United States - Jamaica's Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce made history Sunday as she bagged a fifth world 100m title in a Jamaican sweep at the World Athletics Championships on Sunday, while Team USA claimed four other crowns on offer in Eugene.

Fraser-Pryce, a 35-year-old mother, led from gun to tape in a consummate display of sprinting that belied her age.

The Jamaican, who previously won the blue riband event in 2009, 2013, 2015 and 2019, won in a championship record of 10.67 seconds.

Shericka Jackson took silver in a personal best of 10.73sec, with four-time Olympic sprint champion Elaine Thompson-Herah claiming bronze (10.81).

It was the first time a nation

had swept the medals in the women's 100m at the worlds and came just a day after Fred Kerley led a US sweep of the men's 100m.

"It was definitely something on the cards," Fraser-Pryce said

I'm glad I was the one who finished first in the sweep and I'm glad the other ladies came through and we were able to celebrate the 1-2-3

SHELLEY-ANN FRASER-PRYCE

of the potential sweep.

"I'm glad I was the one who finished first in the sweep and I'm glad the other ladies came through and we were able to celebrate the 1-2-3.

"It's special, it's my fifth world title in the 100m, and doing it at

35, yes I said 35!"

In a startling day of results for Team USA on home soil, Ryan Crouser led another American cleansweep, this time in the shot put alongside Joe Kovacs and Josh Awotunde.

dles was marred by the withdrawal through injury of Jamaican Hansle Parchment while Devon Allen was dramatically ruled out after a heart-breaking false start on the same track where he starred as a college athlete.

Parchment, who had stunned Holloway to win Olympic gold last year, clipped a hurdle during the warm-up and left clutching his thigh.

Holloway admitted that he had sympathy for Allen's marginal false start call.

"I didn't think he false started at all," he said. "But technology says otherwise. It's one of those things. It's athletics. Anything can happen in track and field. It is what it is."

Allen meanwhile described his false start as "frustrating".

"You train a whole year for one competition that lasts 13 seconds and that's that," Allen said.

"It happens and I'll learn from it - and I'll make sure I don't react as fast next time."

Elsewhere on the track, Norway's Karsten Warholm qualified smoothly for Tuesday's 400m hurdles final.

The 26-year-old Olympic champion and world record holder has been out injured with a hamstring injury, but he vowed this week he was at 100% and looked comfortable as he coasted through his semi-final in his bid to bag a third consecutive world title.

"It felt easy. I did my thing for the first turn to test my speed," said Warholm.

AFF

'I'm a competitor with belief,' warns record breaker Fraser-Pryce

Eugene, United States - To maintain a track career at the top of one's game demands raw ability, good coaching and a drive that supersedes all.

Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce has that in spades and on Sunday once again demonstrated her steely desire and sprinting prowess as she bagged a record fifth world women's 100m title.

"The secret behind my success is that I am a competitor, I love to compete and I believe God has given me a gift," said the 35-year-old.

At Hayward Field in Eugene, Oregon, she raced home in her trademark dyed flowing locks in a championship record of 10.67 seconds. Teammate Shericka Jackson took silver, with four-time Olympic sprint champion Elaine Thompson-Herah claiming bronze.

What stands out is Fraser-

Pryce's winning time: that is to say that at the age of 35, she bagged a fifth gold in a faster time than when she was won in 2009, 2013, 2015 and 2019.

No matter how you look at it, that is an astonishing accomplishment.

"I somehow feel special," she said. "I always want to compete and show the work that I have been doing.

"I'm hard-working, keen, driven and always hungry to do more.

"It's special, it's my fifth world title in the 100m, and doing it at 35, yes I said 35!

"A lot of times people talk about my age or being a mother, but I think of it as part of the journey in life.

"And instead of thinking of it as something that will negatively affect me, I look at it as a positive experience."

AFF

Cressy beats Bublik to win ATP Hall of Fame Open title

Newport, United States - American Maxime Cressy won his first career ATP title on Sunday by rallying to defeat Kazakhstan's Alexander Bublik 2-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) in the Hall of Fame Open final.

French-born Cressy, who competed for his homeland until becoming an American in 2018, reached his first two ATP finals earlier this year, losing to Rafael Nadal at Melbourne in January and Taylor Fritz at Eastbourne last month.

But the third time proved charmed as Cressy outlasted Bublik at the grass-court event to win after two hours and 23



Maxime Cressy

minutes, firing 14 aces against 13 double faults and hoisting the trophy after falling behind by a set and a break.

"It's an incredible feeling to win my first title," Cressy said. "I never thought I would win my first title this way. I stuck with it and I got lucky.

"I look forward to more titles. It's a very special feeling."

Bublik, who won his first ATP crown in February at Montpellier, failed to become the first Kazak player to own multiple ATP titles.

"I'm very upset with the outcome but I'd like to congratulate Max on his first title," Bublik said.

"He had great luck."

Russian-born Bublik, who began playing for Kazakhstan in 2016, lost his first four ATP finals -- the first of those at Newport in 2019 to American John Isner - before his breakthrough title in France.

World number 42 Bublik and 41st-ranked Cressy, both 25, met for the first time in Sunday's final.

In the tie-breaker, Cressy took the lead for good on 2-1 when Bublik double faulted. Cressy followed with a backhand winner and took the last three points for the victory.

AFF

Swiatek dominates rankings

Paris, France - Poland's Iga Swiatek continues to dominate the WTA rankings released on Monday with almost twice the points of second-placed Estonian Anett Kontaveit.

In a largely unchanged Top 10, American Jessica Pegula moved up one place to a career-high seven. Croat Petra Martic jumped 30 spots to 55 after winning her second title in Lausanne on Sunday with American Bernarda Pera moving up 49 places to break into the Top 100 at 81st.

WTA RANKINGS (TOP 10)

1. Iga Swiatek (POL) 8336 pts
2. Anett Kontaveit (EST) 4326
3. Maria Sakkari (GRE) 4190
4. Paula Badosa (ESP) 4030
5. Ons Jabeur (TUN) 4010
6. Aryna Sabalenka (BLR) 3267
7. Jessica Pegula (USA) 3087 (+1)
8. Danielle Collins (USA) 3022 (-1)
9. Garbine Muguruza (ESP) 2886
10. Emma Raducanu (GBR) 2717

ATP RANKINGS (TOP 10)

1. Daniil Medvedev (RUS) 7775 pts
2. Alexander Zverev (GER) 6850
3. Rafael Nadal (ESP) 6165
4. Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE) 5045
5. Casper Ruud (NOR) 4890
6. Carlos Alcaraz (ESP) 4845
7. Novak Djokovic (SRB) 4770
8. Andrey Rublev (RUS) 3540
9. Auger-Aliassime (CAN) 3445
10. Janik Sinner (ITA) 3185

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