

TURKEY, SYRIA QUAKE TOLL GOES OVER 5,400

RESCUERS RACE AGAINST TIME

|        |         |
|--------|---------|
| TURKEY |         |
| DEATHS | INJURED |
| 3,703  | 22,286  |
| SYRIA  |         |
| DEATHS | INJURED |
| 1,712  | 3,749   |

Sanliurfa, Turkey - A massive rescue effort in Turkey and Syria battled frigid weather in a race against time on Tuesday to find survivors under buildings flattened by an earthquake that killed more than 5,000 people.

Tremors that inflicted more suffering on a border area already plagued by conflict left people on the streets burning debris to try to stay warm.

Rescuers were working on collapsed apartments with heavy equipment as a worldwide relief effort promised food, search teams and equipment for the disaster zone.

"We live on the first floor out of three; we're too scared to return," said Imam Caglar, 42, in the Turkish city of Sanliurfa. "Our building is not safe at all."

"My mother-in-law, my father-in-law, and two of my father-in-law's sons are trapped," said Mahmud al Ali in the Syrian city of Aleppo. "We are sitting here in the cold and rain and waiting for rescuers to start digging."

The 7.8-magnitude quake struck on Monday as people slept, flattening thousands of structures, trapping an unknown number of people and potentially impacting millions. Whole rows of buildings collapsed, leaving some of the heaviest devastation near the quake's epicentre between the Turkish cities of Gaziantep and Kahramanmaraş.

The destruction led to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declaring a three-month state of emergency in ten southeastern provinces on Tuesday.

Fears toll will rise

A winter storm has compounded the misery by rendering many roads - some of them damaged by the quake - almost impassable, resulting in traffic jams that stretch for kilometres in some regions.

The cold rain and snow are a risk both for people forced from their homes - who took refuge in mosques, schools or even bus shelters - and the survivors



Mesut Hancer holds the hand of his 15-year-old daughter Irmak, who died in the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş, after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck Turkey on Monday; and (below) a Syrian child sits on a collapsed building in the town of Azaz on the border with Turkey on Tuesday (AFP)



buried under debris.

"It is now a race against time," said World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "We have activated the WHO network of emergency medical teams to provide essential health care for the injured and most vulnerable."

Turkey put the latest death toll at 3,703 in that country alone - bringing the confirmed tally in both Turkey and Syria to 5,415.

There are fears that the toll will rise inexorably, with WHO officials estimating up to 20,000 may have died. It warned that up to 23mn people could be affected by the earthquake and urged nations to rush help to the disaster zone.

AFP  
See also Page 09

His Majesty affirms Oman's solidarity with Turkey, Syria

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik made telephone calls to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and President Bashar al Assad of Syria on Tuesday.

His Majesty the Sultan expressed his condolences and heartfelt sympathies to the two leaders and the people of Turkey and Syria in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. He wished the injured speedy recovery.

During the telephonic conversations, His Majesty the Sultan reaffirmed the sultanate's solidarity with the two countries. He voiced Oman's support for all in view of the grave situation, praying to Allah the Almighty to alleviate its impact, help the people of Turkey and Syria overcome this ordeal and spare them any

harm.

On their turn, President Assad and President Erdogan expressed their thanks and appreciation to His Majesty the Sultan for his kind initiative and noble feelings. They valued Oman's stand, praying to Allah the Almighty to spare His Majesty the Sultan and Omani people any calamity.

On Monday, Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, expressed his condolences and sympathies for the victims of the earthquake during his communication with his Turkish and Syrian counterparts, Mevlut Cavusoglu and Faisal al Miqdad. Sayyid Badr affirmed the sultanate's solidarity with the two countries and Oman's willingness to provide all possible assistance.



A man runs along a street strewn with debris, in Hatay, Turkey, on Tuesday (AFP)



Residents rescue a girl from the rubble of a collapsed building in Jandaris, Syria on Monday (AFP)



1mn mtpa gas deal inked with China

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Oman LNG has signed a binding term-sheet agreement with China International United Petroleum and Chemical Company (UNIPEC) to supply 1mn metric tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) per annum starting 2025.

The agreement will leverage ever-growing partnerships between Oman LNG and international energy firms. With this agreement, UNIPEC, the trading arm of the Chinese company SINOPEC, has become the latest beneficiary of Oman LNG marking the first LNG term deal with a Chinese firm.

The deal is considered a remarkable milestone for both companies and countries opening doors for new opportunities in the Chinese market.

The term-sheet agreement stipulates Oman LNG will supply of a total of 1mn metric tonnes per annum (mtpa) of LNG to UNIPEC.

The agreement is a four-year contract, starting in 2025. Signing term-sheet agreements beyond 2024 emphasises Oman LNG's role in sustaining Oman's reputation as a reliable and trusted LNG supplier, coupled with the effective management

of business processes to produce clean energy, and deliver it to customers around the world safely and reliably.

The agreement signing ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Salim Nasser al Auli, Minister of Energy and Minerals, in Muscat. The agreement was signed by Hamed al Nuumany, CEO of Oman LNG, and Wang Yahang, General Manager of UNIPEC.

Speaking after the signing ceremony, Nuumany said, "The term-sheet signing with UNIPEC marks another milestone, where Omani LNG will be creating new opportunities in China. Such agreements will further enhance our position in the global energy industry, and ensure we maintain our reputation as a clean and reliable energy supplier worldwide. This step boosts our on-going efforts to add value to the local economy through growth and collaborations with international partners such as UNIPEC."

Recently, several international energy firms signed long-term agreements with Oman LNG to import LNG from the sultanate. The most recent one, on January 30, was signed by the company with Turkey's BOTAS Petroleum Pipeline Corporation to supply 1mn mtpa of LNG for ten years.

Decommissioned ship sunk in Musandam: RNO

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) sank one of its ships after the end of its service in Musandam on Tuesday. The shipwreck will be used in forming coral reefs and to attract marine organisms.

According to plans, the shipwreck will later be a tourism attraction and site for marine research and studies.

The ship was considered one of the fastest vessels in RNO's fleet and served nearly 35 years, during which time it carried out several tasks.

The sinking of the vessel will



help provide an ideal environment for coral reefs and the proliferation of marine life. This will enrich marine life and help in drawing tourists to the area.

"The sinking site was chosen in Musandam because of its safe sea currents. Moreover, it being a diving site will help increase tourism activity in the area," said H E Sayyid Ibrahim bin Saeed al Busaidi, Governor of Musandam.

Environment Authority rescues 7 stranded dolphins in Dhofar

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) rescued seven stranded dolphins in Dhofar on Tuesday.

A statement issued by EA said, "The Directorate General of Environment in Dhofar Governorate dealt with a report about eight stranded Risso's dolphins, which washed up on the coast of

the wilayat of Hasik.

'Seven of these were rescued in good health and returned to the sea, while the eighth one died. The authority's specialists took samples and measurements to conduct laboratory tests and analyses.'

Risso's dolphins, also known as Grampus, are one of the larger members of the dolphin family.

# 120 take part in fishing contest in maritime fest

Our Correspondent  
Sur

As part of its efforts to support fishermen, Omani Fishermen Association held a competition in the ongoing Maritime Heritage Festival in Sur on Tuesday.

Activities of the festival started on February 3 and will continue till February 19.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily* from Sur, Ahmed Abdullah al Balushi, Vice-President of Omani Fishermen Association and Chairman of the Organising Committee of the competition, said, "More than 120 fishermen and 25 boats participated in the contest to catch yellowfin tuna."

The competition started from the Port of Sur at 4am and included three categories - large boats, small boats and the biggest fish caught.

The committee awarded total prize money of RO5,800 to the winners. The winner of the first category got RO2,000, the runner up won RO1,000, and RO500 went to the third-place winner.

In the second category, the first, second and third place winners took home RO1,000, RO600 and RO400 respectively, while the contestant with the biggest catch won RO300.

About the objectives of the competition, Balushi said the event aimed to support artisanal



*It is also a platform to know the challenges fishermen face, while encouraging jobseekers to join the sector*

AHMED ABDULLAH AL BALUSHI



(Supplied photos)

fishermen. "It is also a platform to know the challenges fishermen face, while encouraging jobseekers to join the sector."

Balushi added that the association continues to hold various events and workshops to support fishermen across governorates.

The Maritime Heritage Festi-

val is being organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of South Sharqiyah and a number of government and private agencies.

It includes several events and activities being held at the Maritime Heritage Village, which tell

the story of the maritime heritage for which Sur is famous.

The Maritime Heritage Village has a section dedicated to related craft industries, while folklore sessions, theatre, recreational and cultural events and performances of traditional marine-related arts keep visitors engaged and entertained.



(Supplied photo)

## Snow Oman now officially open at Mall of Oman

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Majid al Futtaim Entertainment opened Snow Oman officially on Monday.

The opening ceremony featured an array of entertaining activities, including an ice skating performance. It was attended by top officials of Majid al Futtaim Entertainment, including Ignace Lahoud, CEO, Mark D Haak Wegmann, Managing Director of Leisure & Entertainment, and Mohammad el Etri, Vice-President of Global Snow.

Located in Mall of Oman, spread over 14,830sqm, Snow Oman is the largest indoor snow park in the MENA region and the first and only indoor snow destination in the sultanate. It features more than 20 family-friendly rides and attractions, including a 430m ice rink as well as a colony of king and

gentoo penguins.

'Desert Blizzard' features Oman's cityscapes and sand dunes albeit covered in real snow, whilst still reflecting the local culture and heritage.

"We are proud to welcome the newest addition to our ever-expanding portfolio, Snow Oman. Entertainment plays an important role in the growth of local economies, and the opening of Snow Oman marks another major milestone in our investment strategy in the sultanate, besides demonstrating our ongoing commitment to deliver innovative experiences for guests across the region," said Lahoud.

"Entertainment not only impacts the local economy but provides us with a much-needed sense of community, and Snow Oman delivers a unique and immersive way for families to spend quality time together."

In 2005, Majid al Futtaim made the impossible possible by bringing real snow to the desert and launching the Middle East's first indoor ski resort, Ski Dubai. Just over ten years later, it expanded its footprint with the opening of Ski Egypt, which was a first-of-its-kind attraction in the African continent. At the end of last year, Ski Dubai and Ski Egypt placed first and third respectively in the 'World's Best Indoor Ski Resort' category at the prestigious World Ski Awards, a global initiative that recognises excellence in ski tourism.

In 2017, Majid al Futtaim established Global Snow, which is the number one international brand for designing, consulting, managing and opening indoor snow entertainment facilities. Later this year, it will continue to expand its portfolio with the launch of Snow Abu Dhabi in Reem Mall.

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(Supplied photo)

## 162 researchers from 26 countries take part in earth sciences meet

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The First International Conference on Earth Sciences and Energy Transition began at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) under the patronage of H E Dr Rahma Ibrahim al Mahrouqi, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, on Monday.

The five-day conference has been organised by the SQU Earth Sciences Research Centre in cooperation with the UNESCO Chair for Ophiolite Studies.

A total of 162 researchers representing 26 countries are taking part in an exhibition accompanying the conference.

The conference highlights the role of earth sciences and

their importance in the transition to clean energy. It will include studies in the field of earth sciences, alternative energy, and ways to combat carbon dioxide emissions.

Discussions on the agenda include energy from various sources - hydrogen, thermal, solar, wind, marine and waste - and utilisation and storage of carbon dioxide.

## 4 arrested for stealing motorbikes

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) has arrested four people for stealing motorbikes in Muscat.

In a statement, ROP said, 'The Muscat Governorate Police Command has arrested four people on charges of stealing several motorbikes in the wilayat of Seeb.'

Legal procedures have been taken against them.



## 212 expats arrested for violating Labour Law

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

A total of 212 expatriate workers were arrested in January for violating the Labour Law, a monthly report compiled by the Joint Labour Inspection Team of the Ministry of Labour (MoL) has revealed.

A statement issued by MoL said, 'The office of the Joint Labour Inspection Team in Muscat governorate, in cooperation with Royal Oman Police, arrested 212 expatriates for violating the Omani Labour Law.'

Of the 212, 109 were self-employed, 48 were working in Omani professions, and 55 were working for other employers.

The ministry called on all employers to adhere to the provisions of the Labour Law.

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## Oman-Britain strategic group discusses enhancing relations

Muscat - The Oman-Britain Strategic Consultative Group held a coordination meeting in Muscat on Tuesday.

The meeting discussed enhancing relations between the two countries in financial and economic fields.

The meeting also reviewed a range of topics pertaining to finance, business and renewable energy sectors, in addition to exchanging opinion and experiences.

Further, the meeting explored opportunities of cooperation to realise common goals to develop these sectors.

Nasser Khamis al Jashmi,



Secretary-General of the Ministry of Finance and Supervisor General of the National Programme for Financial Sustainability and Financial Sector

Development, chaired the meeting from the Omani side, while Lord Grimstone chaired the British side.

ONA

# Basmatna Ghair awarded for environmental conservation

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Efforts of a group of volunteers passionate about the environment and conservation have been recognised with the latest Green Branch Award.

The award is part of the environmental sustainability conference that took place mid-January, and is designed to acknowledge the efforts of institutions and individuals to promote environmental conservation and to highlight their distinguished contributions in the field.

The group of around 40 volunteers - called Basmatna Ghair - is engaged in spreading a culture of environmental preservation and recycling among the



(Supplied photo)

members of society.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Jihad Khalid al Farsi, 26, head of the team, said, "We operate under the umbrella of Quriyat Club. Our aim is to spread envi-

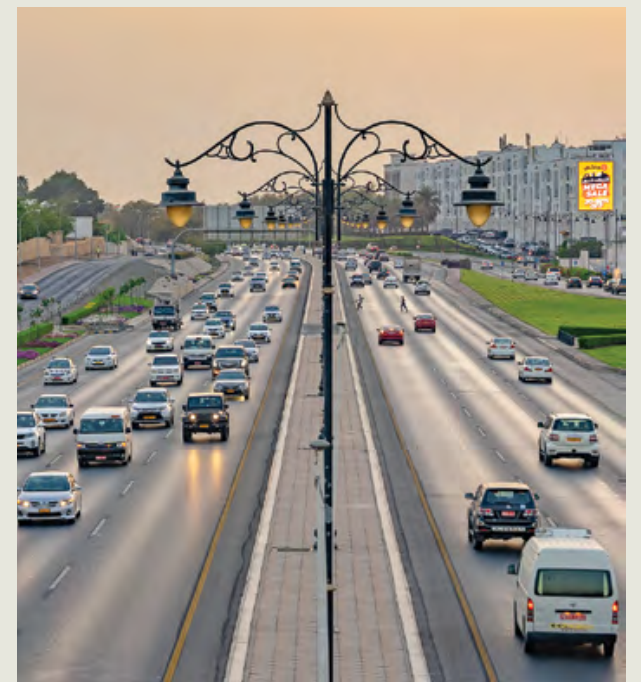
ronmental awareness in society, encourage the culture of recycling, reduce unnecessary consumption and solve environmental problems through initiatives and workshops. We

also strive to motivate young people to participate in volunteer work. The team has also re-planted trees after severe climatic conditions."

The team, which was set up in

2014, runs several charitable initiatives. "The team has also launched initiatives to increase greenery in various governorates, workshops for school students to instill environmental values among them, and camps to promote the culture of outdoor recycling to nature lovers," Farsi said.

Like most non-profit organisations, the team faces financial challenges in implementing its projects. "But the Green Branch Award is a motivation for all team members to continue participating in events and activities to spread awareness among the society. Omani youth should join volunteer teams to serve our beloved country and spread social solidarity among the society."



## Over 50,000 new vehicles registered in Oman in 2022

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

A total of 50,711 new vehicles were registered in 2022 - a sharp rise after a dip in the last few years due to an economic slowdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and oil-price slump. Oman had seen 4,800 fewer vehicle registrations in 2021 compared to 2020.

The total number of vehicles in Oman, by the end of December 2022, increased 3.2 per cent to 1,603,376, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information. In 2021, the number of registered vehicles was 1,552,665.

Private vehicles accounted for 79.4 per cent or 1,273,791 of the total, while the number of commercial vehicles was 238,512, or 14.9 per cent.

### TOTAL VEHICLES REGISTERED BY YEAR:

|      |   |           |
|------|---|-----------|
| 2022 | - | 1,603,376 |
| 2021 | - | 1,552,665 |
| 2020 | - | 1,557,453 |
| 2019 | - | 1,547,741 |
| 2018 | - | 1,495,686 |

Source: NCSI

The NCSI statistics showed that there were 28,633 rental vehicles (1.8 per cent of the total), 28,117 taxis (1.8 per cent), 12,167 government-registered vehicles (excluding military vehicles), 6,765 motorcycles, 5,744 driving school vehicles and 1,280 agricultural tractors.

Additionally, there were 7,528 temporary registration vehicles - numbers used for pre-registration examination purposes and export and import vehicles.

## Campaign launched to preserve Dhofar's baobabs

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

As part of its efforts to combat pests, protect perennial trees and preserve the environment, the Environment Authority, in cooperation with the Nature Conservation Society of Dhofar, launched a campaign in the governorate on Tuesday.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Ali Mohammed Rafeet, a member of the society, said, "More than 30 volunteers are participating in the campaign, which will continue till Friday. It



(Supplied photos)

aims to combat insects that threaten perennial trees and the rare, giant baobab trees of Dhofar."

The governorate boasts of over 200 baobab trees in the wilayats of Mirbat and Dhalkut. Baobab trees grow to a height of

up to 30m, the trunk diameter of full-grown specimen growing to more than 2m.

During the campaign, wood-boring insects were found to infest some baobab trees, informed Rafeet.

"We held the first campaign to disinfect baobab trees in 2022. The society also conducts awareness campaigns among community members to protect wild seeds that are planted in the governorate and remove litter from mountains and pasture lands."

Nature Conservation Society of Dhofar has formed a team to spread awareness among those who visit the governorate for khareef to preserve green land-

scapes and prevent littering. "We also cooperate with Dhofar Municipality, Environment Authority, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in removing dangerous mesquite trees," Rafeet

Urging people to cooperate with the society, abide by the environmental laws and preserve greenery, Rafeet said that the society is constantly engaged in removing waste from wadis and springs, especially during heavy rains. "We gather volunteer teams and work under one umbrella. We will continue to spread environmental awareness and urge young people to volunteer for the love of our country Oman."





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| MARKET WATCH                               |           |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------|
| MSX30                                      | 4,757.97  |
| Sensex                                     | 60,286.04 |
| FOREX RATES                                |           |
| (RO1 equals)                               |           |
| Indian                                     | 215.23    |
| Pakistan                                   | 715.71    |
| Bangladesh                                 | 277.48    |
| Philippines                                | 143.02    |
| Sri Lanka                                  | 950.38    |
| *Rates as on February 07<br>Source: xe.com |           |

**BRIEFS**

**Oil prices increase over supply worries**

Oil prices rose on Tuesday on sustained expectations of recovering demand in the world's largest oil importer, China, as well as supply concerns following two major earthquakes in Türkiye.

International benchmark Brent crude traded at US\$82.14 per barrel at 0648 GMT, up 1.4 per cent from the closing price of US\$80.99 a barrel in the previous trading session.

At the same time, American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded at US\$75.27 per barrel, a 1.6 per cent rise after the previous session closed at US\$74.11 a barrel.

# Oman's non-oil exports jump 48%

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Supported by the post-pandemic economic recovery and improved demand for Omani products in the United States, India and the Gulf region, the sultanate's non-oil exports grew by nearly 48 per cent in the first ten months of 2022.

Total non-oil exports increased by 47.8 per cent to RO6.204bn during January - October period of 2022 compared to RO4.199bn recorded in the same period of 2021, the data released by National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) showed.

The growth in Omani exports suggests that the sultanate's economy is well on a strong recovery path. Supported by higher oil prices and government's economic stimulus measures, Oman's real GDP grew at a solid pace of 4.5 per cent in 2022.

Robust growth in Omani exports last year was led by strong demand from the United States, India and the Gulf countries as these countries continue to record economic recovery after the pandemic slump.



*Total non-oil exports increased to RO6.204bn during January - October period of 2022 as compared to RO4.199bn recorded in the same period of 2021, according to NCSI data*

Moreover, the US has emerged as Oman's biggest non-oil export destination, ahead of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the NCSI data showed.

The sultanate's non-oil exports to the US spiked 58.9 per cent in 2022 amounting to RO748.8mn in the first ten months of the year compared to RO471.1mn for the same period of 2021. The US and Oman have a free trade agreement (FTA) that lowers trade barriers between the two countries. Since taking effect in 2009, the FTA has been benefiting both countries by boosting bilateral trade and investment.

Non-oil shipments to India also surged by over 85 per cent to RO622.3mn in the first ten months of last year as compared to RO335.7mn recorded in 2021.

Oman's exports to Saudi Arabia grew by nearly 51 per cent to RO686.5mn in the ten months period to October 2022. Exports to the UAE also slightly increased by 1.4 per cent to RO648.9mn during the first ten months of 2022 against RO639.7mn in the same period of last year.

The sultanate's non-oil exports to Qatar grew by 57.6 per cent to RO296.3mn in the first ten months of 2022 against RO188mn in the same period a year ago.

Omani non-oil exports to rest other countries also jumped by more than 51 per cent during the first ten months of 2022 to RO3.201bn against RO2.109bn in the same period of 2021.

### Outlook positive

The NCSI data suggests that the strong recovery in non-oil exports is broad-based for almost all of Oman's major trading partners. The strong trade performance

shows that Omani exporters are making good recovery in attracting overseas orders.

Oman's non-oil exports will continue to post robust performance in 2023 as more production capacity is expected to become available for export in the mining, plastics and chemicals sectors, Fitch Solutions, a leading global provider of economic research, recently said.

Fitch Solutions revised up its 2023 forecast for Oman's current account surplus from 3.9 per cent of GDP to 5.1 per cent of GDP due to its more bullish outlook for non-oil exports.

'We expect non-hydrocarbon exports will continue to post robust performance in 2023, which will more than offset the [expected] decline in hydrocarbon exports. We hold a more bullish view on non-hydrocarbon exports in 2023 as we think more production capacity will become available for export in the mining, plastics and chemicals sectors,' Fitch Solutions said in a research note.

As per the NCSI data, Oman's mineral products export grew more than 186 per cent to RO1.838bn in the first ten months of 2022 from RO641.7mn in the corresponding period of 2021. Shipments for chemical products also surged 25.7 per cent to RO1.193mn last year in comparison with RO949.5mn in the same period of previous year.

With increased production capacity of Oman's downstream industries, exports of plastics and rubber grew more than 34 per cent to hit RO960.8mn value in the first ten months of 2022 compared to RO715.2mn in the same period of 2021.

Base metals and their articles accounted for RO1.256bn worth of exports during the ten months period of 2022, an increase of more than 23.4 per cent compared to RO1.018mn recorded in the previous year.

Oman's re-exports, by contrast, declined 3.3 per cent in the first ten months of 2022 at RO1.074bn compared to RO1.110bn recorded in 2021, according to the NCSI data.

The decline in re-exports was caused mainly due to reduced transshipments of transport equipments and technical instruments, the data showed.



## GIG Gulf sets out plans for ambitious growth in Oman

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

GIG Gulf, one of the largest insurance providers in the MENA region, has set out plans for ambitious growth in Oman for 2023 after being rated 'A (Excellent)' by AM Best for the second year in a row.

Following its 2022 transition from AXA, which has been present in the region for over 70 years, GIG Gulf continues to grow in Oman, leveraging its fast-growing presence and strategic partnerships in the country, the company said in a press statement on Tuesday.

As part of its strategy, GIG Gulf is scheduled to welcome over 100 members of the Omani insurance community today at Al Bustan Palace in Muscat to share its growth ambitions and present its strategy for innovation.

'The event, which is a first of its kind gathering in Oman, reflects the importance of intermediaries in the local market, and their instrumental role in GIG Gulf's success story,' GIG Gulf said. It added that the event in Muscat follows a year of milestones for the insurer, with significant ongoing investment in its digital infrastructure to transform the customer experience in Oman.

Paul Adamson, CEO of GIG Gulf, said, "GIG Gulf is uniquely positioned to transform the Omani insurance industry for the better through its multi-distribution model, high performing digital platforms, and its capabilities as a multi-line insurer that operates across all insurance segments. From healthcare to motor and property, the company is the preferred partner to some of Oman's most important public and private sector organisations - with a regional spread that serves over one million consumers including SMEs and corporations."

GIG Gulf is part of the Gulf Insurance Group (GIG), the largest regional composite insurer in the Middle East and North Africa, with companies in Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Its reported consolidated assets stand at US\$4.5bn as of December 31, 2021.

GIG Gulf has launched a series of services in Oman over the past year, including Easy-Claims, which is a digital platform for real-time end-to-end motor claims. It is the first such service to be offered by an insurance company across the GCC markets. The platform allows customers to register their motor insurance claims by entering minimal information and track the process in real-time. Easy-Claims uses big data and AI-based analytics to present granular details on the parts needed for repairs, costs, and timeline.

# CMA issues guidelines for interaction between listed firms, media, investors and analysts

Muscat - The Capital Market Authority (CMA) issued a decision on the guidelines for the interaction between public joint stock companies, media, investors and analysts.

The new decision allows the principle of equal opportunity for all and supports the relationship between the parties of the investment process, the CMA said in a press release.

'This will reflect positively on the market and will address the drawbacks that might be the reason why some national and foreigner investors have pulled out of the market,' the market regulator said.



The CMA's decision pointed to the importance of setting a framework specifying the interaction instruments and their timeframe and simplifying and explaining the data to the public.

## Madayn board discusses developments of Sur port

Muscat - The board of directors of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) held its second meeting for the year 2023 in Sur Industrial City.

The meeting was chaired by H E Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, and chairman of Madayn's board of directors.

The meeting was followed by a field visit in Sur Industrial City, during which the board was briefed on the projects and achievements made during the last period.

The board members also visited the waterfront site of the international port project planned in Sur Industrial City and discussed the developments to expedite the pace of work on this project.

The board of directors, accompanied by officials of Sur Industrial City, then visited a number of localised companies and factories in the industrial city including Al Hael Ceramic Company and Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO) to get familiarised with their production lines.

## Electric trucks produce far fewer emissions than diesel: EU

Paris, France - Electric trucks produce far fewer planet-warming emissions than their diesel counterparts over a lifetime, a report in Europe showed Tuesday, emphasising that the biggest climate impact comes from driving vehicles and not manufacturing them.

The transport sector accounts for about 30 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union, the biggest contributor in the bloc. Heavy vehicles like trucks and buses account for about a quarter of those transport emissions.

A fully electric 40-tonne tractor-trailer emits 63 per cent lower emissions compared to diesel trucks over 1.3mn kilometres (808,000 miles) travelled, according to new research Tuesday from the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) think tank.

This calculation accounts for the emissions associated with the extraction of raw materials, construction and maintenance of the vehicle using the EU's average electricity grid mix.

"The problem is not the factory but the road," said Nikita Pavlenko, ICCT's fuels team lead.

AFP

## Floward raises \$156mn in pre-IPO round

Muscat - Floward, the go-to online flowers and gifts destination in MENA and UK, announced on Tuesday, during its participation in the technology conference 'LEAP' in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that it has raised US\$156mn in its Series C Pre-IPO investment round led by Aljazira Capital, Rainwater Partners, and STV.

The company intends to utilize the funds to further invest in expanding its gifting verticals and relying more on artificial intelligence and machine learning to elevate its customer experience and meet the demands of its ever-growing customer base in the region.

Floward will also use the funds to roll out its mergers and acquisitions strategy, as it plans to consolidate and invest in local brands that champion different categories of its target gifting verticals. Notably, Floward has recently acquired Mukbhar, the leading brand defining authentic standards of perfumery in the GCC, in November 2022.

In a press release, Chairman and CEO of Floward, Abdulaziz B al Loughani, said, "We are proud to announce the successful closing of our investment round led by Aljazira Capital, Rainwater Partners, and STV. We would like to extend our gratitude for their trust in our team who has achieved remarkable results and driven the company's valuation to grow by 3.8x since our last funding round a year and a half ago amid the challenging global investment climate. Our commitment to the region has delivered 50mn flower stems in 2022, created more than 1,000 direct jobs, and partnered with over 400 brands and local talents who have produced some of the best brands on a global scale."

"Furthermore, we are honored to have been selected for the Saudi Unicorns Program and are very excited for the next chapter of our journey. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our team members, customers, partners, and regional governments for their unwavering support and dedication to making Floward a leading player in the flowers and gifts industry globally."

Floward has raised US\$34.2mn through previous investment rounds, the latest of which was US\$27.5mn in its Series B investment round led by STV and Impact46 in June 2021.



Abdulaziz al Loughani (left) and Mohammed al Arifi

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# Google to release ChatGPT rival named Bard

San Francisco, US - Google has said it will release a conversational chatbot named Bard, setting up an artificial intelligence showdown with Microsoft which has invested billions in the creators of ChatGPT, the hugely popular language app that convincingly mimics human writing.

ChatGPT, created by San Francisco company OpenAI, has caused a sensation for its ability to write essays, poems or programming code on demand within seconds, sparking widespread fears of cheating or of entire professions becoming obsolete.

Microsoft announced last month that it was backing OpenAI and has begun to integrate ChatGPT features into its Teams platform, with expectations that it will adapt the app to its Office suite and Bing search engine.

The potential inclusion in Bing turned the focus on Google and speculation that the company's world-dominating search engine could face unprecedented competition from an AI-powered rival.

Media reports said the

overnight success of ChatGPT was designated a "code red" threat at Google with founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page - who left several years ago - brought back to brainstorm ideas and fast-track a response.

The pressure to act was heightened by the poor earnings posted last week by Google-parent Alphabet, which fell short of investor expectations. The company last month announced that it was laying off 12,000 people as it put more emphasis on AI projects.

Google's announcement came on the eve of an AI-related launch event by Microsoft in yet a further sign that the two tech giants will do battle over the technology, also known as generative AI.

"Generative AI is a game changer and much like the rise of the internet sank the networking giants that came before (AOL, CompuServe etc.) it has the potential to change the competitive dynamic for search and information," said independent tech analyst Rob Enderle.



Google CEO Sundar Pichai

"Google still largely lives off the fact their search engine is the most widely used, this could change that, relegating them to history," he added.

**'High-quality responses'**

In his blog post on Monday, Google CEO Sundar Pichai said that Google's Bard conversational AI was to go out for testing

with a plan to make it more widely available "in the coming weeks."

Google's Bard is based on

LaMDA, the firm's Language Model for Dialogue Applications system, and has been in development for several years.

"Bard seeks to combine the breadth of the world's knowledge with the power, intelligence, and creativity of our large language models," Pichai said.

"It draws on information from the web to provide fresh, high-quality responses," he added, hinting that the app would give up-to-the-date responses, something ChatGPT is unable to do.

Before the emergence of ChatGPT, which was released in late November, Google had been reluctant to launch its own language-based AI fearing the reputational risk of releasing technology that wasn't ready.

Researchers using the same language models as Bard or ChatGPT have demonstrated the technology's ability to spew out misinformation or nonsense on a potentially massive scale.

Facebook-owner Meta in November was forced to take down the release of its own large language model called Galactica after three days when users shared its biased and incorrect results on social media within hours of its release.

Pichai insisted that responses churned out by Bard would "meet a high bar for quality, safety and groundedness in real world information."

And much like ChatGPT, Bard would source its responses from a limited version of its base language model in order to reduce computing power and reach a wider audience.

Crucially for its looming duel with Microsoft, Google also said that users would soon see AI-powered features in its search engine.

New-style responses would "distill complex information and multiple perspectives into easy-to-digest formats," Pichai said.

Search engines beefed up by generative AI "will give structured answers to questions and no longer links," Thierry Poibeau, of the CNRS research center in Paris, told AFP. But bots like ChatGPT "also give wrong answers, which is annoying for a search engine," said Poibeau.

AFP

## BP posts record annual profit for 2022, waters down green target

London, UK - British energy giant BP on Tuesday announced a record profit for 2022 thanks to soaring oil and gas prices, as it watered down its target for cutting carbon emissions.

BP's underlying profit more than doubled to a record US\$27.7bn last year.

That mirrors huge gains by its rivals thanks to the jump in oil and gas prices following the attack by major energy producer Russia on neighbouring Ukraine.

But BP's exit from its 19.75-per cent stake in Russian energy group Rosneft cost it more than US\$24bn.

That pushed it into a loss after tax totalling US\$2.5bn last year, compared with net profit of US\$7.6bn in 2021.

BP on Tuesday also said its carbon emissions would not fall as quickly as anticipated, triggering fresh anger from green groups.

The company expects carbon emissions from oil and gas production to fall by between 20-30 per cent over the 11 years to 2030.

This compared with its prior forecast for a drop of 25-40 per cent.

"We need continuing near-term investment into today's en-



ergy system - which depends on oil and gas - to meet today's demands and to make sure the transition is an orderly one," said chief executive Bernard Looney.

"We will prioritise projects where we can deliver quickly, at low cost, using our existing infrastructure, allowing us to minimise additional emissions and maximise both value and our contribution to energy security and affordability."

Environmentalists hit out the strategy update, with Greenpeace UK's head of climate justice, Kate Blagojevic, saying it was "time to stop drilling and start making polluters... pay the price for the climate damage

they are causing all around the world".

The record profits come as consumers face soaring heating and electricity bills, which has triggered widespread calls for energy majors to pay more tax to ease a cost-of-living crisis.

In the UK, unions and members of the opposition Labour party again called on the Conservative government to increase its windfall tax on the likes of BP and British rival Shell.

"As millions struggle to heat their homes and put food on the table, BP are laughing all the way to the bank," said Paul Nowak, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress.

"Ministers are letting big oil and gas companies pocket billions in excess profits. But they are refusing to give nurses, teachers and other key workers a decent pay rise."

Britain is facing its biggest strikes in more than a decade as public and private sector workers demand that pay increases go some way to matching sky-high inflation. Markets cheered BP's record underlying profits -- and huge fourth-quarter net earnings that came in at almost US\$11bn.

BP's shares jumped more than three percent, rising to the top of the gainers board on London's top-tier FTSE 100 index.

AFP

## West's new sanctions seek to hit Russia oil exports

London, UK - The West's latest wave of sanctions on Russian energy exports seeks to hit Moscow harder than its previous moves over the Ukraine war.

An EU-wide ban on Russia oil products - like diesel, gasoline and jet fuel - came into effect Sunday alongside a Group of Seven (G7) price cap on the same items.

That expanded on an EU embargo on seaborne oil deliveries introduced two months ago - when it also established with G7 partners a US\$60-dollar-per-barrel cap for exports around the world.

There are two price cap levels, US\$100 per barrel for more expensive fuel like diesel and US\$45 on lower-quality products such as fuel oil.

Key energy producer Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine almost one year ago, on February 24, 2022, sparking international condemnation and economic retaliation.

"The caps and ban on Russian petroleum products are likely to have a more profound impact than the similar measures that targeted crude oil in December," said PVM Energy analyst Stephen Brennock.

"Unlike with its crude exports,



there are no readily available markets to accommodate its surplus fuel supplies."

Prior to the conflict, the 27-nation European Union was the main buyer of Russian diesel, consuming almost 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) or half of its imports of that product.

Despite a sharp drop over the last year, more than one quarter of EU diesel imports still originated in Russia in first few weeks of the year, according to S&P Global data.

That amounted to an average of 450,000 bpd.

Moscow will be forced to find new markets for its oil products to preserve revenues that help finance its ongoing war in Ukraine.

The most obvious candidates are Asian superpowers China and India.

"China and India ... have become the biggest buyers of Russian crude in recent months. Yet the same ravenous appetite for crude will not apply to its refined oil products," Brennock said.

"Both countries are net exporters of products and have plenty of excess refining capacity -- so there is scant need for them to be importing more."

AFP

## SoftBank Group reports \$5.9bn quarterly loss on tech slump

Tokyo, Japan - Japan's SoftBank Group on Tuesday reported a surprise US\$5.9bn net loss in the third quarter, as a slump in the tech sector continued to hit the investment behemoth's bottom line.

The loss compared with the net profit of 29bn yen (US\$219mn) the firm reported in the same three-month period last year.

Its two Vision Fund investment vehicles alone lost 660bn yen (US\$5bn) in October-December, "reflecting declines in the share prices of a wide range of portfolio companies", SoftBank said.

The firm has made huge bets to find and grow hot new tech ventures around the world, but that has left its earnings vulnerable to fickle market forces, and its Vision Funds have reported



losses for four straight quarters.

Interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve and other central banks to tackle inflation have weighed on global tech shares, putting pressure on SoftBank.

"In the past year or so, the environment has been very tough," chief financial officer Yoshimitsu Goto told reporters. "We cannot be optimistic yet."

Results have lurched between dizzying highs and lows in recent years, with China's crackdown on its tech sector taking a toll on

the company.

Second-quarter earnings were boosted by the sale of some shares in Alibaba as SoftBank reduced its stake to around 15 per cent from 24 per cent.

But it reported a record quarterly net loss for the first quarter, as tech shares tanked on interest rate hikes, a trend analysts said was likely to continue.

"Weakness in global equity markets remains the main risk to the SoftBank story," said Kirk Boody, an analyst at Redex Research who publishes on SmartKarma.

CEO Masayoshi Son has regularly defended his strategy of making major bets on high-tech firms and start-ups, insisting that the approach will lead to a handful of significant wins that outweigh losses.

AFP

## India's Adani Enterprises shares soar 15%

Mumbai, India - Shares in the flagship firm of troubled Indian conglomerate Adani rose almost 15 per cent Tuesday, clawing back some of its recent huge losses after saying it would repay more than US\$1bn in loans.

Investors wiped out around US\$120bn in value from the group owned by tycoon Gautam Adani after claims of accounting fraud by short-seller US investment group Hindenburg Research on January 24.

The collapse raised concerns about the group's ability to raise fresh financing to pay down its debts. It cancelled a share sale, and reportedly also a bond issue, last week.

But India's biggest conglomerate said Monday it was repaying early loans worth US\$1.1bn, in a move meant to reassure investors.

The Adani Ports subsidiary



said Tuesday it would also repay debts of around 50bn rupees (US\$605mn) and slash by half its capital expenditure in the next financial year.

Adani Enterprises, the group's flagship firm, soared as much as 25 per cent on Tuesday, with trading suspended three times on the way up.

The shares closed up 14.6 per cent - although they are still down by more than half since the start of the year.

Other group companies were

mixed, with Adani Transmission rising five per cent but closing 0.77 per cent lower, and Adani Total Gas down five per cent and trade suspended again.

"The markets are happy that they prepaid a chunk of their borrowings. This is a refreshing sign of confidence," markets commentator Srinath Sridharan told AFP.

Fitch Ratings said Tuesday that Indian banks' exposure to the Adani group was "insufficient in itself to present substan-

tial risk to the banks' standalone credit profile".

Hindenburg accused Adani of a "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme" in "the largest con in corporate history".

Adani artificially boosted the share prices of its units by funneling money into the stocks through offshore tax havens, Hindenburg said.

The conglomerate has rejected the claims as a "maliciously mischievous" reputational attack.

Last week tycoon Adani, 60, insisted the "fundamentals of our company are very strong, our balance sheet is healthy and assets robust".

His personal wealth has more than halved, seeing him fall from number three in the Forbes real-time list of the richest people in the world to 17th as of Tuesday.

AFP

# Bank Nizwa invests in Digital Onboarding

Bank Nizwa has invested heavily in seamless and efficient digital account opening experiences for customers. Individuals can open Shari'ah-compliant savings accounts remotely via their laptop or mobile device, elevating their experience and satisfying their appetite to be digitally onboarded.

"Bank Nizwa has always been a pioneer in digital solutions, and we are committed to developing smart and fully-digitised processes to ensure our efficiency. As a result of the digital onboarding process, we are able to manage cases efficiently, capture documents automatically, and collaborate more efficiently, resulting in less paperwork and more productivity. Offering self-service options allows the bank to attract new customers," said Sadiq al Lawati, head Channels and Digitalisation at Bank Nizwa.

"Fine-tuned digital onboarding experiences are customer-centric and form a solid foundation for long-term relationships with their clients. By acting digitally and recommending tailored products, banks can increase customer loyalty and brand awareness," he added.



Locals and residents over 18 years of age can open a savings account virtually by downloading the Bank Nizwa Mobile App. They will need to take a picture of both sides of their IDs, take a selfie, fill out the required information, and then make a deposit, a press release said. Digital onboarding provides customers with faster access to

all of the bank's products. Once the process is complete the digital identity of the customer is fully set up, the savings account is open and the customer is able to use the entire portfolio of digital products of the bank. The debit card will be delivered to the customer where-ever he/she resides. The Bank Nizwa's savings ac-

count serves as the basic tool when it comes to investing and growing funds with the principles of Mudaraba. Under this, the client is 'Shaheb-Al Mal' and the bank is Mudarib. In general, Mudaraba Savings Accounts are designed for non-trading customers with some potential savings and only a few transactions per month.

# Gulf states near top in 50-Country rankings

Global supply chain executives say innovation and help for small businesses will do the most to drive non-oil economic growth for Gulf economies, which outperformed most others in the 14th annual Agility Emerging Markets Logistics Index.

UAE ranked No.3 behind China and India in the 50-country Index. Saudi Arabia was No 6. Both countries were in the top 10 in all four Index categories-- domestic logistics, international logistics, business fundamentals and digital readiness. Qatar was in the top 10 in all categories except international logistics, where it was 19th, a press release said.

GCC countries again dominated the business fundamentals rankings, which compare the legal, regulatory and tax frameworks of emerging markets countries. UAE (1), Qatar (2), Saudi Arabia (3), Oman (5), Bahrain (6) and Kuwait (11) were clustered at the top for best business climate.

Among the six GCC economies, Kuwait (No 15 overall) did most to improve its competitiveness, gaining ground in every category. In digital readiness, Oman, up five spots to No. 0, and Bahrain, up six to No.16, made the biggest



strides among GCC countries.

The Index and a survey of 750 global logistics industry executives comprise Agility's 14th annual snapshot of industry sentiment and ranking of the world's leading emerging markets. The Index ranks countries for overall competitiveness based on factors that make them attractive to logistics providers, freight forwarders, air and ocean carriers, distributors and investors.

In the survey, industry executives were asked to name the

most important drivers of economic diversification for GCC countries, all of which are trying to reduce dependence on oil and gas by accelerating private-sector growth. Respondents identified the key factors as tech development and innovation; small business environment; infrastructure development; regional and global integration; business conditions for multinationals; a skilled labor force; ending energy subsidies; and creating career opportunities for women.

# Ooredoo introduces 3 month plan

Always aiming to put customers first, Ooredoo has launched its revamped Hala prepaid data plan, which is now valid for three months. Both new and existing customers can enjoy 25 GB of data for 90 days for only RO16.

Savvy at attracting customers across all segments, Ooredoo decided to introduce the unique value proposition to those who want to enjoy the company's great value prepaid plans, but who do not want to worry about their data's expiration date either.

After all, most people want to choose a plan that suits their lifestyle and needs, a press release said.

All of Ooredoo's Hala prepaid plans ensure customers are spoilt for choice with a mix of data, voice and social data, all enhanced by Ooredoo's awesome network. There is something for everyone as Ooredoo's Hala plans tap into its customers' unique needs while offering them great value, their way.

# ISG students shine at inter-school football, Oman Gavel Championship



Indian School Al Ghubra was the cynosure of attention at the All International School Football Tournament conducted at Al Injaz Private School last week.

The footballers from ISG won two championship trophies. ISG boys and girls grabbed the first prizes in the Under-15 category and ISG boys team was declared

the runners-up in the Under-10 category, a press release said.

The girls team was declared the group topper among five schools in the sultanate in the Round Robin League matches while the Under-15 boys team won the finals against Al Shomoukh International School with a margin of 2-0. In the fi-

nals versus Modern International School, ISG Under-10 boys team were declared the runners-up.

## ISG Gaveliers

Meanwhile, ISG Gaveliers claimed top honours at the Oman Gavel Championship of Public Speaking held at Indian

School Al Wadi Al Kabir last week. A total of 264 contestants from 33 Gavel clubs across Oman had participated and ISG Gavel Club fielded 32 Gaveliers in the four categories - Humorous speech, Evaluation speech, Table Topics speech and International speech. Around 22 ISG Gaveliers qualified for the finals.



# Japanese restaurant 'Sakana' opens at Sifawy Boutique Hotel

Jebel Sifah has recently opened 'Sakana' restaurant at Sifawy Boutique Hotel. Overlooking the picturesque marina in Jebel Sifah, Sakana is a new dining outlet serving authentic Japanese cuisine.

The Sushi and Teppanyaki signature restaurant offers a wide variety of mouthwatering Japanese platters featuring Ebi Tempura, a dedicated Teppanyaki Hibachi set menu, and a la carte, noodles, traditional sushi, Nigiri sushi, sashimi, maki sushi, and more, a press release said.

The opening of Sakana adds to an extensive food and beverage

portfolio in the destination that Jebel Sifah is well known for in Muscat. Japanese cuisine is recognised globally as one of the finest cuisines worldwide for what it has to offer from colourful and appetizing to healthy delicacies that have gained millions of food lovers craving this kitchen internationally.

With its talented Chefs preparing nothing but the best of Japanese dishes using the freshest ingredients, Japanese cuisine lovers and food connoisseurs are guaranteed a remarkable culinary journey at Sakana.

# Srinidhi clinches five titles in ISC badminton championship

Srinidhi used her brilliant form to claim five titles at the annual badminton championship organised by Indian Social Club Muscat.

Srinidhi claimed titles in Under-13, Girls Under-15, Girls Under-19, Girls Under-15 doubles (pairing with Diya Anil) and Mixed Doubles (pairing with talented Himesh Haridas), a press release said.

In the final of Under-13 and Under-15, Srinidhi defeated Diya Anil whereas in Under-19 she beat Nakshtara Rajesh. In Under-13 after trailing 6-9, Diya Anil rallied to 13-16 before

Srinidhi played with tact and reeled off the next five points, scoring 21-14 and 21-14. She faced some stiff resistance from Nakshathra in Under-19 before wrapping up the title with cross-court smashes and drop shots.

In Under-11 girls singles, Gauri Sajayan defeated Jessel Ruth Pinto scoring 15-5 and 15-5. In Under-11 boys singles, Ian George Sudhin beat Atharv Dutta in the finals and Himnesh Shahlot overcome the resistance in second game from Ishaan Shakthi, scoring 21-5 and 21-13. Himnesh along with his partner Aman D'costa defeated



Ian George and Atharv D in Boys Under-13 doubles, scoring 21-15 and 21-14 to record two titles in the name of Himnesh Shahlot.

In Under-15 boys singles, Vedant Anand faced some resistance from Pranith to claim the title, and in girls Under-15 doubles, Diya and Srinidhi faced stiff resistance before beating Nakshathra and Ria, scoring 22-20 and 22-20.

In Super veterans, Bonny Thomas and Krishnakumar showed some good teamwork in their victory over Kutty and Udayan, scoring 21-14, 21-13.

# Khimji Ramdas Eshraqa to employ DHH job-seekers

Dedicated to building a more inclusive society, Khimji Ramdas (KR) Eshraqa has entered into an agreement with Al-Tawasul Institute for the training of the Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH) job-seekers in the sultanate.

Under the agreement, Al-Tawasul will conduct training for DHH Omanis, who will upon completion of the programme, be considered for suitable job opportunities within the Khimji Ramdas Group, a press release said.

The agreement's signing ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Sayyed Salem bin Muslam al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Human Resources Development, Ministry of Labour at Avani Muscat Hotel and Suites. It was signed by Nailesh Khimji, director, of Khimji Ramdas Group, and Said bin Mohammad Al-Baddai, General Manager, from Al-Tawasul Institute.

Discussing the significance of the initiative, Nailesh Khimji said, "KR Eshraqa has always been focused on finding ways to improve the quality of life of the sultanate's



citizens. The signing of this agreement is a step in the same direction and is part of our commitment to creating job opportunity for our citizens from all sections of society. Aligning our commitment to Oman Vision 2040, we are pleased to partner with Al-Tawasul Training Institute to help DHH job-seekers to contribute to their field of expertise and reach higher personal goals."

General Manager of Al Tawasul Institute, Said bin Mohammad al Baddai added, "We are delighted to join hands with KR Eshraqa to provide equal training and employment of persons with hearing impairment. Under this agreement, Al-Tawasul will work towards the rehabilitation and training of DHH individuals by means of a high-quality, interactive English and Arabic sign-language training module. Job-seekers will also be taught to use computers, so that they are fully equipped to manage their roles in the Sultanate's vibrant labour market."



## MEA lensmen shine at HUAWEI NEXT IMAGE Awards

Huawei's annual smartphone photography competition, Huawei Next Image Awards 2022, had concluded on December 30, 2022, with the unveiling of 54 prize-winning works, which included 3 Grand Prize winners, 24 Best-in-Category winners, and 27 runner-up winners.

The Next Image Awards 2022 had kicked off on August 1 last year and remained open for more than three months and received thousands of entries from around the world. Regional photographers have made a strong showing in the competition. Out of the 54 winning works, seven are from across the Middle East and Africa (MEA) region.

Smartphones have revolutionised the way people take pictures. As smartphone cameras get better year after year, people are relying less and less on digital cameras. According to some studies, more than 85% of photos are being taken with smartphones, and their share is only going to go up.

The compact size and flexibility smartphones offer over traditional cameras help photography enthusiasts push the boundaries of this art form. Moreover, smartphones level the playing

field for amateur photographers to compete against professionals with years of experience under their belt. Huawei Next Image Awards have helped close this gap even further over the years. And the fact that several of this year's winners are amateur photographers such as students, doctors, and engineers drives this point home.

Four photographers from the MEA region won the best-in-category award, and two others were runner-up winners. Besides winning the award, these photographers also do an excellent job of showcasing the diversity and charm of the region's rich culture. Their photographs highlight the unique perspectives and stories these cultures have to offer the world.

The winner in the Storyboard category was Mark Anthony Agtay from the United Arab Emirates, with a series of nine photographs beautifully depicting interesting and diverse ways people use their hands in their day-to-day lives. These pictures are thought provoking and benefit from clever use of colours. The runner-up winner in the Portrait category was a photograph by Junaid Jafar from the UAE.

## Abu Dhabi to welcome Olympians for World Triathlon

Abu Dhabi Sports Council has today announced a stellar field of world, Olympic and Commonwealth champions for next month's season-opening World Triathlon Championship Series race in Abu Dhabi, presented by Daman.

Set to take place on 3rd and 4th March at Yas Marina Circuit, the elite tournament will

feature some of the biggest names in triathlon from around the world as they aim to get their season off to a winning start in the sport's most prestigious annual event and claim crucial Olympic and Paralympic points.

Lining up in the men's elite category will be 10 of the world's top-ranked triathletes.

Heading the list is French World No.1 and world champion Leo Bergere who will be joined by Morgan Pearson of the USA and Belgium's World No.4 Jelle Geens - the men he beat to the podium top spot in Abu Dhabi in November. The star line-up continues with Tokyo Olympic champion Kristian Blummenfelt.

Fans can also look forward to

watching World No.2, Tokyo Olympic silver medallist and Commonwealth champion Alex Yee (Great Britain), World No.5 Vincent Luis of France, and World No.3 and Tokyo Olympics bronze medallist Hayden Wilde (New Zealand).

"I came to Abu Dhabi in November with a World Championship title in my sights. That

race unfortunately didn't go to plan due to getting COVID just before the race - now I'm more determined than ever to come back and top the podium in March," said Hayden Wilde. "I spent a lot of time in Abu Dhabi in the lead up to the race in November. The community, the facilities, the city - everything is perfect for me."

## PDO receives recognition in HR

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has become the first organisation in the Middle East to achieve People Development Partner status from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the world's leading professional body for human resources and people development.

PDO has achieved this by working closely with the CIPD team over the past several years, investing heavily in increasing the impact of its people function, ensuring their professionalism through CIPD qualifications and experience assessments, and providing entry-level jobs for people professionals, a press release said.

CIPD regional director MENA



Stuart Dunlop said, "We are delighted to recognise PDO as our first People Development Partner in the Middle East. The award demonstrates an exceptional degree of commitment to developing people professionals. To achieve PDP status, organisations must demonstrate a clear

commitment to developing the capability and credibility of their people function.

"By achieving this status, PDO has shown a clear commitment not only to its people professionals but the wider workforce that they support. We look forward to continuing our work together."

CEO of CIPD Peter Cheese, commended PDO for their ongoing excellence and for leading the way in the Middle East by investing in their people professionals to help them adapt to the changing world of work.

Peter said, "CIPD will continue to work with PDO to help them go 'above and beyond' in delivering a people team with the best HR capabilities, knowledge, and expertise, while also investing back into the broader people profession by contributing to CIPD's research/policy work."

PDO people director Farid al Harthy added, "We are honoured to have achieved PDP status from the CIPD, which recognises our commitment to developing our people."



## Canadian Jebel K9 brings back 'Canines for a Cause'

Canadian Jebel K9 is excited to announce the comeback of the annual 'Canines for a Cause' charity festival this Saturday 11 February 2023 at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, in collaboration with media partner HiFM.

The day boasts both, prize draws and door prizes as well as a host of vendors showcasing products and services for the community. The event will also shed light on local rescue groups to help raise awareness for animal welfare across Oman, a press release said.

After being placed on hold since 2019 due to the pandemic restrictions, this year marks the 5th annual event for this initiative, presenting a fun-filled family day out for everyone to enjoy, especially dogs. Doors open at 9am and the official event will start at 10am and end at 3pm, where a line up of talented dogs will

showcase various displays such as 'Agility, Search and Rescue Display', and 'Jumping Display'.

"We are so delighted to bring back such an exciting initiative to support our local community. During our last event, we welcomed over 1000 participants and over 400 dogs. You can imagine the excitement and buzz from dog-lovers enjoying the games and competitions whilst marveling at a world of breeds, coming together at the beautiful setting of Al Bustan Palace," said Alfa Vold, founder and managing partner of Canadian Jebel K9 and Jebel 5 Star Pet Resort, and organiser of Canines for a Cause.

For those who like to add a little more fun to the day, guests are invited to bring their dog in a costume for a chance to win the 'Best Dressed Dog'.

Some of the other entertaining competitions include Best Trick, Dress-Up Relay, Rocket Recall,

How High Can You Fly Jumping Competition, Musical Hoops, Bone Appetite, Paw-casso, and Find the Treat. Visitors can also try out the Obedience and Agility Competition for novice and advanced obedience.

Prizes and ribbons will be awarded to first and second place and prizes are in store for the best dressed dog, loveliest lady dog, the most handsome hound, the most outrageous dog, the gorgeous golden oldie, the best rescuer, and find the treat winner. Dogs of all varieties and levels are welcome to join in, whether a beginner or experienced canine, in competitions.

Tickets are available at the entrance and fees for this special event are RO5 per person, RO2 per dog (children under 12 years get free entry). Proceeds from all ticket sales will be going to Child Care Center and Animal Rescue in Oman.

## Asyad to present journey at OSHRM conference

Asyad Group is set to take part, as a Platinum Sponsor, in the 6th annual Omani Society for Human Resource Management (OSHRM) Conference, 'The New Era of Work', taking place between February 7-9 at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre in Muscat.

In line with its people-first culture, Asyad's participation at OSHRM reaffirms the Group's commitment to a people-centric approach built on investment in skills, experiences and tools that build the capacities of its human resources, a press release said.

Asyad Group designed its unified people-first culture with the aim of creating a nurturing workplace to foster collaboration and innovation across the group,



building the group's competitiveness amongst regional and global players. Asyad's people-centric approach also enables the group to further advance the growth of the sultanate's economy by developing Omani leaders who drive change and innovation to deliver Oman's lo-

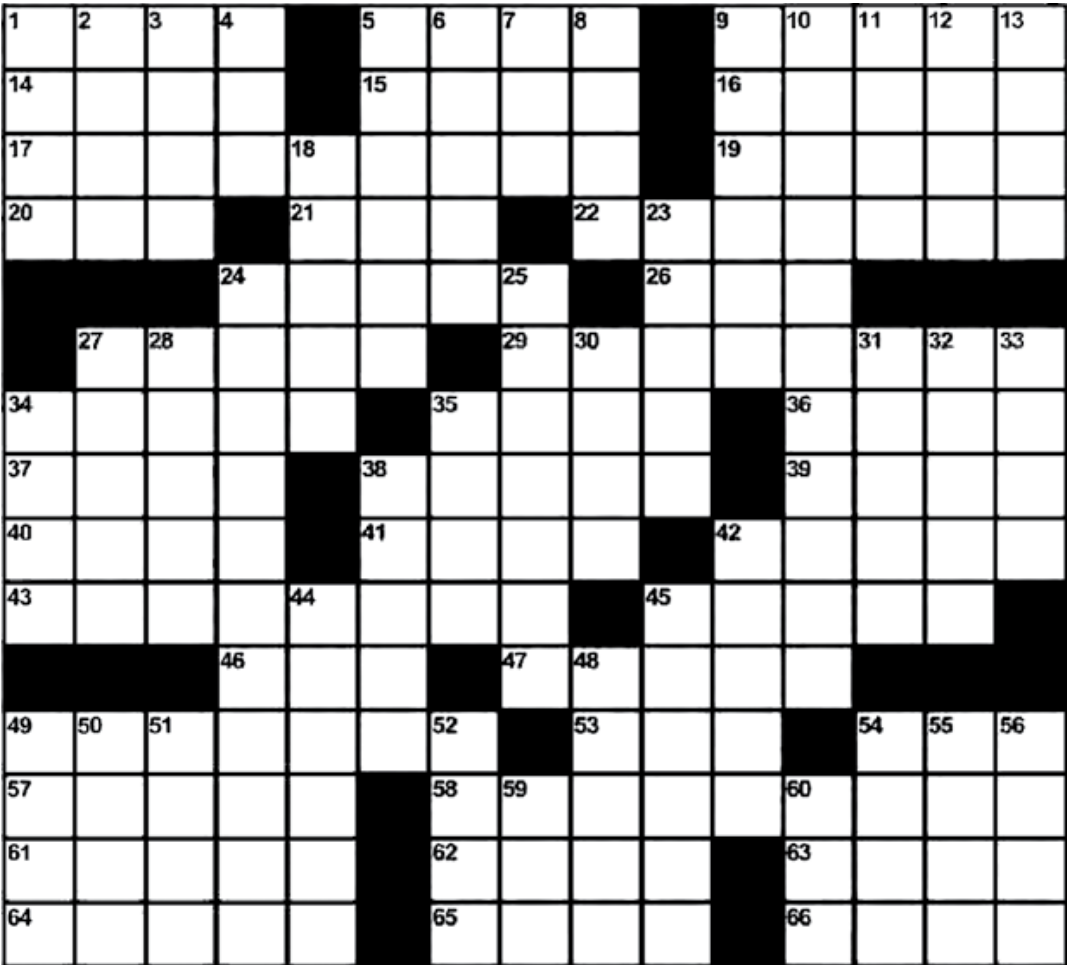
gistics sector goals and projects.

During the conference, Asyad will present its journey in crystallising its core values, derived from the Group's purpose and vision, and showcase how the group is enacting and translating them into daily conduct by every Asyad employee. These shared

values are forged in one single institutional culture focused on investing in promising talents and equipping the leaders of tomorrow with global expertise and comprehensive learning programs that combine professional education with world-class successful experiences and global market research.

More importantly, the global integrated logistics provider has successfully developed a unified culture that acts as the optimal vehicle to deliver Asyad's strategy and objectives, as it instills key values that consolidate the group's position as the employer of choice in Oman. OSHRM conference is an ideal platform for Asyad to share its journey in building the Asyad way culture.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS
- 1) After-shave powder

5) Drop down?

9) Asian caregivers

14) Chocolate cookie

15) Super server

16) Commonplace

17) Liar of note

19) Pest-control brand

20) Blue

21) " ... and sat down beside it

22) Straightening up

24) Goods

26) Hollywood agt.

27) Checks copy

29) Pairs

34) Eyeglasses, informally

35) Breakfast-cereal ingredi-ent, sometimes

36) Apple or pear, e.g.

37) "The other white meat"

38) Question

39) Fine cotton

40) Highest point

41) Puts to work

42) Gets stuck in a bog

43) Most suspicious

45) Evans or Jackson

46) Lb. and gm.

47) British weapons

49) More than devotees

53) Gives a thumbs-up sign

54) Tiller locale

57) Poet's "below"

58) 1957 Disney classic

61) Vice President John\_Garner

62) Go by sea

63) Emerald\_

64) Looped crosses

65) Genesis brother

66) Guy between Tyler and Taylor
- DOWN

1) First-rate

2) La Scala highlight

3) Advance

4) Loving murmur

5) Carriers of ceremonial staffs

6) Autumn color

7) Luau souvenir

8) Meadowlands pace

9) Dwelling places

10) Memorable Julie An-drews role

11) Not pro

12) Nuclear fission co-dis-coverer Otto

13) Make one's way through mud

18) Confabulates

23) Swift specialty

24) "The Wizard of Oz" vil-lain

25) Where some jams are made

27) A notable period of his-tory

28) Skin layer

30) Armed conflicts

31) Wavy-patterned fabric

32) Actor M. Walsh

33) Large bodies of water

34) Fitness centers

35) Give a smack to

38) Hero's journey

42) Minister's house

44) Hankerings

45) Hyde's alter ego

48) " \_ For" (Kidman film)

49) "Black Beauty" author Sewell

50) Campus VIP

51) Dungeonlike

52) He hit 66 homers in '98

54)\_-ran

55) What Humpty Dumpty did

56) Exhausting trip

59) Dr. Frankenstein's work-place

60) Insolence
- NOTE PAD
- 
- YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE
- ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19  
There will be a pause in the action today -- you have a lot of momentum going on in various projects right now, but it's time for patience, not for progress. Slowing down will give you a chance to kick off your shoes, sit down and get comfortable. Work on learning how to accept the fact that you can't always have things happen as quickly as you think you want them to. The universe has a different speed in mind for you, and it's liberating to just go with it.

**LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22  
You've given all your current projects 95 percent of your energy, but it's the last 5 percent that is the hardest to deliver, isn't it? Somehow, you've got to find the extra burst of energy you need to finish what you have started. Don't panic -- you'll find it, you just have to give yourself time to do it. Just because you're not 'feeling it' early in the day doesn't mean that it won't show up later in the day. Your energy will be there when you need it.

**SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21  
Pleasing others will give you a lot of pleasure today, so don't hesitate to oblige people whenever you feel the urge to. If someone reaches out for your assistance, offer it! Someday, you will be able to reach out and ask them a favor in return. Every time you say 'sure thing' to an odd request, you will feel an extra bit of pride that you're someone who can rise to any occasion. You have the capacity to give your full attention to anything and everything. You're a multi-tasking master!

**TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20  
They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but you might be getting a bit fed up with someone who seems to be following a bit too closely in your footsteps right now. It's nice to see that someone admires you, but it's not so nice to see them lose their own identity. Have a talk with this carbon copy and ask them why they've been making the changes they've been making. Help them find better solutions, but don't let on that you feel they're borrowing from you.

**VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22  
By spending all of your free time with just one person (no matter how wonderful they make you feel), you are running a very real risk of getting in too deep too fast with this relationship. They are getting used to having exclusive access to you, and might assume you feel the same way. Check in with them today about the status of things, and make sure that you are both on the same wavelength. It's best to address these things earlier rather than later.

**CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19  
While you might not have as much discipline as you would like to have right now, there is still nothing you can't accomplish if you put your mind to it! What you lack in discipline, you more than make up for with heart and soul. If you keep slipping in your diet, going back for one more of whatever it is you gave up, or succumbing to some little vice, don't beat yourself up. One slip does not a complete failure make. Just get back on that horse -- and ride it to success.

**GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21  
A surprise reunion between you and long lost ex will test your flexibility and force you to ask serious questions about how much you have really changed. The answers won't come easily, but if you have time to sit down for a conversation with this person, you can gain a lot of clarity on a lot of issues you thought were long gone -- or at least long-ago dealt with. But don't feel like you owe this person a formal reunion. If you feel like avoiding them altogether, you should.

**LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22  
Your kindness and flexibility are good qualities that you should cherish -- but you should also know when to put them aside. Sometimes, you need to get more aggressive, if you're going to succeed. Be realistic: You'll have to search for the balance between too aggressive and not aggressive enough, and this could take some time. You know what you deserve, though, so don't stop until you've gotten it. Are you bending over backwards? Be careful not to send the message that you just want to make everyone else happy.

**AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18  
Make a concerted effort to keep the past in the past today! Just because a person did something wrong to someone you care about or made some other type of mistake years ago does not mean that they are a bad person through-and-through. You have to give other people the benefit of the doubt. Give them the respect you would give to anyone else. It's perfectly okay to remember what they did, but unless it was something against you, you shouldn't hold it against them.

**CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22  
You're going to meet some new people today, and one of them will have a very familiar face. They could be a long lost friend from elementary school, or they could be someone you see at the coffee shop every morning. Wait to see if they notice anything before saying something. You might think that bringing it up will be a shortcut to a bond between you two, but unless you are certain how you know them, you might want to hold off on bringing up the issue.

**SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21  
The irritation you have been feeling from a certain person lately is about to cease. They are figuring out that their behavior is not winning them any points, and they are in the process of changing their outlook. Hang on a little bit longer and give them some more time to make this transition. As for you, expect to move into a new phase, full of reward and contentedness. Keep your eyes open. Look for an opportunity to try something that you have been wanting to try for a while.

**PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20  
You have a lot of beauty and strength that people don't often get a chance to see -- ask yourself why that is, today. Are you afraid to show your true colors to the world? Wake up to the fact that there are plenty of people in your life who want to see you shine -- with all of your light! More people are interested in you, for more diverse reasons, than you truly understand. You are missing an amazing opportunity by standing on the sidelines of your own life. Be yourself!
- 
- TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE
- 01. In which satirical comedy British television series was Captain Fantastic a recurring feature?**  
A. Twice a Fortnight (1967)  
B. Q... (1969-82)  
C. The Complete and Utter History of Britain (1969)  
D. Do Not Adjust Your Set (1967-69)

**02. Clusterball is a game involving aircraft, balls, magnetic ramps and a collection point, and is played on what?**  
A. A pond  
B. An icefield  
C. A screen  
D. A tabletop

**03. Developments, initially by researchers in the University of Manchester, in creating a graphene sieve are aimed at doing what?**  
A. Trapping carbon dioxide  
B. Filtering and de-salinating water  
C. Breaking apart methane molecules  
D. Filtering sewage

Answers: 1. B, 2. C, 3. D
- KIDS COLOURING
- 
- BOGGLER
- 
- 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
- 
- 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
-

TURKEY, SYRIA EARTHQUAKE

# Many survivors battle hunger, winter

Hundreds of thousands spent the night in dormitories, schools and mosques

**Sanliurfa, Turkey** - In the Turkish city of Sanliurfa, survivors of the massive quake that has wreaked death, destruction and havoc on the region face an invisible but powerful threat - hunger.

As the morning sun illuminates the sky, Sanliurfa's cracked streets look empty. The mercury is only just above freezing, but it feels much colder. Like their neighbours in the other nine provinces hit by Monday's 7.8-magnitude quake and its frightening aftershocks, the people of Sanliurfa are focused on basic survival.

Turkey's most powerful quake in almost 100 years had struck this remote border region with Syria in the early hours on Monday, killing more than 5,400 people in Turkey and neighbouring Syria.

Dozens of Sanliurfa families found refuge in the imposing Hilton hotel's ground floor.

Early on Tuesday, most of the parents huddling with their



People warm themselves around a bonfire in the rubble in Kahramanmaraş, Turkey, after the earthquake which struck the country's southeast, on Tuesday (AFP)

children have not slept a wink.

"We arrived here at 3pm yesterday, the hotel gave us soup in the evening, but the night has passed. We're hungry, and the children too," said

Imam Caglar, 42. "The bakeries will be closed today, I don't know how we will find bread," the father of three said.

It's out of the question to go fetch food from his flat, located

a few streets away, because of the danger that the building might suddenly crumble.

"We live on the first floor out of three, we're too scared to return," he says, shaking his head.

"Our building is not safe at all."

**Winter hampers response**

The Turkish government is scrambling to house people

forced into the street after their homes either collapsed or were too risky to stay in because of the aftershocks.

Hundreds of thousands spent the night in dormitories,

schools, mosques and other public buildings, while others sheltered in hotels that opened their doors for free.

Supplying them with food and other basic aid has been a challenge.

A winter storm has made the region's roads, some of them heavily damaged by the tremors, nearly impassable. Many local airports are shut, their runways in need of repair.

"We had a small bowl of soup, that's not enough," says Mehmet Cilde, 56, a father of six. He hopes that the local municipality will eventually provide food. But, he admits, 'we have no information, nothing'.

The situation is even more dire for Filiz Cifci.

She missed the soup distribution on Monday evening, further along the street from the Hilton hotel.

Cifci and her three children, who fled their home before dawn on Monday with only their three blankets and phones, preferred to skip a meal than wait in the wind and cold rain.

"We only had tea and coffee yesterday evening, nothing else," she said, in a headscarf and purple tunic, sitting close to the hotel's bathroom, where families get drinking water.

She doesn't know if her children will have enough to eat on Tuesday and in the coming days.

AFP

## Syrian Red Crescent calls on EU to lift economic sanctions

**Damascus, Syria** - The Syrian Red Crescent on Tuesday appealed to Western countries to lift sanctions and provide aid after a powerful earthquake has killed more than 1,600 people across the war-torn country.

The 7.8-magnitude quake early on Monday, which has also killed thousands in neighbouring Turkey, led to widespread destruction in both regime-controlled and rebel-held parts of Syria.

After more than a decade of war, President Bashar al-Assad's government remains a pariah in the West, complicating international efforts to assist those affected by the quake.

Khaled Haboubati, head of the Syrian Red Crescent, urged on Tuesday 'all European Union countries to lift economic sanctions on Syria'.

"The time has come after this earthquake," Haboubati, whose organisation is based in government-held areas, told a press conference broadcast by



A Syrian child poses for a picture inside an emergency shelter in the city of Maarat Misrin on Tuesday (AFP)

Syrian state TV. His call echoes a similar plea by Syria's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, who on Monday said the government was ready to 'provide all the required facilities' to receive humanitarian assistance.

Damascus often blames its financial woes on Western

sanctions imposed in the wake of the 2011 conflict that began with the brutal repression of peaceful protests and escalated to pull in foreign powers and global militants.

Despite the sanctions, government-controlled parts of the country receive aid through

United Nations agencies, many of which have headquarters in Damascus.

Syrian state media and rescuers said at least 1,712 people have died in the earthquake and more than 3,600 have been injured across the country.

AFP

### At least 20 'IS members' escape Syria jail in Rajo

**Azaz, Syria** - Prisoners mutinied in a northwestern Syria prison on Monday following a deadly earthquake, with at least 20 escaping the jail holding mostly Islamic State group members, a source at the facility told AFP.

The military police prison in the town of Rajo near the Turkish border holds about 2,000 inmates, with about 1,300 of them suspected to be IS fighters, said the source.

The prison also holds fighters from Kurdish-led forces. "After the earthquake struck, Rajo was affected and inmates started to mutiny and took control of parts of the prison," said the official at Rajo jail.

"About 20 prisoners fled," he added.

AFP



Aleppo's ancient citadel is seen damaged following the deadly earthquake that shook Syria on Monday (AFP)

## UNESCO sounds alarm over quake damage to 'World Heritage' sites

**Paris, France** - The UN's cultural agency UNESCO said on Tuesday it was ready to provide assistance after two sites listed on its World Heritage list in Syria and Turkey sustained damage in the devastating earthquake.

As well as the damage to the old city of Syria's Aleppo and the fortress in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir, UNESCO said at least three other World Heritage sites could be affected.

"Our organisation will provide assistance within its mandate," said UNESCO director general Audrey Azoulay.

A statement from UNESCO said it and partners had already carried out an initial survey of the damage of the quake which struck before dawn on Monday.

It said it was 'particularly concerned' about the old city of Aleppo, which has been on its list of World Heritage in Danger since 2013 due to the Syrian civil war. "Significant damage has been noted in the citadel. The western tower of the old city wall has collapsed and several buildings in the souks have been weakened," it said.

Aleppo was Syria's pre-war commercial hub and considered one of the world's longest continuously inhabited cities,

boasting markets, mosques, caravanserais, and public baths. But a brutal siege imposed on rebels by government forces left it disfigured. Syria's directorate of antiquities had already raised concern about the damage on Wednesday, saying parts of Aleppo's northern defensive walls had collapsed.

In Turkey, UNESCO said it was saddened by the 'collapse

*Significant damage has been noted in citadel. The western tower of the old city wall has collapsed*

**UNESCO**

of several buildings' at the World Heritage site of the Diyarbakir Fortress and the adjacent Hevsel Gardens.

It emphasised that the entire area was an important centre of the Roman, Sassanid, Byzantine, Islamic and Ottoman periods.

The pre-dawn quake hit near Gaziantep in southeastern Turkey at a depth of about 18km (11 miles), the US Geological Survey said.

AFP

## Syria newborn pulled alive from quake rubble

**Jindayris, Syria** - Extended family members pulled a newborn baby alive from the rubble of a home in northern Syria, after finding her still tied by her umbilical cord to her mother, who died in Monday's massive quake, a relative said.

The infant is the sole survivor of her immediate family, the rest of whom were all killed when the 7.8-magnitude quake that struck Syria and neighbouring Turkey flattened the family home in the rebel-held town of Jindayris, Khalil al-Suwadi said.

"We heard a voice while we were digging," Suwadi told AFP on Tuesday.



The newborn baby pulled alive from the rubble, receives medical care at a clinic in Afrin, on Tuesday (AFP)

"We cleared the dust and found the baby with the umbilical cord (intact) so we cut it and my cousin took her to hospital."

Video of the rescue went

viral on social media.

The footage shows a man sprinting from the rubble of a collapsed four-storey building clutching a tiny baby covered in

dust. A second man runs towards the first carrying a blanket to try to warm the newborn in the sub-zero temperatures while a third screams for a car to take her to hospital.

The baby was taken for treatment in the nearby town of Afrin, while family members spent the next several hours recovering the bodies of her father Abdullah, mother Afraa, four siblings and an aunt.

Their bodies were laid out on the floor of an adjacent relative's home ahead of a joint funeral that was held on Tuesday.

In the dimly lit room, Suwadi stared at the lifeless corpses

and listed their names.

"We are displaced from (the government-held eastern city of) Deir Ezzor. Abdullah is my cousin and I am married to his sister," he said.

Inside an incubator in the hospital in Afrin, the newborn was hooked to an intravenous drip, her body scarred, and a bandage wrapped around her left fist. Her forehead and fingers were still blue from the biting cold as paediatrician Hani Maarouf monitored her vitals.

"She is now stable," Maarouf said but noted that she had arrived in bad condition.

AFP

# North Korea pledges ‘expanded’ military drills for war readiness

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea's top army officials have said they will expand and intensify military drills to ensure their readiness for war, state media reported on Tuesday, ahead of a massive parade.

The pledge came at a Monday meeting overseen by leader Kim Jong Un and follows last week's staging of joint air drills by South Korea and the United States.

The agenda was topped by 'the issue of constantly expanding and intensifying the operation and combat drills of the (Korean People's Army) ... strictly perfecting the preparedness for war', the official Korean Central News Agency said.

The meeting of North Korea's central military commission comes as commercial satellite imagery suggests 'extensive parade preparations' are underway in Pyongyang ahead of key state holidays this month.

North Korea celebrates the founding anniversary of its armed forces on Wednesday and the 'Day of the Shining Star' on February 16. The latter is the birthday of Kim Jong Il, son of North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung and father of Kim Jong Un.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said on Tuesday it was closely monitoring areas surrounding Pyongyang's parade training ground, adding it had seen a 'great increase in personnel and vehicles' in recent days.



North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un attending the 4th meeting of the 8th Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea in Pyongyang on Monday (AFP)

**North Korean balloon**

Seoul and Washington have moved to bolster joint military drills following a year of sanctions-busting weapons tests by North Korea, infuriating Py-

ongyang, which sees such joint exercises as rehearsals for invasion. Last week, the security allies staged joint air drills featuring strategic bombers and stealth fighters, prompting Pyongyang to warn such exercises could 'ig-

nite an all-out showdown'.

The joint exercises, their first this year, came a day after US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his South Korean counterpart vowed to boost security co-operation to counter an

increasingly belligerent nuclear-armed North. North Korea's foreign minister has said the move to ramp up joint drills crossed 'an extreme red line'.

On Monday, Seoul's defence ministry said a North Korean bal-

loon had crossed over to its airspace at the weekend, but concluded it did not pose a threat.

It was believed to be a weather balloon, Yonhap News agency reported, citing officials, and the ministry said it had taken

'measures' without elaborating.

The report came after Washington shot down a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon, with Beijing saying that it was a civilian airship that had accidentally crossed into US airspace.

**Beef up military**

Experts say Monday's meeting of North Korea's top brass aimed to highlight the country's readiness to face down upcoming joint military drills between South Korea and the United States - and also stress it was prepared for an actual war.

"North Korea is hinting about the possibility of military action in the future in the name of operational and combat training and war preparedness," said Hong Min, researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification.

Yang Moo-jin, professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, added that the meeting signalled Pyongyang's determination to 'aggressively beef up its military'.

Kim recently called for an 'exponential' increase in Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, including mass-producing tactical nuclear weapons and developing new missiles for nuclear counterstrikes. Kim has also said his country must 'overwhelmingly beef up military muscle' in 2023 in response to 'US and South Korean hostility'.

AFP

**Three dead as migrant boat sinks off Greece**

Athens, Greece - Three migrants died and more than 20 were feared missing after a second boat sank off the coast of Greece in just days, the coastguard said on Tuesday.

The two women and one man who drowned are believed to have been part of a group of 41 people whose dinghy sank after hitting a reef near the island of Lesbos, a coastguard spokeswoman told AFP. Sixteen people have been rescued so far amid an ongoing search by land, sea and air that's being hampered by strong winds, she added.

On Sunday, four children and a woman died when a boat carrying another group from neighbouring Turkey sank off the Greek island of Leros.

The coastguard managed to rescue 41 people, including six children and two adults. The number of migrants requiring rescue has risen in recent weeks.

AFP

**Massacre during Vietnam War: Seoul court rules South Korea responsible**

Seoul, South Korea - A Seoul court delivered a landmark ruling on Tuesday holding the South Korean government accountable for a massacre committed by its soldiers in the Vietnam War, ordering it to pay compensation.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, South Korea sent troops to support America's doomed fight against the communist North Vietnamese during a bloody two-decade conflict that ended with the fall of Saigon and Vietnam's reunification in 1975.

South Korean marines were accused of killing around 70 civilians during a raid on February 12, 1968 in a case brought to court in Seoul by a Vietnamese woman who survived the massacre.

Seoul's Central District Court ruled that victim Nguyen Thi Thanh should be compensated with 30mn won (US\$23,800), plus interest, for the mass killings in the town of Phong Nhi in Vietnam's central Quang Nam province.

Thanh, now 62, who was injured in the raid and lost family including her mother, filed the lawsuit in 2020 seeking compensation from the South Korean government.

Over the past three years, Vietnamese witnesses and journalists who covered the 1968 incident have appeared in court to testify.

The court eventually sided with the victim, rejecting the government's argument that it was hard to prove Korean troops were the perpetrators.

AFP

**Five Argentine rugby players sentenced to life**

Dolores, Argentina - A court in Argentina on Monday sentenced five amateur rugby players from the same team to life imprisonment for beating a teenager to death in a crime with alleged racist undertones.

Three more defendants were sentenced to 15 years in prison for 'secondary participation' in the murder of Fernando Baez Sosa, a law student from a Paraguayan immigrant family, outside a disco three years ago.

The high-profile four-week trial at the court in Dolores, 220km (140 miles) south of Buenos Aires, turned the spotlight on classism and racism in the country and even sparked protests in several cities.

The eight defendants, now aged between 21 and 23, had been charged with 'doubly aggravated murder' after pummeling 18-year-old Baez to death in the popular seaside resort of Villa Gesell on January 18, 2020.

After a fight broke out in a nightclub, those involved were evicted but their quarrel continued in the street.

Baez became isolated from his friends and was surrounded by eight attackers, all teammates at a small, provincial rugby club, who beat him so severely that he died of his injuries. According to witnesses, his attackers called Baez -

whose parents, a bricklayer and a caregiver, are Paraguayan immigrants - a 'shitty black'.

In a country where the majority of the population is descended from white Europeans, mostly from Spain, Italy or Germany, the term 'black' is used disparagingly

by some to describe Indigenous people or migrants from neighbouring countries.

"We are strong," said Baez's mother Graciela Sosa as she arrived at court with her husband Silvino Baez. "Justice means life."

AFP



Relatives of Fernando Baez Sosa, the son of Paraguayans who was murdered by a group of rugbiers in 2020, cry after watching on a television the sentencing hearing in Carapegua, Paraguay on Monday (AFP)

## France hit by new strikes, protests over unpopular pension reform



Protesters carry a banner which reads 'Salaries and pensions, same struggle' as they participate in a demonstration on the third day of nationwide rallies, in Nantes, Western France on Tuesday (AFP)

Paris, France - Fresh strikes hit trains, schools and refineries in France on Tuesday over an unpopular pension reform pushed by President Emmanuel Macron, with nationwide protests planned for later in the day.

A third day of union-backed demonstrations since January 19 is set to test momentum for the protest movement which has vowed to block Macron's bid to raise the retirement age.

"We are dealing with a president - because he is at the heart of all this - who, with his oversized ego, wants to prove that he is capable of passing this reform," the head of the hardline CGT union, Philippe Martinez,

told RTL radio. Macron put raising the retirement age and encouraging the French to work more at the heart of his re-election campaign last year, but polls

estimate that two-thirds of people are against the changes.

Lawmakers began debating the reform, which would see the age for a full pension raised from 62 to 64 and the mandatory number of years of work extended for a full pension, during

a stormy session in parliament on Monday.

Last week's demonstrations brought out 1.3mn people across the country while a first round on

January 19 saw 1.1mn, according to the police.

A security source told AFP that between 900,000 and 1.1mn people were expected on Tuesday. The crowds so far have been the largest anti-government protests since 2010 during

pension reform by right-wing former president Nicolas Sarkozy.

Trains and the Paris metro again faced 'severe disruptions', while around one in five flights at Orly airport south of the capital were expected to be cancelled.

But the overall level of disruption, including in schools, was expected to be lower than on the previous two days.

Around half of long-distance trains were running, the state railway company said.

"It's ok, it's manageable," Sylvain Magnan, a 23-year-old told AFP at the main station in the city of Marseille on the Mediterranean.

"I just took a later train."

AFP

*We are dealing with a president who wants to prove that he is capable of passing this (pension) reform*

PHILIPPE MARTINEZ

At least 15 dead, 20 injured in landslides in Peru

Lima, Peru - Landslides in southern Peru have left at least 15 people dead, 20 injured and two missing, authorities said on Monday, warning that the toll from the disaster could rise.

"The number of people dead so far has risen to 15," said the directorate of the National Civil Defense Institute in the Arequipa region, where mud and rock slides began on Sunday as a result of torrential rains. Hardest hit were four villages in an area called Nicolas Valcarcel, where heavy rains had been falling since Sunday.

Arequipa governor Rohel Sanchez told Canal N television 'the situation in these four towns is really bad'.

In hills near the villages, miners were working and were probably swept away, Sanchez said.

"There is a high probability that in the tunnels themselves there are also people who are dead there," he told reporters.

Sanchez said many of the miners came from other regions and acknowledged that identifying victims could be a 'very complex' problem. "In each of them there is a transitional population due to the mining activity they carry out," he said.

AFP

Russia 'advancing' in east Ukraine

Bakhmut's capture would offer a gateway for Russia to continue its advances into Donetsk

Moscow, Russia - Moscow said on Tuesday that Russian forces were advancing towards Bakhmut and Vugledar, two key centres of fighting in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine, now the flashpoint of Russia's intervention.

The comments come after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned last week his forces would keep fighting for 'fortress' Bakhmut as long as possible but urged the West to send more weapons so they could hold the city.

"Military operations are at the moment progressing with success in areas around Vugledar and Artemovsk," Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said during a meeting with defence officials, using the Russian name for Bakhmut.

He also listed seven other settlements in Donetsk that Russian forces had recently 'liberated', including the salt-mining town of Soledar that came under Russian control in January.

Bakhmut - just south of Soledar - is a battered town whose population has almost entirely fled.



Ukrainian servicemen stand atop an M113 armoured personnel carrier (APC) in Zarichne on Monday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

Military operations are at the moment progressing with success in areas around Vugledar and Artemovsk (Bakhmut)

SERGEI SHOIGU

Months of heavy fighting has made it the longest-running battle of Russia's nearly year-long Ukraine offensive.

Its capture would offer a gateway for Russian forces to continue their advance into Donetsk - territory that Moscow is determined to capture as a military pri-

ority.

The Russian-installed mayor of the Donetsk region's main city, also called Donetsk, said five people had been killed by Ukrainian shelling earlier on Tuesday.

Zelensky last week urged Western countries to speed up deliveries of weapons pledged to

Ukraine - particularly long-range missiles - so his forces can fend off Russian advances there.

'Unpredictable' escalation

Near Yampil, north of Bakhmut in the Donetsk region, Ukrainian serviceman Sergiy Solomon told AFP he was concerned about their stockpiles of arms and rumours of a looming Russian offensive. "The Russians have tanks, armoured personnel carriers and Grads (rockets), everything you can think of," the

31-year-old former builder said.

"We have equipment but not a lot of munitions," he added.

Ukraine has recently received guarantees from several Western countries that they will send modern tanks. Washington has also said it will soon dispatch missiles that can punch deeper into Russian held territory.

Kyiv is also appealing for modern fighter jets to gain air superiority. Shoigu however warned on Tuesday that military aid delivered to Ukraine from its backers would only make the situation on

the battlefield more difficult.

"The US and its allies are trying to drag out the conflict as long as possible. To do this, they have begun supplying heavy offensive weapons (to Kyiv) and openly calling on Ukraine to seize our territories," Shoigu said.

"Such steps draw NATO countries into the conflict and could see it escalate unpredictably." The recent battles around Bakhmut have been described by both sides as among the most bloody of the last year.

AFP

UK's Sunak appoints new Tory chair, creates four ministries

London, UK - British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Tuesday reorganised several government departments and appointed a new Conservative Party chairman following last month's dismissal of a senior ally over murky tax dealings.

Sunak, who last week marked 100 days in 10 Downing Street, announced close confidant Greg Hands had replaced Nadhim Zahawi in the role of party head and cabinet minister without portfolio. The Tory leader fired the wealthy Zahawi after an internal probe into his tax affairs - dating from his founding of the YouGov polling company in 2000 - found a 'serious breach' of ministerial rules.

Hands, an MP for a west London constituency, said on Twitter he was 'excited' to be the new Conservative party chair, a fundraising and coordinating role seen as crucial in the run-up to general elections. "The work starts right away," he added.



Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (AFP)

Sunak also opted to create four new government departments, as he bids to turn around the government's currently dismal fortunes ahead of a general election expected next year.

The ruling Conservatives - in power since 2010 - are trailing the main opposition Labour party by wide margins, according to polls over recent months.

It follows several damaging scandals involving Sunak's pred-

ecessors and amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation as decades-high inflations threatens to tip the economy into recession. Sunak created a new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, appointing former Business Secretary Grant Shapps to head the ministry.

He also launched a new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

AFP

Israeli troops kill teen in West Bank raid

Nablus, Palestinian Territories - Israeli troops shot dead a Palestinian teenager in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus on Tuesday, the Palestinian health ministry said, with the Israeli army saying he had fired on soldiers.

The ministry said Hamza Amjad al-Ashqar, 17, was 'killed by a bullet in the face fired by the occupation (Israeli) soldiers during the aggression on Nablus'.

The Israeli army said troops had 'responded with live fire towards an armed suspect who fired at them'.

'A hit was identified,' the army said in a statement, adding that 'rocks, explosive devices and Molotov cocktails were hurled at the soldiers' conducting the raid.

A military spokesperson could not immediately tell AFP what weapon the armed suspect had fired.

A Palestinian security source, who was not authorised to speak to the media, said Ashqar was from Nablus's Askar refugee camp.

Three people were arrested



The mother (right) and grandmother of the Palestinian teenager shot dead by Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus, mourn during his funeral at the Askar refugee camp east of Nablus on Tuesday (AFP)

during the Israeli raid on the city, the source added.

No Palestinian fighter group immediately claimed Ashqar as a member.

The Lions' Den, a local fighter alliance that boasts recruits from across the longstanding factions, said its fighters had been involved in the clashes but did not claim Ashqar as a member.

Separately, official Palestinian

news agency Wafa said around 20 Palestinians were arrested in Burqin, near the flashpoint city of Jenin.

There has been a mounting death toll from a spate of Israeli raids in West Bank towns and cities in recent months.

On Monday, Israeli forces killed five suspected Palestinian gunmen in a raid in Jericho, in the Jordan Valley, after a days-long

search for suspects in a shooting in a restaurant near the city.

Since the start of the year, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has claimed the lives of 42 Palestinians. Six Israeli civilians, including a child, and one Ukrainian civilian have been killed over the same period. Israel has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day War of 1967.

AFP

Funeral held for Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf

Karachi, Pakistan - Thousands of people attended funeral prayers on Tuesday for Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who became a key US ally during the 'war on terror'.

Musharraf, who fled Pakistan in 2016 after a travel ban on him was lifted, died on Sunday aged 79 in Dubai, having suffered a long illness.

Prayers were held at the grounds of a military compound in Karachi in a ceremony attended by around 10,000 people, mostly retired and serving military officers, an AFP reporter observed. Neither the serving army chief, the prime minister,

nor the president attended the funeral, which was not officially announced by the military or government and was not aired on local television.

The body was set to be transported to a nearby military graveyard.

In Pakistan, where the military is supremely powerful and enjoys significant support, Musharraf remains a divisive figure.

In an editorial published by the country's leading English language newspaper on Monday, Musharraf was described 'as something of an enigma as his authoritarian rule was also interspersed with liberal reforms'.



Army soldiers escort an ambulance carrying the coffin of Pervez Musharraf to an army graveyard for burial in Karachi on Tuesday (AFP)

"Yet the late general's mistakes were considerable, the biggest and most unforgivable being the derailing of the constitutional order."

Economic boom, democratic decline

The four-star general seized power in a 1999 bloodless coup and was acting simultaneously

as Pakistan's army chief, chief executive, and president when the 9/11 attacks on the United States took place.

He became Washington's chief regional ally during the invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan, a decision which put him in the crosshairs of Islamist militants, who made several attempts on his life.

But it also brought in a huge influx of foreign aid, which bolstered the economy.

The general twice suspended the constitution and was accused of rigging a referendum shoring up his power, as well as rampant rights abuses including

rounding up opponents during his nearly nine-year rule.

In 2007, Musharraf ordered troops to storm a mosque in Islamabad where more than a hundred students calling for the imposition of Sharia law were killed, sparking a major militant backlash.

In the same year, he attempted to challenge the independence of the judiciary, leading to widespread protests, and was accused of involvement in the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto.

He became increasingly isolated before ultimately losing power and leaving many Pakista-

nis with a deep distaste for direct military rule.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif offered a simple condolence message on the death of Musharraf, who seized power after ousting his brother Nawaz Sharif.

Coalition partner and Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, remained silent.

Khurram Dastagir, federal minister and a central leader of the governing PMLN party, said on Tuesday that Pakistan should 'forgive but not forget'.

AFP

# 'Bigger than the Ashes'

India host Australia in their spin backyard in a four-Test series starting Thursday

Nagpur, India - India will host Australia in their spin-friendly backyard over four highly anticipated Tests starting Thursday, with Steve Smith saying winning the crunch series would be "bigger than the Ashes".

Australia have struggled to overcome conditions in India, with their last series win there coming in 2004 while their opponents have claimed the past three encounters, including twice down under.

Smith admitted that India is "a difficult place to win a Test match, let alone a series."

"If we are able to topple that mountain, that would be huge. I think if we can win in India, that would be bigger than an Ashes series," he said ahead of the first Test in Nagpur.

The visitors are reeling from a spate of injuries - including to key pace-bowlers Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood - while the hosts are at near full strength.

Ravindra Jadeja has returned from injury to spearhead the spin department alongside Ravichandran Ashwin while star batter Virat Kohli is back in imperious form.

Australian captain Pat Cummins, who will lead his side's pace attack, said fast bowling could play a big part on India's notoriously spin-friendly wickets.

"I think, coming here to India, a lot of the talk is around big spinning wickets, mainly fast (moving) Test matches, but it's not always the case," said Cummins.

"You need to get into the grind at times, and that role as a fast bowler might be bowling plenty of overs for not a heap of



India's Shubman Gill during a net training session

reward but doing a job for the team."

With Starc out for the first Test and Hazlewood and all-rounder Cameron Green in doubt for the entire series, Scott Boland, playing in his first overseas Test, will be called upon to open the bowling alongside Cummins.

Nathan Lyon, who has claimed 34 wickets in seven Tests on Indian soil, will lead the spin charge.

But the key battles for Cummins' side could be with the bat.

Smith was imperious during the last tour of India, scoring three centuries including a brilliant 178 in Ranchi. But opener David Warner struggled, crossing 50 on just one occasion as Australia lost the series 2-1.

On this occasion, Warner will open alongside Usman Khawaja, whose comfort against the turning ball and rich vein of form

could prove crucial.

Australia will look to Khawaja and top-order stalwarts Smith, Warner and Marnus Labuschagne to maintain their strong form and nullify India's bowlers.

A draw in any of the four Tests will be enough to secure world number one Australia a place in the ICC World Test Championship final at The Oval in June.

Second-placed India, led by

Rohit Sharma, need to win at least 3-0 to assure themselves of a spot for the second time running. Jadeja, a left-arm spinner and an attacking lower-order batsman, said he felt "blessed" after returning from his career-threatening knee injury.

"(I am) very excited and (it) feels really great that after more than five months, I am wearing an Indian jersey," Jadeja told bcci.tv.



Virat Kohli is in fine form and could prove difficult to contain

## Three crucial battles in India-Australia Test series

Nagpur, India - India host Australia in a hotly anticipated four-match Test series starting on Thursday in Nagpur.

AFP Sport looks at three key battles that could decide who comes out on top in a clash between the world's two top cricket teams.

### KOHLI vs CUMMINS

Virat Kohli has triumphed over his extended lean patch from last year and his match-up with fast bowler Pat Cummins, the Australia skipper, could light up the series.

The batting maestro has hit four tons since breaking his 1,020-day century drought in last year's T20 Asia Cup, but hasn't been able to bring his white-ball form into Tests.

An exemplary leader, Cummins has on the other hand been in the best Test form of his career, claiming 29 wickets in nine Tests over the past 12 months.

Cummins has got Kohli out five times in Tests, but the home hero will be looking to hit back in his backyard.

"I am really looking forward to seeing Kohli versus Cummins. That's a fantastic match-up," former Aussie quick Jason Gillespie was quoted as saying by the Hindustan Times.

"When Virat comes out to bat, I would love to see Cummins take the ball and go at him straight away. That will be great theatre, two wonderful cricketers at the top of their game."

### WARNER vs SIRAJ

Sparks are expected to fly when David Warner, an explosive left-handed opener, faces the seam and swing of rising star Mohammed Siraj.

Siraj, 28, got Warner out twice during his 2021 debut in

Australia and went on to take 13 wickets in three matches.

He has since grown in stature to regularly lead India's pace attack in the absence of the injured Jasprit Bumrah and has bagged 46 wickets in 15 Tests.

Warner has struggled on Indian pitches, with a batting average of 24.25 in eight Tests in the cricket-mad country.

His overall Test average is over 46 across 101 matches. Both men have something to prove in the coming series and Warner said last year that "winning in India is key".

### KHAWAJA vs ASHWIN

Indian spinners at home are a challenge for any visiting batsman, but for Australia's in-form opener Usman Khawaja the task may well decide the fate of the series.

The Islamabad-born Khawaja handled spin with aplomb in Pakistan last year and led the tourists to a 1-0 series win with his 496 runs, including two centuries in three Tests.

The 36-year-old left-hander recently notched up his 4,000th Test run in a match against South Africa in Sydney, where he was 195 not out. Khawaja is especially wary of Ravichandran Ashwin, who has enjoyed great success against left-handed batsmen, telling The Sydney Morning Herald: "Ashwin is a gun."

"He's very skilful, he's got a lot of tricky little variations, he uses the crease quite well too." "But it's one of those really good challenges," Khawaja added.

"The wicket's going to turn here at some point, whether day one, day three or day four, and he's going to be in the game and bowl a lot of overs." AFP



Gary Ballance

## Zimbabwe's Ballance now second player to score centuries for two countries

Bulawayo, Zimbabwe - Gary Ballance became only the second Test batsman after Kepler Wessels to score a century for two countries, reaching an unbeaten 107 at tea for Zimbabwe against the West Indies in Bulawayo on Tuesday.

Needing to make at least 248 in reply to a West Indies' declaration of 447-6 on Monday to avoid a possible follow-on, Zimbabwe reached 313-7 after the second session on day four of the first Test.

Harare-born Ballance scored four centuries for England during the last decade before returning home to make his Test debut for Zimbabwe in this match.

South Africa-born Wessels scored four centuries for Australia before returning home and making two more for his homeland when they were readmitted to Test cricket in the 1990s.

Aware of his key role having come in at number five with Zimbabwe 114-3, Ballance was the epitome of caution, painstakingly building his innings.

By tea, the 33-year-old had faced 203 balls and his total included two sixes.

## Australia's Finch retires from internationals

Melbourne, Australia - Australian men's Twenty20 captain Aaron Finch retired from international cricket on Tuesday, ending his 12-year career as one of the most prolific run scorers in limited-overs formats.

A destructive opening batter at his peak, Finch's position had been under a cloud since Australia failed to make the knockout stage of last year's T20 World Cup at home.

It was not immediately clear who would replace the Victoria-born batter, who has captained the team in 76 of the 103 T20s he has played since debuting against England in 2011.

"Realising that I won't be playing on until the next T20 World Cup in 2024, now is the right



Aaron Finch

moment to step down and give the team time to plan and build towards that event," he told reporters at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"To be able to represent Australia for 12 years and play with

and against some of the greatest players of all time has been an incredible honour."

The 36-year-old was in 2018 crowned the best T20 batter in the game, and captained Australia to their maiden T20 World

Cup victory in Dubai in 2021.

Only five players have scored more runs than Finch in T20 internationals.

Finch retired as Australia's one-day skipper last September, replaced by 29-year-old fast bowler Pat Cummins.

Cummins also leads Australia's Test squad, but selectors may be reluctant to add the T20 captaincy to his workload.

Finch said winning the T20 World Cup and the ODI World Cup in 2015 were the two cricket memories he would "cherish the most".

He holds the record for the highest score in a T20 international - 172 runs off 76 balls against Zimbabwe in 2018.

AFP

## Pakistan hope to put women's cricket on map at T20 World Cup

Karachi, Pakistan - Pakistan captain Bismah Maroof says the Twenty20 World Cup is a "big opportunity to showcase our talent" and boost recognition of women's cricket in the country.

The 31-year-old all-rounder will spearhead a Pakistan team which has never been beyond the first round in seven previous appearances at the tournament.

Speaking to AFP by telephone from South Africa where the World Cup gets underway on Friday, Maroof said: "There were times when no one or very few people would know that the Pakistan women's cricket team exists. "With more matches and live coverage we have earned recognition and respect."

Pakistan's women will need to vastly improve on past World Cup performances if they are to make an impact at the 10-team



Bismah Maroof bats during the 2022 Women's Cricket World Cup

tournament.

They have won only seven of their 28 World Cup matches to date, although two were against India, in 2012 and 2016.

Maroof and her team-mates will be chasing a third victory over their arch-rivals when the two sides clash in Cape Town on February 12 to kick off their campaigns.

After taking up cricket as a 16-year-old, Lahore-born Maroof has seen first-hand how women's cricket in Pakistan has developed over more than a decade.

But she knows also that plenty of work remains.

"I hope it'll keep getting better and we'll be getting as the facilities and recognition as the other top teams do," she said. "That is the key to improvement."

Pakistan are ranked seventh in the world, meaning they will have

to over-perform if they are to make it past the first round at the World Cup for the first time.

At last year's Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, Pakistan finished bottom of their group, behind T20 world champions Australia, India and Barbados, losing all three games.

They will be missing star pace bowler Diana Baig for the World Cup after she fractured a finger in a comprehensive 101-run one-day defeat to Australia last month.

But in Fatima Sana, 21, they have a bowling all-rounder who won the International Cricket Council's emerging women's cricketer award last year. The title may well be beyond them, but Maroof says that the World Cup is "another big opportunity for us to showcase our talent."

AFP

# MAKE OR BREAK

Lionel Messi and PSG face potentially season-defining week starting with French Cup match at bitter rivals Marseille

Paris, France - A French Cup trip to bitter rivals Marseille on Wednesday is the start of seven days that could define this season for Paris Saint-Germain, with a Champions League showdown against Bayern Munich approaching.

The Bundesliga giants visit the French capital for the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie next Tuesday, but there will be no easy build-up to that game for PSG.

Marseille await them in the bear pit of the Velodrome for a

nals in the last two decades.

Yet while Marseille will have a hostile crowd in their favour with 65,000 fans behind them on Wednesday, PSG's domestic superiority has been questioned in recent weeks.

Christophe Galtier's team won just one of their first four league matches in 2023 before getting the better of Montpellier and Toulouse in recent days.

They needed a fine Lionel Messi strike to win 2-1 against the latter on Saturday after losing Kylian Mbappe to a thigh injury

*I ask the team to play for Leo and to do the work for him. We need to free him up from doing certain tasks. His teammates are going to have to put in twice as much effort...*

CHRISTOPHE GALTIER

French Cup last-16 tie as the Parisians aim to reclaim a trophy they missed out on last season after winning it six times in the previous seven years.

Then they go to in-form Monaco on Saturday. A match that could be one of the biggest obstacles remaining to their title bid in Ligue 1. They are eight points clear of nearest rivals Marseille and Lens at the top of the table.

PSG have an excellent Cup record against Marseille, winning 10 of the 11 past encounters between the clubs, including two fi-

that will keep him out of the Bayern first leg too. Mbappe has risen above Messi and Neymar to become comfortably PSG's most important player. His absence at such a key stage of the season is a hammer blow.

Marco Verratti's return from suspension will at least provide a huge boost in midfield, but PSG's defence has also appeared vulnerable of late and a Marseille attack led by Alexis Sanchez could exploit their weaknesses.

Neymar is back in training after a minor muscle injury but Galtier is in no doubt that, with-



Paris Saint-Germain players celebrate a goal against Toulouse in their French Ligue 1 match in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

out Mbappe, the main man is Messi. "I ask the team to play for Leo and to do the work for him," the coach said. "We need to free him up from doing certain tasks. His teammates are going to have to put in twice as much effort when it comes to winning the ball back and in terms of movement so he can play the kind of passes in tight spaces that are so rare in football these days."

Marseille, who also host PSG in the league later this month, had gone 10 games unbeaten before losing 3-1 at home to Nice on Sunday. It was a disappointing night for Igor Tudor's team, with

Vitinha, the Portuguese striker signed from Braga for 32 million euros (\$34.3m) before the January transfer deadline, substituted at half-time on his debut.

"We have done some really good things since the start of the season so the fact we have lost one game does not mean we will be short of confidence on Wednesday, insisted Marseille midfielder Matteo Guendouzi.

## Dortmund taking it day by day on Haller, says manager Terzic

Berlin, Germany - Borussia Dortmund manager Edin Terzic said on Tuesday the unusual nature of striker Sebastien Haller's illness made it difficult for the club to plot out his return.

Haller, who returned in January after six months' treatment for testicular cancer, scored his first goal for Dortmund in his side's 5-1 home win over Freiburg on Saturday.

Speaking ahead of Wednesday's German Cup clash at local rivals Bochum, Terzic said the club's doctors and coaches were constantly in "open and honest communication" about how best to re-integrate the returning striker.

"It's a situation that none of us can really assess. Neither Sebastian, myself nor our medical department had any experience of something like this," Terzic said at the club's training base in Dortmund.

"When someone comes back from an ACL tear or a shoulder



Borussia Dortmund's Sebastien Haller gets past Freiburg's Kiliann Sildillia during their German Bundesliga match on Saturday (AFP)

injury, we can make an estimation because we have experience there. But with this we are all inexperienced, so the solution is open and honest communication."

Terzic disagreed when asked if Haller could play the full 90 minutes against Bochum despite an apparent lack of preparation.

"I see it differently, he's had the longest preparation anyone could imagine. How hard he worked between his therapies... it's hard to comprehend how intensely (he worked)."

On Saturday, the France-born, Ivory Coast striker headed in a cross from Raphael Guerreiro midway through the second half for his side's third goal.

After the match, Haller said he was "waiting for this since day one. I'm floating on a cloud."

Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke on Monday praised the striker and his work ethic, saying his return was "a miracle".

## Injured Benzema, Courtois miss Madrid's Club World Cup trip

Rabat, Morocco - Injured Real Madrid duo Karim Benzema and Thibaut Courtois are not included in the club's 22-man squad travelling to Morocco for the Club World Cup, published on Monday.

Eder Militao, Ferland Mendy, Eden Hazard and Lucas Vazquez are also unavailable because of injury problems. Ballon d'Or winner Benzema suffered a thigh injury in Thursday's win over Valencia in La Liga and had to be substituted, continuing a season disrupted by fitness problems.

The 35-year-old forward missed France's World Cup defence because of injury and subsequently retired from international duty.

Courtois also suffered a thigh problem while warming up before Madrid's 1-0 defeat by Real Mallorca on Sunday. The Belgium stopper was replaced by Ukrainian goalkeeper Andriy Lunin for the narrow loss which left the champions eight points



Karim Benzema

*Ballon d'Or winner Benzema suffered a thigh injury in Thursday's win over Valencia in La Liga*

behind Barcelona at the top.

Record four-time champions Los Blancos face Egyptian side Al Ahly on Wednesday in the Club World Cup semi-final, before a prospective final on Saturday.

Real Madrid have endured many injury issues this season, with David Alaba and Aurelien Tchouameni only recently returning from spells out.

## Ghanaian footballer Atsu rescued from quake rubble, says association



Christian Atsu

Accra, Ghana - Ghana national player and former Newcastle midfielder Christian Atsu has been rescued from the rubble of an earthquake that killed more than 4,800 people in Turkey and neighbouring Syria, Ghana's Football Association confirmed on Tuesday.

Atsu, 31, joined Turkish Super Lig side Hatayspor in September, based in the southern province of

Hatay near the epicentre of Monday's massive quake.

"I have good news coming. I am just getting information from the president of the Ghana association that Christian Atsu has been found in Hatay," Francisca Ashietey-Oduntun told Accra-based Asaase Radio, referring to a local Ghanaian community association.

"Good news! We've received

some positive news that Christian Atsu has been successfully rescued from the rubble of the collapsed building and is receiving treatment," Ghana's football body said on Twitter.

"Let's continue to pray for Christian," it added.

Hatayspor official Mustafa Ozat told Play Spor streaming channel on Monday that Atsu was still in the rubble and was

trying to escape.

Atsu spent five seasons at Newcastle after an initial campaign on loan before leaving for Saudi Arabia in 2021.

He won the last of his 60 Ghana national caps in September 2019.

"We pray for Ghana International Christian Atsu and victims of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria," the Ghana Football Association said on Twitter.

Dozens of nations have offered aid since the 7.8-magnitude quake struck early on Monday as people were sleeping. Freezing weather has hampered emergency efforts.

Multi-storey apartment buildings full of residents were among the more than 5,600 structures reduced to rubble in Turkey.

# BIG OPPORTUNITY

Oman Under-19 boys to take on Hong Kong in four-match series at Oman Cricket Academy starting February 15, Aditya to lead the team



Oman Under 19 boys are all set to take on Hong Kong

Muscat: Oman Cricket will host a strong Hong Kong under-19 team for a four-match 50-over-a-side bilateral series at the Oman Cricket Academy ground in Al Amerat from February 15.

Aditya Gurumukhi has been named the skipper of Oman squad with Tanuj Sivakumar appointed his deputy for the series that will conclude on February 21.

The bilateral series is part of OC's endeavour to provide greater exposure to national U19 cricketers with coach Adeel Shafique hoping that his boys

would gain experience and build on their match temperament by playing against stronger opposition. It may be mentioned that Oman U19 lads had missed out on a place in the Asia Regional Qualifier after going out in the semifinals of the ICC U19 Cricket World Cup Division 2 - Asia Qualifier at home last October. On the other hand, Hong Kong went on to reach the final before losing to Singapore.

Both Singapore and Hong Kong along with Kuwait, Malaysia, Nepal and hosts UAE

*The first of the four-match 50-over series will begin on February 15 while the second match will be played the next day. The third and fourth match of the series will be held on February 19 and 21.*

will fight for the lone spot in the final qualification event - Asia Regional Qualifier - for the ICC U19 Cricket World Cup 2024 in Sri Lanka. The Asia Regional Qualifier will be held in the UAE from February 24-March 2 and Hong

Kong's tour of Oman is expected to give them good preparations ahead of the regional qualifier.

The first of the four-match 50-over series will begin on February 15 while the second match will be played the next day. The third

and fourth match of the series will be held on February 19 and 21.

**Oman U19 squad:** Aditya Gurumukhi (captain), Tanuj Sivakumar (vice-captain), Aryan Bisht, Mohammad Arafat Islam, Lakshmi Narayana, Glen Menezes, Wajih Abbas Farista, Devansh Loya, Prateish Ramesh, Mustaqeem Sayed, Rahul Habibulla (wk), Aleem Matto, Adharsh Srinivasan, Ahmed al Zadjali (Omani). Manager: Sher Mohammad. Coach: Adeel Shafique.



Wheelchair tennis great Shingo Kunieda of Japan

## Retiring wheelchair tennis legend Kunieda happy to change perceptions

Tokyo, Japan - Japanese Paralympic legend Shingo Kunieda said Tuesday he was ending his illustrious career satisfied that wheelchair tennis was now "finally seen as a sport" in the eyes of the public.

Kunieda has won 50 Grand Slam titles and four Paralympic gold medals, including a third singles title at the Covid-postponed Tokyo Games in 2021.

The 38-year-old, who announced his retirement last month, spent a total of 582 weeks as the men's world number one.

Kunieda said his first Paralympic gold medal at the 2004 Athens Games was not even reported on the sports pages of Japan's newspapers but attitudes have since "changed a lot".

"After the Tokyo Games, it really felt like it was now being seen as a sport," he told reporters.

"I had always been trying to get people to think of it as a sport, and last year I didn't feel the pressure to do that any more.

"Finally, I was able to just purely play tennis and compete against my opponent."

Kunieda, who was diagnosed with spinal cancer as a child, said he "didn't even know what the Paralympics were" when he first picked up a racket as an 11-year-old. He ends his career as one of the Paralympics' greatest athletes, and was number one in the International Tennis Federation's year-end rankings 10 times.

He also won all Grand Slam singles titles in the same calendar year five times. The last prize to elude him was the Wimbledon men's singles title, which was introduced in 2016.

He chalked that off when he beat Britain's Alfie Hewett in last year's final. "Wimbledon was the last title left for me to win, and after I hit the winning point, I celebrated with my team," he said.

"The first words that slipped out my mouth were 'now I retire', right there on the court."

The Japanese government is considering giving Kunieda the prestigious People's Honour Award for achievements in sport, entertainment and culture.

## Paris mayor against Russian athletes at 2024 Olympics 'while war goes on'

Paris, France - Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo changed her stance on Russian competitors at the 2024 Olympics on Tuesday saying they should be banned "while the war continues" in Ukraine, her office said.

Last month Hidalgo said she believed Russians could take part "under a neutral flag" to avoid "depriving athletes of competition".

On Tuesday she told French media that her earlier position was "indecent" because a neutral flag, "does not really exist" although she said there should be a place for "dissident Russians who want to parade under the refugee flag".

Her office said this was a "clarification" of her position.

They would, she said, be athletes who do not "support Vladimir Putin in his aggression".

The Refugee Olympic Team competed for the first time in the Rio Games in 2016, where it was made up of 10 athletes originally from Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan



Anne Hidalgo

and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, Russians and Belarusians have been banned from most world sporting events.

Hidalgo did not address the issue of the participation of Belarusian athletes but the International Olympic Committee (IOC) said last month it was exploring a "pathway" to allow competitors from both countries to take

part in the Paris Olympics.

Ukraine responded by saying it would consider boycotting the Games.

The United States said Russian and Belarusian athletes should compete in Paris under a

neutral flag, but many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, have opposed the idea.

Poland's sports minister, Kamil Bortniczuk, said last week that as many as 40 countries could refuse to take part in Paris if Russia and its ally Belarus were allowed to compete.

Estonia has said it would boycott while the Czech Olympic Committee said on Monday it was opposed to Russian participation but would not boycott.

French president Emmanuel Macron has not expressed himself on the subject. Contacted Tuesday by the AFP, neither the president's office nor France's ministry of sport gave any immediate reaction to Hidalgo's new position. The IOC, rather than the organisers and the French authorities, will ultimately decide who competes in the Olympics.

Russians have taken part under a neutral flag following a doping scandal at the 2014 Sochi Winter Games.

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PACO RABANNE - OBIT

“Paco Rabanne made transgression magnetic. Who else could induce fashionable Parisian women to clamour for dresses made of plastic and metal?” said Jose Manuel Albesa, of Barcelona-based Puig, which owned Rabanne’s label since the 1960s.

Rabanne was a key figure in the space-age fashion movement of the 1960s, known for using metal and other unlikely materials in his outfits. Nicknamed ‘Wacko Paco’ in the 1960s for his often unwearable designs, Spain’s Paco Rabanne became best-known in later years for his globally popular line of fragrances as well as his eccentric beliefs.

Dismissed as ‘the metal worker’ by Coco Chanel, his influence nonetheless carried through many generations and he famously dressed global superstar Lady Gaga in outfits made entirely of paper for her 2011 appearance at the MTV Europe Music Awards.

He also designed Jane Fonda’s iconic costume for 1968 sci-fi film Barbarella, and dresses for French icons Brigitte Bardot and Francoise Hardy.

Rabanne started out as a co-creator of the 1960s space-age movement in fashion alongside designers such as Pierre Cardin, who incorporated the era’s giddy excitement around the future and technological advancements into their clothes.

His 1966 show brought immediate fame and notoriety when he stunned the audience with ‘12 Unwearable Dresses’, his models dancing barefoot down the catwalk in outfits made of sharp metal and other unlikely materials.

“I have always had the impression of being a time accelerator,” he wrote in typically enigmatic style for a retrospective at Antwerp’s fashion museum MoMu in 2016, “of going as far as is reasonable for one’s time and not indulge in the morbid pleasure of the known things, which I view as decay.”

Fleeing Franco

Francisco Rabaneda-Cuervo was born in 1934 in Spain’s Basque region, near the city of San Sebastian, where his mother was a seamstress for the designer Cristobal Balenciaga and his father was an army general.

Rabanne’s life was uprooted by the Spanish Civil War when the army of dictator Francisco Franco turned on his father, a commander of the Guernica garrison, and gunned him down in 1936.

In 1939 his family fled to France, a time when Rabanne went on to study at the Beaux-Arts university in Paris, graduating with a diploma in architecture.

He began his fashion career creating accessories - jewellery, ties, but-



PACO

SPANISH FASHION DESIGNER PACO RABANNE, KNOWN FOR HIS ECCENTRIC CLOTHING DESIGNS AND FOR FOUNDING ONE OF THE WORLD’S BEST-KNOWN FRAGRANCE BRANDS, DIED ON FRIDAY AT THE AGE OF 88

tons - that caught the attention of Christian Dior, Yves Saint-Laurent and Pierre Cardin.

After the media furore around his own line, Rabanne signed a deal in 1968 that brought him under the ownership of the Barcelona-based Puig

family, heavyweights in the fashion and fragrance industry.

It marked his entry into perfumes that would see his name become synonymous with cologne, ultimately even eclipsing his fame as a designer.

Mystic, madman

Ever the provocateur, Rabanne had a penchant for mysticism and esoterism. He claimed to have had multiple lives, been some 78,000 years old, seen God, and been visited by aliens.

In 1999 he predicted in his book



Paco Rabanne acknowledges the audience during his Spring-Summer 1993 Haute Couture collection fashion show in Paris on January 27, 1993.



I have always had the impression of being a time accelerator, of going as far as is reasonable for one’s time and not indulge in the morbid pleasure of the known things

PACO RABANNE



A model presents a ruffled black top over a straight black and gold link dress of designer Paco Rabanne during his 1997/98 Fall/Winter high fashion collection in Paris



Paco Rabanne poses with models during his Spring-Summer 1993

‘Fire From Heaven’ that Paris would be destroyed later that year when the Russian space station Mir crashed down to Earth - a claim derived from his reading of the 16th-century French seer Nostradamus.

“To say that Paco Rabanne marches

to his own drummer is an understatement,” the New York Times wrote in 2002. “He’s been called a futurist, couturier, mystic, madman, Dadaist, sculptor, architect, astrologer, perfumer, artist and prophet.”

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GRAMMYS  
RED CARPET

While the Oscars are known for embracing a certain brand of Hollywood glamour, the Grammys are in your face - some of the most iconic fashion looks have emerged on music's biggest night, like Jennifer Lopez's plunging green Versace gown in 2000. Here's a look at what the A-listers wore to the Grammys:

Rainbow effect

If you want to get noticed on the red carpet, a pop of colour does the trick. Lizzo - who won Record of the Year honours for *About Damn Time* - served up major fashion drama in a voluminous orange Dolce and Gabbana cape with huge floral blooms, over a sleek corseted gown in the same vibrant hue with peach eye shadow, fingerless mesh gloves and nail art to match. Taylor Swift, who won the Grammy for best music video for *All Too Well*, stunned in a two-piece bejeweled bluish-purple Roberto Cavalli number - a long-sleeved crop top and long skirt - in keeping with her album title *Midnights*. Adele, who won for Best Pop Solo Performance, wowed in a full-length Louis Vuitton burgundy gown with sculptural shoulder ruffles and a plunging neckline, her hair cascading in soft waves. At the gala, she was seated with Lizzo - a major power duo. Super-producer Pharrell Williams rocked up in a quilted red leather ensemble - with a (faux?) fur coat over the top and uber-cool blinged out sunglasses. And pop dreamboat Harry Styles - who won Album of the Year honours and the award for Best Pop Vocal Album - obviously couldn't choose which colour to go



US singer-songwriter Taylor Swift

US singer-songwriter Kelsea Ballerini

English singer-songwriter Harry Styles

Canadian singer Shania Twain

BOLD  
BLACK  
BLING

Music's brightest stars on Sunday brought their fashion A-game to the Grammys red carpet, strutting their stuff in bold colours, slinky styles, major bling and barely-there gowns

with, so he wore them all. The British singer donned a glittering Harlequin-patterned sleeveless jumpsuit in every hue of the rainbow encrusted with Swarovski crystals, leaving his chest bare to show off his body ink. Country folk rocker Brandi Carlile donned a sparkly black Versace suit with a long coat and a pop of colour - a fuchsia blouse that was more readily visible during her performance of her Grammy-winning song *Broken Horses*.

Bold in black

Of course, some stars went for basic, but sexy, black. Olivia Rodrigo, last year's Grammy winner for Best New Artist, adopted the naked dress trend seen on several recent showbiz red carpets in a sheer floor-length black gown. Brazilian superstar Anitta, up for Best New Artist honours this year, also understood the assignment - she slayed in a strapless Versace gown with see-through detailing and a

long train. And Doja Cat, who wowed fashionistas at Paris fashion week with her exuberant looks and wild makeup, showed up in another Versace dress - hers was a one-shoulder latex frock that hugged her curves, finished with long gloves.

Simply flawless

As the new all-time Grammy winners with 32 statuettes, Beyonce is in a class by herself, and that applies to her fashion as well. The 41-year-old superstar arrived at the gala more than an hour late - due to traffic, host Trevor Noah said - in a strapless Gucci corset gown with a silver skirt cut up to her hip and rippling out in shimmering ruffles to finish in a train. Elbow-length gloves finished off the look for the new reigning queen of the Grammys. AFP



British musician Aynzli Jones



US singer Lizzo