

Unemployment rate drops

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's unemployment rate dropped well below the pre-pandemic level at the start of this year, thanks to the sultanate's efforts in preventing lay-offs of Omani workers and providing jobs to citizens during the pandemic in cooperation with the private sector.

The unemployment rate dropped to as low as 1.9 per cent in December 2021, well below the pre-pandemic level of 2.8 per cent in December 2019, the World Bank said in its recently released *Gulf Economic Update* report.

The World Bank noted that unemployment remains higher among Omani youth aged between 15 and 24, and particularly among young women.

The bank emphasised that more Omanis are currently em-



(Supplied photo)

Unemployment rate dropped to 1.9% in Dec 2021, compared to the pre-pandemic level of 2.8% in Dec 2019

ployed in the private sector as compared to the pre-pandemic times.

"The private sector continues to be the largest contributor to Omanis' employment. After a decline in 2020, the number of Omanis employed in the private sector has bounced back, and as

of December 2021, it is estimated at about 267,000 compared to an average of about 262,300 in 2019," the World Bank said.

The General Federation of Oman Workers' latest data shows that jobs of 45,708 citizens were saved in 2021.

By end of December 2021, as

many as 40,000 Omanis were hired bringing the total number of jobseekers within the range of 50,000.

The Ministry of Labour is aiming to provide 35,000 job opportunities through recruitment, replacement and training for citizens in 2022.

Oman-Iran trade hits record high of \$1.336bn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The volume of trade between Oman and Iran touched a record high in the last Iranian fiscal year (ending March 20), the head of the Iran-Oman Joint Economic Committee has announced.

Mohsen Zarrabi put the annual trade between the two countries at US\$1.336bn year, showing 53 per cent growth year-on-year.

He also stated that Iran's export to Oman rose 63 per cent to US\$716mn in the last fiscal year from US\$438mn the previous year.

H E Ali Najafi, Iran's ambassador to Oman, was also quoted by the Islamic Republic News Agency stating that Iran-Oman trade has hit a record high. Oman's exports to Iran were valued at US\$619mn.

According to H E Najafi, despite US sanctions and restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, trade with Oman experienced a substantial increase and officials of both countries were hopeful of further boosting bilateral trade.

He also noted that the sultanate ranked sixth among Iran's neighbours and second among the GCC states for imports from Iran.



Friendly and neighbourly ties between Iran and Oman have paved the way for evermore expansion of economic and business transactions

H E ALI NAJAFI

"Friendly and neighbourly ties between Iran and Oman have paved the way for evermore expansion of economic and business transactions," he added.

Iran is looking to have an agreement with Oman to allow preferential trade, which will help enhance bilateral economic ties.

Omani researcher produces biofuel from algae

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To produce environmentally friendly fuel and reduce pollution, an Omani researcher has made sustainable biofuel extracted

from algae.

An engineering student of Buraimi College, Hajar bint Khamis al Azriya's project - titled Al Nabdh al Akhdar - aims to produce biofuel extracted from a mixture of different algae and also produce bio-organic fertilis-

ers from the production waste.

"Biodiesel is an alternative to oil and reducing environmental pollution and gas emissions, as biodiesel is safer when burnt," Hajar said.

The Ministry of Education and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, North Sharqiyah Branch, have honoured Hajar's project.



Hajar al Azriya

Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation nominated Hajar to represent the sultanate to participate in International Women's Day celebrations held at Expo 2020 Dubai.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Hajar said, "In 2019, I did extensive work on the project, re-

searching and conducting lab experiments in cooperation with oil and gas companies."

She sourced different types of algae and extracted oils from these to produce biofuels. The residue of the process was used to produce organic fertiliser. "I have done a major part of the project, but I need financial and moral support to complete it and develop it further."

Hajar has also produced sustainable biofuel extracted from contaminated and harmful veterinary medical waste.

Thanking her family for supporting her, she said, "I wasn't born an engineer; my parents made me one."

Oman condemns burning of Quran copies in Sweden

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Foreign Ministry on Tuesday expressed Oman's strong condemnation of the Quran burning incident in Sweden.

A statement issued by the Foreign Ministry said, 'The Sultanate of Oman has strongly condemned the burning of copies of the holy Quran by extremists in Sweden and such acts of provocation to the feelings of Muslims and incitement to violence and hatred.'

It stressed the need for international efforts to consolidate the values of tolerance and coexistence and criminalise all acts that promote the ideology of hatred.



Antarctic sea ice shrinks to lowest level

Guangzhou, China - The area covered by sea ice in Antarctica shrunk to its lowest level in 2022, according to records that began in the late 1970s.

The record set this year is the second sharpest drop in ice coverage in just five years, Chinese researchers from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou and the Laboratory of Southern Marine Science in Zhuhai reported in the journal *Advances in Atmospheric Sciences*.

Researchers have been investigating ocean currents and weather phenomena behind the



melting, but are still faced with mysteries. While ice in the Arctic is rapidly decreasing due to global warming, the ice surface in

the Antarctic, on the other hand, has tended to increase slightly, by about one per cent every decade since the 1970s.

After an unusual decline recorded in 2017, it happened again this year at the end of the summer in the southern hemisphere at the end of February. For the first time, the extent of Antarctic ice actually fell to less than 2mn sqkm - about 30 per cent less than the average for the years 1981 to 2010.

The climate change service of the EU Copernicus programme has also reported that the daily measured extent of Antarctic sea ice this February had reached one of its lowest levels since records began in 1979.

ONA

جهاز الضرائب
TAX AUTHORITY

Announcement

In implementation of the provisions of the Value Added Tax law and its executive regulations, the Tax Authority calls upon those who are subject for VAT to submit their declarations for the first quarter of the year 2022 according to the form of tax return available on the electronic services portal: www.taxoman.gov.om

Attach all the required financial data according to the form no later than **April 30, 2022**. Hoping all those in question to adhere to the deadline.

Study on impact of truck drivers' visa costs on Oman's logistics firms approved

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In order to enhance the competitiveness of Omani land transport and logistics companies in the Gulf markets, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (OCCI) South Batinah branch approved a study on Tuesday.

The study is titled 'Visa system for truck drivers in the Gulf Cooperation Council and their impact on land transport costs.'

The study, which was completed recently, ascertained the impact of visa costs of truck drivers on the logistics sector.

The Board of Directors of OCCI's branch in South Batinah held its second meeting for the year on Tuesday. The meeting discussed supporting truck drivers and the land transport sector



The study revealed that logistics companies in the sultanate face stiff competition and challenges from GCC counterparts

tronic surveys. It identified several solutions and recommendations, which will be referred to the concerned authorities for approval.

To boost the business environment for land transport firms in Oman, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has banned the entry of empty foreign trucks into the sultanate.

Book on govt transition, modern renaissance of Oman launched

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The National Records and Archives Authority has issued the English version of the book titled *The System of Government Transition: Modern and Renewable Renaissance of Oman (An Analytical Study)*.

This edition is part of the 26th volume of the Research and Survey in National and International Archives series.

According to Oman News Agency, the book contains 614 pages and includes 16 chapters divided into two main sections. The book sheds light on the mechanism of transfer of power in the sultanate and documents the Basic Law of the State of 2021.

It also documents modernisation of legislation and organisation of the State's Administrative Apparatus, restructuring of the



government, the decision-making process, power transfer stability regulations and mandates for the Crown Prince in the sultanate, as well as the legal organisation of the Council of Oman and the Shura Council for 2021.

The book also elaborates on

ROP arrests man wanted in murder case abroad

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) arrested a person wanted by a foreign country for killing one of his relatives and attempting to kill another person.

In a statement, ROP said, 'Within the framework of joint cooperation between Royal Oman Police and the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), the Directorate General of Inquiries and Criminal

Investigations has arrested a person of Arab nationality wanted by a country on charges of committing a murder crime.

'The person is accused of killing one of his relatives and attempting to kill another person. Procedures are being completed against him.'

Meanwhile, ROP arrested two people for stealing in Dakhliyah governorate. 'Two people were arrested on charges of sabotage and seizing a safe from a shop as well as cash,' it stated.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	33	19
Doha	31	21
Kuwait City	31	22
Manama	31	22
Muscat	32	24
Riyadh	39	24

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MAFWR starts harvesting wheat from 40 acres of farm in Dakhliyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has started harvesting wheat from 40 acres of land in several wilayats of Dakhliyah governorate.

Suleiman bin Salim al Asimi, director of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in the wilayat of Adam, said, "Cultivation of wheat crop begins in the month of November and goes on till March each year. Wheat is harvested in a number of villages using modern machines instead of traditional methods."

According to Asimi, the department distributed 525kg of wheat kernels of different varieties this year. Fifteen farmers from Adam cultivated wheat on 40 acres. "Al Bashaer Farm cultivated the largest area (29 acres) and produced about 33 tonnes of wheat."

In 2020, the ministry signed a memorandum of cooperation with Oman Flour Mills to buy wheat from Omani farmers at a rate of RO500 per tonne. Oman produced 2,649 tonnes of wheat in the 2020-21 season.

Deal inked to develop Koot al Askar heritage site in Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) signed an agreement with International Point Projects Company to develop the Koot al Askar heritage site in the wilayat of Taqah in Dhofar governorate on Monday.

According to the agreement, International Point Projects Company will develop, manage and operate the Koot al Askar site. The agreement is in line with the ministry's efforts to involve the private sector in the tourism industry.

According to MHT, the agree-

According to the agreement, International Point Projects Company will develop, manage and operate the Koot al Askar site

ment aims to revitalise cultural heritage sites, support the tourism industry and enhance it in line with the rich and diverse heritage of the sultanate, create more job opportunities and support the local community.

The ministry confirmed that the agreement will help in attracting more visitors to this historical site, which highlights the richness of Omani history and its authentic culture.

MHT also signed an agreement with a local company to manage and operate a group of shops at Al Baleed Archaeological Park on Tuesday. The agreement is part of the ministry's goal to create a sustainable tourism sector. 'It will help attract more visitors to this historic site inscribed on the World Heritage List, which highlights the richness of Omani heritage and its authentic culture,' MHT stated.

TENDER NOTICE



The Internal Tender Committee of Emdad Logistics Company SAOC., hereby announces the following Tender:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of receiving Specifications	Date of Bid Submission	Suppliers	Tender Fee OMR	Place of Submission
ITC/TT/005 /2022	Design and Build Of Warehouse ,Open Storage, Maintenance Workshop, And Area Fencing	28th April 2022	29th May 2022	Only Specialized Companies	2,610/- OMR Non Refundable	Emdad Logistics Company, 3rd floor

Taking into consideration the following:

All specialized companies that wish to participate in the tender must deposit the tender amount into the bank account of the Company (details of the bank account is set out hereunder) and submit the original payment receipt of the tender along with a copy of the Commercial Registration Certificate and the contact details of the authorized individual (business card) to the address presented below:

From 09:00 - 15:00 (Sunday – Thursday).

Payment Information:
Bank Transfer:

Account Name	Emdad Logistics Co SAOC
Account Number	018020025780
Bank Name	Sohar International Bank SAOG
Branch	Al Khoudh Branch
Bank ID Code	BSHROMRXXXX

Complete Tender documents should be submitted in sealed envelope with red wax with tender number and title and addressed to the "Chairman of Internal Tender Committee". The envelope should not make any reference to the bidder details.

All applicants are required to submit the Tender in the Tender box in the main office of Port of Duqm Company at or before 04:00 PM on the assigned date for submission of the Tender. Tenders submitted after the above-mentioned date and time shall not be considered.

- The company is not obliged to accept the lowest offer or any other offer without any justifiable reasons.
- The company reserve the right to issue the order either in part or full for the quoted items without any justifiable reasons.
- The company reserve the right to reject the tenders not complying with the tender documentation requirement. For any clarification, please contact us through tenders@portofduqm.om

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MARKET WATCH

MSX30

4,261.98

Sensex

56,463.15

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs

198.84

Pakistani Rs

479.62

Bangladesh taka

224.33

Philippines peso

136.44

Sri Lankan Rs

858.53

*Rates as on April 19

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Oil rises as Libya outage adds to supply woes

Oil prices rose on Tuesday as investors fretted over tight global supply after Libya was forced to halt some exports and as factories in Shanghai prepared to reopen post a COVID-19 shutdown, easing some demand worries.

Brent crude futures rose 0.5 per cent to US\$113.77 a barrel at 0349 GMT, while US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures gained 0.3 per cent to US\$108.54 a barrel, according to Reuters.

Gains were limited with the dollar trading at a fresh two-year high. A stronger dollar hurts oil buyers holding other currencies. Both benchmark contracts gained more than 1 per cent in the previous session after hitting their highest since March 28

Middle East's food security at risk due to Russia-Ukraine conflict

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sparked price increases across commodity markets, most evident by the surge in oil and energy prices since late February. But agricultural commodity prices have also jumped higher globally given the importance of both Russia and Ukraine to key export markets.

The Middle East and North Africa region is particularly exposed to the war via higher agricultural commodity costs given the relative shortage of arable land in the region and its dependency on the flows of commodities from both Russia and Ukraine, according to Emirates NBD, one of the largest banks in the Middle East.

The Middle East is highly reliant on imports of food commodities, particularly for basic goods like wheat, rice and coarse grains (including corn, barley and other feed grains). More than 50 per cent of the Middle East's wheat consumption needs are met by imports, as per a research



Muscat Daily

note published by Emirates NBD on Tuesday.

"With such a high dependency on imports of basic agricultural commodities, any prolonged disruption can feed through into considerable economic and social pressures, particularly via higher food price inflation. A prolonged conflict in Ukraine and international trading firms avoiding transactions with Russian exporters will contribute to acute price pressures across

the region," Edward Bell, senior director - market economics at Emirates NBD, said in the research note.

The war in Ukraine has 'multiplied risks' for the Middle Eastern countries by raising food and energy prices, the World Bank said in a report last week.

According to the World Bank report, inflation in the Gulf countries is expected to reach 3.0 per cent this year compared to 1.2 per cent in 2021, and will rise to

3.7 per cent in oil-importing countries from 1.4 per cent last year.

Both Russia and Ukraine are major suppliers of agricultural commodities to import markets. Together they accounted for an average of 29 per cent of total global wheat exports from the 2017-2021 marketing years and 18 per cent of total coarse grain exports, with particularly large shares in barley and rye.

Outside of grains, both coun-

tries are the largest producers of sunflower seed as well as the associated seed meal and oil. While the war progresses, Ukraine has limited options to divert agricultural exports from normal seaborne routes with bottlenecks on rail capacity to European markets, let alone internal disruption as the conflict remains fraught, Bell said.

He said importers in the Middle East and North Africa are particularly reliant on flows of exports from both Russia and Ukraine. "Just taking wheat imports as a baseline, both countries are among the single largest source origins for imports and in some case account for a large majority of total imports. The UAE sourced around 63 per cent of its total wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine while in Egypt the share is closer to 80 per cent," Bell said.

Carry-over inventories of wheat, the research note said, were at relatively normal levels ahead of the conflict and already shipments are increasing from major producers in South America (Brazil and Argentina) to the

regional importers.

"A general benefit for food inflation across the region is that rice production is still set to expand this year, helping Middle East economies in particular relative to North Africa given higher regional consumption. However, a prolonged conflict that destroys or interrupts Ukraine's export infrastructure and sanctions on the export of Russian agricultural commodities will pose meaningful medium-term risks for prices and regional security of supply," Bell explained.

He further said that the conflict in Ukraine is also passing through to agricultural markets via higher fertilizer costs. Russia is a major producer of fertilizers—potash, phosphates and nitrogen—and has a large share of global export markets.

While fertilizers are not a major direct input cost for the Middle East's food costs given the shortage of arable land, higher agricultural chemical prices will pass through to other exporters and feed back into the Middle East and North Africa region, Bell added.

CBO issues RO77mn treasury bills Ezaars.com joins hands with Nabay.com

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills, issue number 138, was issued this week by the Central Bank of Oman. The total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO77.5mn, for a maturity period of 28 days, from April 20 until May 18.

The average accepted price reached RO99.946 for every RO100 bill, while the minimum accepted price arrived at

RO99.940. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.7022 per cent and 0.7026 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 0.75 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 1.25 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the

opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo). Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates.

The government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

Muscat - Oman's popular e-commerce marketplace Ezaars.com has entered a data migration association with the renowned digital platform, Nabay.com.

With this amalgamation, all the merchants on Ezaars.com will move to Nabay.com, thereby creating a larger collection of products and brands to choose from. Ezaars.com will cease operations on the current platform later this month, according to a press statement.

Ezaars.com, a venture by online brand management agency, Socioholics, has over 100,000 organic users and sells exclusive luxury brands retailed from merchants all over GCC with a portfolio that includes premium electronic gadgets, specialty foods, fashion accessories, lifestyle products, and even educational courses.

"We are thrilled to enter this association with Nabay.com. At Ezaars.com, our objective has been to bring exceptional



Jessica Asher

lifestyle, fashion, and home products to customers.

Through this partnership, we are sure that the end-user will be at a greater advantage owing to the larger portfolio that will be available," said Jessica Asher, founder of Ezaars.com.

With this association, the selection of brands and products increases to include over 6,000 within all categories online.

A homegrown e-commerce website, Nabay.com is spearheaded by Nabeel Sultan, entrepreneur and chairman of Nabeel Sultan Investments LLC. Launched in April 2019,



Nabeel Sultan

Nabay.com operates as a fully integrated global e-commerce marketplace. Merchants have the option to own their store and online presence on Nabay.com.

"Nabay.com was created to provide shoppers in the region with a wide range of products sourced from around the globe. We have seen exceptional growth right from the beginning and are now scaling up across the region, entering this association with Ezaars.com allows us to further accelerate our rapid growth trajectory," said Nabeel Sultan, founder of Nabay.com.

All merchants on Ezaars.com will move to Nabay.com, thereby creating a larger collection of products and brands to choose from. Ezaars.com will cease operations on its current platform later this month

Nabay.com recently went through the first round of funding where Mohsin Haider Darwish LLC invested in Nabay.com as a significant partner.

Ezaars.com is a venture of Socioholics, an online brand management agency operating in Oman and UAE for over nine years.

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MSX gains 0.2% as volumes rise

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) increased 0.2 per cent on Tuesday to close at 4,261.99 points. Most of the listed companies on the MSX have announced their preliminary financial results for the first quarter. All the sectoral indices closed in green territories on Tuesday led by Industrial index which rose 0.46 per cent. Financial and Services indices increased 0.08 per cent and 0.35 per cent, respectively. MSX Sharia index inched down by 0.07 per cent to close at 482.76 points.

Trading activities continued to remain weak at the bourse. However, total trading volumes rose 7.57 per cent to 14.69mn shares on Tuesday compared with 13.66mn shares traded on Monday.



Market turnover increased more than 37 per cent to RO3.13mn against RO2.28mn recorded in the previous trading session.

Market breadth of the MSX remained positive with 20 advancing stocks to nine declin-

ers. As many as 24 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers of the day were Sohar Power (9.76 per cent), Oman Fisheries (9.17 per cent), Al Madina Investment (7.7 per cent), SMN Power Holding (4.76 per cent) and National

Gas (3.57 per cent). Top losers were Dhofar International Development and Investment (-9.7 per cent), Dhofar Generating (-4.62 per cent), Gulf Mushroom (-3.08 per cent) and Al Batinah Power (-2.04 per cent).

IMF slashes global growth forecasts amid Ukraine war

Washington, US – The “seismic” impact of the war in Ukraine is spreading worldwide, causing the IMF on Tuesday to sharply downgrade its 2022 global growth forecast to 3.6 per cent.

That slowdown, 0.8 points lower than its previous estimate released in January, comes amid surging prices, shortages and rising debt levels, the IMF said in its latest World Economic Outlook.

The fallout is felt most acutely in the poorest nations, threatening to erase recent gains as they began to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the risks and uncertainty remain high, the organization warned.

“The economic effects of the war are spreading far and wide – like seismic waves that emanate from the epicenter of an earthquake,” IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said in the report.

Russia invaded Ukraine in late February, devastating the country’s infrastructure and ability to produce grain and other goods, while stiff sanctions on Moscow sent fuel prices higher.

The conflict also sparked a flood of refugees into neighboring countries.

The crisis will be the focus of global finance officials who gather in Washington this week



– virtually and in person – for the spring meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

The report shows Ukraine suffering a 35 per cent collapse of its economy this year, while Russia’s GDP will fall 8.5 per cent – more than 11 points below the pre-war expectations.

European nations will see much slower growth as the war drives up fuel and food prices, pushing inflation higher and keeping it there for longer than expected, which will harm countries worldwide, especially emerging and developing nations.

The United States and China also will feel the effects of the war and the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with

US growth expected to slow to 3.7 per cent, and China’s to 4.4 per cent.

Surging inflation

“This crisis unfolds while the global economy was on a mending path but had not yet fully recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic,” Gourinchas said.

That has fueled an acceleration of inflation – expected to hit 5.7 per cent in advanced economies this year and 8.7 per cent in developing nations – which endangers the gains of the past two years, the Washington-based lender warned.

The price pressures have prompted central banks in many countries to begin to raise interest rates to tamp down inflation, but that will hurt highly-indebted

developing nations, especially if the Federal Reserve and others move more aggressively, the report noted.

“Even prior to the war, inflation had surged in many economies because of soaring commodity prices and pandemic-induced supply-demand imbalances,” Gourinchas said.

Now, shortages caused by the war “will greatly amplify those pressures, notably through increases in the price of energy, metals and food,” he said.

Supply snarls in some sectors are expected to last into next year, while high inflation will be elevated for “much longer” than previously expected.

The official cautioned that the outlook is highly uncertain, and things could get drastically worse if the war is prolonged and tougher sanctions imposed on Moscow.

“Growth could slow significantly more while inflation could turn out higher than expected if, for instance, sanctions aimed at ending the war extend to an even broader volume of Russian energy and other exports,” he said.

Meanwhile, the pandemic is continuing, and lockdowns in China to defeat renewed coronavirus outbreaks are slowing activity, including in manufacturing

hubs, which “could cause new bottlenecks in global supply chains.”

“Through closely integrated global supply chains, production disruptions in one country can very quickly cascade globally,” Gourinchas said.

Developing nations face increasing demands on scarce resources, especially since debt loads have risen. Gourinchas added his voice to the call to help countries restructure their debt.

The G20 Common Framework adopted last year, which was meant to offer a path to restructure large debt loads, “has yet to deliver,” Gourinchas said in a blog post.

“The absence of an effective and expeditious framework is a fault line in the global financial system.”

A key hurdle has been the lack of information on the size of debt owed to China, as well as some other lenders, by private companies as well as governments, and the need for private creditors to participate in the debt relief.

World Bank President David Malpass, who has been outspoken on the issue, has said 60 per cent of low-income countries already face debt distress or are at high risk.

AFP

World Bank plans new \$170bn emergency fund

Washington, US – The World Bank is seeking to create a US\$170bn emergency fund to help the poorest nations being buffeted by multiple crises, the bank’s President David Malpass said Monday.

The “crisis response envelope” will continue the work begun during the COVID-19 pandemic, and help countries deal with surging inflation, which was made worse by the Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as the “severe financial stress” caused by high debt levels, he said.

“This is a continued massive crisis response,” Malpass told reporters. High debt and inflation “are two big problems facing global growth,” he said.

“I’m deeply concerned about developing countries. They’re facing sudden price increases for energy, fertilizer and food.”

The Washington-based development lender last week downgraded its forecast for global growth this year, and the IMF is expected to do the same when it releases its updated forecasts on Tuesday. Speaking ahead of this week’s spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank, Malpass said the 15-month aid fund would run through June 2023 and build on the US\$157bn COVID-response fund, which expired in June 2021.



David Malpass

“We expect to commit around US\$50bn of this amount in the next three months,” he said, adding that he plans to discuss the fund with the bank board in coming weeks.

Malpass repeated his concern for poor countries facing high debt levels, noting that 60 per cent of low-income countries already face debt distress or are at high risk. He has recommended improvements in the G20 Common Framework adopted last year, which was meant to offer a path to restructure large debt loads, but has not yet produced results. A key hurdle is the lack of information on the size of debt owed to China, as well as some other lenders, by private companies as well as governments.

G20 finance ministers will meet on Wednesday on the spring meetings’ sidelines.

AFP

IMF warns high debt could slow countries' economic recoveries

New York, US – Debt accumulated by businesses and individuals worldwide could slow economic recoveries from the pandemic crisis, the IMF warned Monday.

Governments took exceptional measures to support their economies as COVID-19 spread two years ago, including rolling out debt repayment suspensions or offering large-scale loans.

But these programs resulted in higher debt levels for some sectors, including those most disrupted by the virus, like tourism and restaurants, as well as low income households, the Washington-based crisis lender said.

In a chapter of its World Economic Outlook, the IMF said the debt burden could hold growth back in developed countries by 0.9 per cent and in emerging markets by 1.3 per cent over the next three years.

“Financially constrained households and vulnerable firms, which have grown in number and

proportion during the COVID-19 pandemic, are expected to cut spending by more, especially in countries where the insolvency framework is inefficient and fiscal space limited,” the lender said.

To avoid exacerbating problems, government should “calibrate the pace” of phasing out aid and spending programs.

“Where the recovery is well underway and balance sheets are in good shape, fiscal support can be reduced faster, facilitating the work of central banks,” the IMF said.

For struggling sectors, governments could offer aid to prevent bankruptcies, or provide incentives for restructuring, rather than liquidation.

“To lessen the burden on public finances, temporary higher taxes on excess profits could be envisaged. This would help claw back some of the transfers to firms that did not need them,” the lender said.

AFP

As G20 meets, US looks to increase pressure on Russia

Washington, US – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen this week will call on her counterparts in major economies to ramp up the economic pain on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine, a senior official said Monday.

The fallout from the war and the impact on the global economy will be key topics of discussion during the spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank, which began Monday.

Finance officials from the G7 and G20 nations also will meet this week.

“The secretary believes the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the need for the world’s largest economies to stand together to defend international order and protect peace and prosperity,” the Treasury official told reporters.

“She will use this week’s meetings to work with allies to continue our united efforts to increase economic pressure on Russia while mitigating spillover effects.”

The IMF and World Bank have warned of the devastating costs the war is imposing on the global economy, especially



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen

through rising prices for energy and food at a time of high inflation.

Western sanctions on Moscow have contributed to the price pressures, which are hitting the poorest countries the hardest.

While Yellen is “deeply concerned” about the impacts, “We are firm in our resolve to hold

Russia and its leadership accountable, and have imposed crippling sanctions,” the official said.

In a speech at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo vowed to “take apart Russia’s war machine, piece by piece, by disrupting their military industrial complex

and its supply chains.”

“We are continuing our efforts to use sanctions and export controls to deny Russia the critical inputs it needs, targeting key sectors like aerospace, electronics and others related to the defense sector,” he said, noting their invasion has taken longer than Moscow expected.

The Treasury official noted Washington also will continue to work to penalize countries that try to evade the sanctions and restrict Russian leader Vladimir Putin’s ability to project power, though they did not provide any specifics on the type of sanctions or the targets being considered.

Boycotting Russia

While Yellen will participate in key meetings this week, especially the opening session of the G20 focused on the fallout from the Russian invasion, she will not attend other sessions if officials from Moscow are included, the Treasury official said.

She will make it clear that “the benefits and privileges of the leading economic institutions of the world – which we helped create after (World War II) – are re-

served for countries that demonstrate respect for the core principles that underpin peace and security across the world,” the Treasury official said.

Russian finance officials are expected to participate remotely in G20 meeting on Wednesday, which is led by Indonesia this year.

Other officials from the world’s leading economies may boycott the sessions as well, a French source told AFP last week.

US President Joe Biden has proposed ejecting Russia from the G20.

Yellen will meet with Ukraine’s Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal and “will reiterate the Biden administration’s firm support for the people of Ukraine as they defend their lives and their country,” according to Treasury.

Adeyemo will meet with Ukrainian Finance Minister Sergii Marchenko on Thursday.

Yellen also will call for a coordinated multilateral effort to support Ukraine’s short-term funding needs for humanitarian relief and rebuilding.

AFP

Electric car sales on the rise despite rising costs

Beijing, China – Buyers around the world are lining up to purchase electric vehicles (EV) in 2022 even with sticker prices surging, flipping the script on a decade and a half of conventional auto industry wisdom that EV sales would break out only after battery costs dropped below a threshold that was always just over the horizon.

This year, EV demand has stayed strong even as the average cost of lithium-ion battery cells soared to an estimated US\$160 per kilowatt-hour in the first quarter from US\$105 last year. Costs rose due to supply chain disruptions.

For a smaller vehicle like the Hongguang Mini, the best-selling EV in China, the higher battery costs added almost US\$1,500,

equal to 30 per cent of the sticker price.

Experts noted that environmental concerns also are pushing more buyers to choose EVs despite the volatile economics.

Manufacturers from Tesla to SAIC-GM-Wuling, which makes the Hongguang Mini, have passed higher costs on to consumers with double-digit price increases for EVs.

Andy Palmer, chairman of Slovak EV battery maker InoBat, said margins in the battery industry are already wafer thin, so “rising costs will have to be passed onto carmakers.”

Vehicle manufacturers like Mercedes-Benz (MBGn.DE) will likely shift increases to customers if their raw material prices keep rising. “We need to



keep margins,” Chief Technology Officer Markus Schaefer told

Reuters news agency. Global EV sales in the first

quarter jumped nearly 120 per cent, according to estimates by

EV-volumes.com. China’s Nio, Xpeng and Li Auto delivered record EV sales in March. Tesla delivered a record 310,000 EVs in the first quarter.

This spike in battery costs could be a blip in the long-term trend in which technology improvements and growing production pushed costs down for three straight decades.

Industry data showed that the US\$105 per kilowatt hour average cost in 2021 was down nearly 99 per cent from over US\$7,500 in 1991.

Experts say battery costs could stay elevated for the next year or so, but then another big drop is probably in store as big-ticket investments by automakers and suppliers in mining, refining and battery cell produc-

tion, and a move to diversify raw material sources, tip the balance from shortage to surplus.

British battery company Britishvolt is due to launch battery production at a 45-gigawatt-hour plant in northeast England in 2024.

The industry has long been awaiting the battery cell cost threshold of US\$100 per kilowatt-hour, as a signal EVs were reaching price parity with fossil-fuel equivalents.

EV demand in China and other markets “is going up faster than people thought, faster than the supply of materials” for EV batteries, said Stan Whittingham, a co-inventor of lithium-ion batteries and a 2019 Nobel laureate.

ONA

Bank Nizwa launches ‘Nibras’ programme aiming to host industry’s key personalities

Intending to be the go-to bank for Sharia’a-compliant products, services and financial advisory, Bank Nizwa, Oman’s leading and most trusted Islamic bank, recently launched a series of events under the name of ‘Nibras’. The initiative is held under the headship of Shaikh Khalid al Khalili, chairman of Bank Nizwa to engage with the bank’s key stakeholders and position Bank Nizwa as a leader in Islamic banking.

Aligning with its objective and commitment to make Islamic Banking acquainted with the masses in Oman, The first session of ‘Nibras’ introduced panelist H E Tahir al Amri, executive president of the Central Bank of Oman and was moderated by Shaikh Khalili himself. The session highlighted various topics including the progressive career journey of H E Ameri as well as

the rapid digital revolution in the financial sector and how Islamic banking has stayed abreast with this progressive change.

During the panel discussion, H E Amri emphasised the application of digitalisation in an institutions day to day operations and creating a positive impact on the business. The panel also reflected on how innovation has affected the development of the banking industry and the outlook of Oman’s banking sector in the next five to ten years. Moreover, the panelist also shed light on digital transformation’s opportunities, challenges and regulations.

“Over the years, the Islamic financial system has significantly evolved. It is one of the most dynamic systems to emerge in recent years, and it has managed to pique the curiosity of millions of people all around the world,”



said Shaikh Khalili. “With more Omanis joining the national workforce every day and are required to make financial decisions, it is crucial to educate them about Islamic banking. Islamic banking seeks to promote the ideals of a prosperous society and stable economy. It offers commercially viable finance based on the values of fairness, ethics and compassion. In fact, Islamic banking was created to benefit, directly and indirectly, all members of the communities that it serves, under Sharia’a law.”

Bank Nizwa regularly conducts such knowledge sessions to increase awareness and clarity about Islamic banking and Shari-

a’a-compliant financial services and products, intending to enable attendees to make informed financial decisions. It hosts annual events with varying themes and targets diverse audiences, such as Bank Nizwa wholesales clients gathering, Islamic Finance Knowledge Programme and many more to expand its professional network.

“That being said, Bank Nizwa has always strived to be the financial partner of choice for the people and enterprises of Oman. Ever since its inception, the bank has been committed to providing Sharia’a-compliant innovative financial solutions, with an aim to offer customers a unique banking experience in line with their evolving needs,” he added.

As the first Islamic bank in Oman, Bank Nizwa maintains a long-standing commitment to raising awareness of the concept and principles of Islamic finance and sharing its multifaceted benefits with people across the sultanate. It has spearheaded several initiatives geared at advocating the concept of Islamic banking and the various advantages of opting for Sharia’a-compliant financing solutions. The Bank seeks to enhance the Islamic economy, contributing to the socio-economic development through integrated efforts between the various institutions.

With Oman’s growing economy being fuelled by a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, leading to job creation and adaption of innovation, it is only imperative that Islamic banks like Bank Nizwa stay ahead of the curve by undertaking such thought leadership programmes that are targeted to provide social and economic benefits to the members of the community.

Mazoon Electricity holds workshop on Oman Electrical Standards for staff

Mazoon Electricity (member of Nama group) organised its first workshop for its staff, licenced electricians and construction consultants as part of a series of workshops it has launched on the implementation of Oman Electrical Standards (OES) relating to electrical connections to buildings.

The workshop was organised for the benefit of Mazoon Electricity employees in South Batinah governorate and Al Suwaiq wilayat to apprise them with the latest update of standard 4 of OES and methods of its implementation, along with discussing existing challenges.

STANDARD OES-4 is a binding specification for electrical installations in buildings, whether residential, agricultural or industrial, and other fixed and temporary low-voltage connections.

It sets out the technical and safety requirements to be observed by distribution compa-



nies, engineering offices and contracting companies when designing, implementing and inspecting electrical installations in buildings.

The first workshop was attended by customer service staff who are divided into three groups over a period of three weeks, while other participants including licenced electricians and construction consultants will attend the upcoming workshops.

The move aims to keep pace with the continuous updates of OES, enhance communication

Premium Motors celebrates Qaranqasho with children

Premium Motors, official dealer for the German car brands Audi and Volkswagen in Oman, lined up a host of fun events for customer family and children to mark Qaranqasho, a community event traditionally observed in the middle of Ramadan.

A cultural highlight in Oman during Ramadan, Qaranqasho is a tradition when children go around singing songs around their neighbourhood and receive sweets and money.

Premium Motors marked the day at its showroom with giveaways, face painting, sketch colouring and other entertainment for children who were specially invited for the celebration. Creating memorable moments, the Qaranqasho event witnessed a great turnout.

Christian Nehme, general manager of Premium Motors, said, “Qaranqasho is a delightful tradition that brings families and



communities together during the most blessed time of the year. Our showroom was filled with the joy of children laughing as we celebrated Qaranqasho together. It was an enriching, engaging and entertaining experience for the children and all of us. It was indeed an unforgettable Qaranqasho.”

By hosting this event, Premium Motors intended to nurture local traditions and encourage its customers to enjoy and share precious moments together.



National Bank of Oman shares the spirit of giving during Ramadan

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has utilised its annual Ramadan community outreach programme, to share the spirit of giving across Oman and give back to the community by distributing 1,800 food hampers to families in need and people with disabilities.

Partnering with Al Rahma Association, Association Of Early Intervention For Children With Disability and Nida Al Khair Charity Team, the bank has continued to raise awareness of the charitable organisa-

tions and provide support for the community.

As part of the initiative, over 150 iftar boxes were given to families of children with rare diseases as part of the bank’s corporate social responsibility programs. Each hamper was personally delivered to the families by volunteers from NBO, strengthening the bank’s bond with the local community and providing much needed assistance, as well as peace of mind, during the holy month of Ramadan.

Special Ramadan offer on Foton Tunland

Gulf Great Sands, the exclusive importer of Foton vehicles in Oman, has announced a special offer on Foton Tunland pickup as part of its exclusive Ramadan offer - ‘Reward Your Business With More’. The promotion is available on Foton Tunland Pickup 2.4L Single Cab, 134hp, 2WD and Foton Tunland Pickup 2.4L Double Cab, 134hp, 2WD

Foton Tunland Single and Double Cab Pickup (2WD) which is powered by a 2.4 litre engine combines an original, robust design with the power, performance and reliability of established, globally reputed brands for its major drivetrain features. It is powered by the new generation 2.4 litre Turbo TGDl petrol engine making it the most powerful pickup in its class.

Features of the Tunland include Bosch electronics and ABS + EBD, ESC, On-Board Diagnostics (OBD, TPMS), dual airbag, Bluetooth and Parking sensors.

Foton’s Ramadan scheme which will go on till May 20, 2022, offers free periodic maintenance service, free insurance, free registration, assured fuel card, and LuLu gift voucher.

Partnering with Foton Motor Group, one of the world’s largest manufacturers of commercial vehicles, Gulf Great Sands (GGS) had launched a full range of com-

mercial vehicles in Oman. Through this exclusive distribution partnership, Gulf Great Sands has commenced the supply of a range of Foton’s commercial vehicles in Oman which includes Heavy Duty Trucks, Medium Duty Trucks, Light Duty Trucks, Pickups, Mini buses, Panel vans, and SUVs.

A GGS LLC spokesperson said, “This is the perfect season to own Foton Tunland pickups, which stands out for its robust power, superior performance, precision engineering and bold looks. It is powered by a 2.4 litre engine and combines an original, vibrant design with the power, performance and reliability of established, globally-reputed brands for its major drivetrain features.”

Free registration
All customers purchasing Foton Tunland pickup during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle registration.

Free insurance
All customers purchasing Foton Tunland pickup during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle insurance

(Oman and UAE) for private registration only.

Free service package
Customers of Foton Tunland pickup model will get assured first year or 10,000km periodic maintenance service only.

Assured free gift on every purchase: Fuel card
Customer of Foton Tunland pickup will get assured fuel card of RO50 fuel card.

Assured free LuLu gift voucher
Customer of Foton Tunland pickup will get an assured LuLu gift voucher worth RO100.

Manufacturer’s warranty
All customers purchasing Foton

Tunland pickup will be eligible for three years /100,000km manufacturer’s warranty during the above said period.

Foton Tunland
Foton Tunland Pickup has the largest loading deck in its class. Features of the Tunland include Bosch electronics and ABS + EBD, ESC, On-Board Diagnostics (OBD, TPMS), dual airbag and radar with buzzer. Foton Tunland Single Cab pickup which is powered by a 2.4 litre engine combines an original, robust design with the power, performance and reliability of established, globally reputed brands for its major drivetrain features.

A workhorse
Foton Tunland is a workhorse

which is very reliable, economical and ensures stable driving condition even in a peak loading condition. Foton Tunland symbolises everything the brand Foton stands for - remarkable design with high quality yet at affordable price. Formidable joint ventures with globally reputed manufacturers and major component brands, have enabled Foton to include advanced systems and state-of-the-art technology into every Foton vehicle.

Technical specification
►Engine Displacement - 2.4L (2378cc)
►Max Power (HP/rpm) - 134/5250,
►Max Torque (N•m/rpm) - 200 (2500 - 3500 rpm)
►Transmission - 5MT
►Overall Dimensions (LxWxH) mm - 5310x1800x1715
►Cargo Compartment Inside Dimensions (LxWxH) mm- 2315x1580x440
►Wheel Base (mm) - 3105
►Minimum Ground Clearance (Full Load, mm) - 160
►Seating Capacity (persons) - 2



Authority for SME Development and Bank Muscat to host Souq Al Wathbah

The Authority for SME Development and Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, have joined hands to organise the annual Ramadan Souq Al Wathbah at Muscat Street at the bank's head office from April 21 to 23 (Thursday to Saturday).

Souq Al Wathbah, which comes as part of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) of Bank Muscat, aims at promoting small enterprises and will feature attractive products and services from more than 120 entrepreneurs and SMEs.

The three-day exhibition, which is being held as part of the bank's commitment to deliver long-term benefits to the nation, will showcase a number of Omani products encompassing fashion, beauty, health and food as well as services at competitive prices.

The souq will be open from 8pm to 12 midnight and offer a unique shopping experience to visitors and promote Omani small enterprises. In particular, the Ramadan Souq creates an avenue to successfully market these small business' products in a market that is characterised by intense competition.

Hence, identifying and seizing



opportunities are all the more important for Omani SMEs to survive and grow to the next stage in their evolution. Bank Muscat has been organising the Ramadan Souq in association with the SMEs Development Authority since 2017 to strengthen the SME sector in Oman.

The Al Wathbah Souq has become an important platform that educates the community about the importance of MSMEs being the backbone of the country's economy and also gives Omani MSMEs an opportunity to

network with successful entrepreneurs and exchange experiences.

On this occasion, the organising committee would like to extend its appreciation to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for their cooperation in making this annual event a success.

The souq is expected to witness excellent participation from the public and the media, especially as it is one of the well-known souqs held during the month of Ramadan.

The event is part of the strate-

gies of both SMEs Development Authority and Bank Muscat to support Omani entrepreneurs and SMEs.

Bank Muscat has also launched various other initiatives to benefit entrepreneurs including the Al Wathbah Academy, Al Wathbah Businesswomen's Forum etc.

Al Wathbah Academy was launched by the bank in 2013 as part of its CSR initiative to equip Omani youth with self-employment skills. It reflects the bank's commitment to sustainable development and strengthening the

role of SMEs in the economic development of Oman.

The programme is conducted in 8 modules spread over a period of 4 to 8 months and leads to the internationally recognised certification from the Project Management Institute (PMI).

Notably, the bank's Al Wathbah SME department offers a comprehensive suite of tailor-made finance solutions and non-financial services targeted at small and medium enterprises.

Credit facilities, both funded and non-funded in nature, are available to all sectors. Further support is extended through non-financial services in areas of education, coaching, networking opportunities and workshops. Earlier in 2021, the bank organised a free VAT registration and advisory desk at the head office for the benefit of its large numbers of SME customers.

It must be mentioned in this regard that Bank Muscat is continuously partnering with both government agencies and the private sector to promote entrepreneurship in Oman, particularly amongst the youth as part of its focus on supporting the strategic goals of the ambitious Oman Vision 2040.



IHG Hotels and Resorts introduces IHG One Rewards

The travel industry is roaring back to life. From epic summer vacations to much-needed family reunions people are making up for lost time and memories. IHG Hotels & Resorts is here for it - debuting a new global loyalty programme: IHG One Rewards, as it welcomes guests to the next chapter of travel.

With nearly 6,000 hotels in over 100 countries, IHG Hotels & Resorts has been hard at work while the world was on hold - building its portfolio, repositioning itself in the industry with exciting new brands and partnerships, investing significantly, and taking loyalty to new heights. Today, as travellers pack their bags, dreaming of their vacations or the satisfaction of successful business trips, IHG is launching a best-in-class loyalty programme, IHG One Rewards, which is centered around its guests - giving them richer benefits, more ways to earn, and a new premier credit card, all powered by leading technology on its new mobile app.

The reimagined programme connects IHG One Rewards members to IHG Hotels & Resorts' growing portfolio of 17 brands, including one of the largest Luxury & Lifestyle collections in the world.

The launch of IHG One Rewards follows the announcement in January 2022 of the programme's new tier and bonus point earning structure - designed to help members earn more points faster and have more ways to use them.

IHG One Rewards will offer industry-leading value and relevant benefits for members to enhance their stays. Highlights of the programme include:

Faster Earn: A new tier and bonus point earning structure will allow members to earn more points faster and gain rewards sooner. The new tier and bonus

point earning structure starts on April 13, 2022 and will be reflected in all member accounts on or before April 17, 2022.

Richer Benefits: Further enhancements and member benefits include:

►Free Breakfast for Diamond Elite members as a Welcome Amenity choice

►Exclusive access to Reward Night Discount Promotions for Platinum Elite and Diamond Elite members

►More opportunities for Elite members to receive early check-in, late check-out (if available) and room upgrades (to suites, if available, or another premium room type for Platinum Elite and Diamond Elite members)

Exceptional Choice: Recognising that not all members want to use their points in the same way, IHG One Rewards marks the introduction of Milestone Rewards - a new, technology-enabled platform that will allow members to choose the rewards that matter most to them. Starting at just 20 nights stayed, members will be offered a choice from a selection of rewards every ten nights, through 100 nights stayed. These Milestone Rewards choices include points, US\$20 F&B Rewards, Confirmable Suite Upgrades and Annual Lounge Membership.

In the coming weeks, IHG Hotels & Resorts will also roll out the new IHG One Rewards mobile app, which will power IHG One Rewards and put the loyalty experience in the palm of guests' hands. The app is a key element to IHG One Rewards and sets a foundation for future growth.

The new, modern experience is more personalised, offers streamlined booking and allows members to stay informed, check-in faster, stay connected to the hotel and travel with flexibility. I

Mercedes-Benz Cars ME launches 'Road to Mecca'

On the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, luxury automotive brand Mercedes-Benz Cars Middle East has launched the 'Road to Mecca' - a four-part docuseries that ventures through 5000 years of heritage, history and the present day simultaneously. The campaign focuses on the journey of Nabil al Rostamani, a successful commercial aviation pilot, and his journey of self-discovery as he leaves behind his pilot wings to retrace the historic pilgrimage routes by road, from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia.

The journey to Mecca is a pilgrimage which many faithful Muslims have embarked on for thousands of years during the holy month of Ramadan. It is a time of year where people focus on the things that matter to them: Families, values and faith. As Muslims continue to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, the Mercedes-Benz campaign



aims to highlight how the historic journey to Mecca has been transformed by modern technology. A journey on the ground that once took months to complete, enriched with the exchange of goods, ideas, and traditions, can now be completed in the span of a few hours by air. While the pilgrimage itself remains sacred, the tradition, heritage and history associated with the ancient journey on

the ground has faded away with to the onset of modern technology.

Speaking to the launch of the campaign, Krishan Bodhani, vice president and director of sales and marketing of Mercedes-Benz Cars Middle East, said, "Mercedes-Benz has held a long and proud heritage and history in the Middle East, and we are constantly working towards ensuring that we are a part of the

continued development and growth of the region across all fronts - including its rich history and timeless traditions. It is with great pride that we embark on this journey to Mecca together, and we thank Nabil al Rostamani for allowing us to be a part of his deeply personal experience."

The four-part docuseries follows Rostamani - devoted father, adventure seeker, nature lover, and hero of this iconic journey. A successful commercial aviation pilot, Rostamani's career sees him take to the skies as he whizzes to different destinations. However, his fast-paced lifestyle means that he is always skipping past the world below without ever stopping or slowing down to enjoy the ride or the destination itself. Through the docuseries, audience members will gain the opportunity to come along Rostamani's journey to Mecca in a Mercedes-Benz G-Class.

Of his journey for the do-

cuseries, Rostamani said, "When I was offered the opportunity to partner with Mercedes-Benz to travel to Mecca, I just couldn't turn it down. Not only would I have the chance to relive the fond memories of the road trips I used to take with my father as a child, but I would also finally get to stop, slow down, and leave behind my pilot wings as I took the time to make the long road to Mecca in my G-Class. I am extremely grateful to Mercedes-Benz for the opportunity to be able to retrace my historic routes and allow me to share my journey of self-discovery with the world."

Viewers can enjoy the four-part docuseries that will air weekly throughout the course of Ramadan on <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqJp9gXDaxmLycYGadljwHQ> - YouTube channel and <https://shahid.mbc.net/en-MBCShahid>.

Nissan Oman's special Ramadan scheme with attractive starting EMIs

Nissan Oman from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), is offering a wide range of benefits for Nissan patrons as part of its special Ramadan offer.

The offer, which is available on all models purchased for personal use, will go on till May 19, 2022.

As part of the special scheme, Nissan Oman is offering free periodic vehicle service package, free insurance, assured gift voucher, free registration and many more. Vehicles purchased with commercial registration will not be eligible for the scheme. Vehicles bought for taxi, driving school, ministries, fleet and rental car usage will not be eligible for this scheme.

A senior official of Nissan Oman, from the house of SBA said, "At Nissan Oman every Ramadan we try to offer the best possible value proposition for the benefit of our esteemed customers. We would like to emphasise that this is the best time to buy Nissan cars. Nissan Oman has always made genuine efforts to offer world-class facilities and



services to its valued customers. We are happy to launch a special promotion on the wide range of Nissan vehicles in celebration of the holy month of Ramadan."

EMI for popular models

Customers can avail starting EMI rate as part of the offer. Starting EMI for Nissan Sunny 1.5L is RO59, Nissan Sunny 1.6L is RO69, Nissan Kicks is RO77, Nissan X-Trail is RO118,

Nissan Altima is RO120, Nissan Maxima is RO166, Nissan X-Terra is RO133, Nissan Pathfinder is RO171, Nissan Patrol Y61 Super Safari is RO207, Nissan Patrol Y62 is RO230, Nissan Navara is RO103 and Nissan Urvan is RO102. These starting EMIs are calculated on the price of the base model with 20 per cent down payment, 2.75 per cent rate of interest for ten years loan tenure through Bank Muscat. Subject to

credit approvals. Conditions apply.

Free periodic vehicle service package

All customers purchasing Nissan vehicles during this scheme period except GTR, 370Z will be eligible for free periodic maintenance service package for three years/ 60,000km (whichever is earlier), limited to six services only. This offer includes only the service intervals

of 10,000km.

Assured gift voucher

All customers buying Nissan vehicles during this scheme will be eligible for value added service (VAS) gift vouchers up to RO200. The gift voucher value will vary from model to model. All customers purchasing Nissan Sunny and Kicks will be eligible for a gift voucher worth RO50; Altima, X-Trail, X-Terra, Navara, and Urvan buying customers will

be eligible for RO100 gift vouchers; Maxima and Pathfinder buying customers will be eligible for gift vouchers worth RO150; Nissan Patrol (Y61 & Y62) customers will be eligible for gift vouchers worth RO200. Voucher can be redeemed for purchase of value-added service products, services contracts and Parts at SBA service centres. The gift voucher offer is subject to terms and conditions: VAS voucher will have to be utilized

fully in one go and cannot be fragmented. Any additional expenses on top of the voucher amount will be paid by the customer separately. VAS voucher will have a limited validity period and will have to be consumer before October 31, 2022.

VAS voucher is transferable. VAS voucher will be in RO50 denomination. Multiple vouchers will be issued for RO100/ RO150/ RO200. VAS Voucher can be redeemed only at SBA Workshop and the voucher amount cannot be discounted in cash.

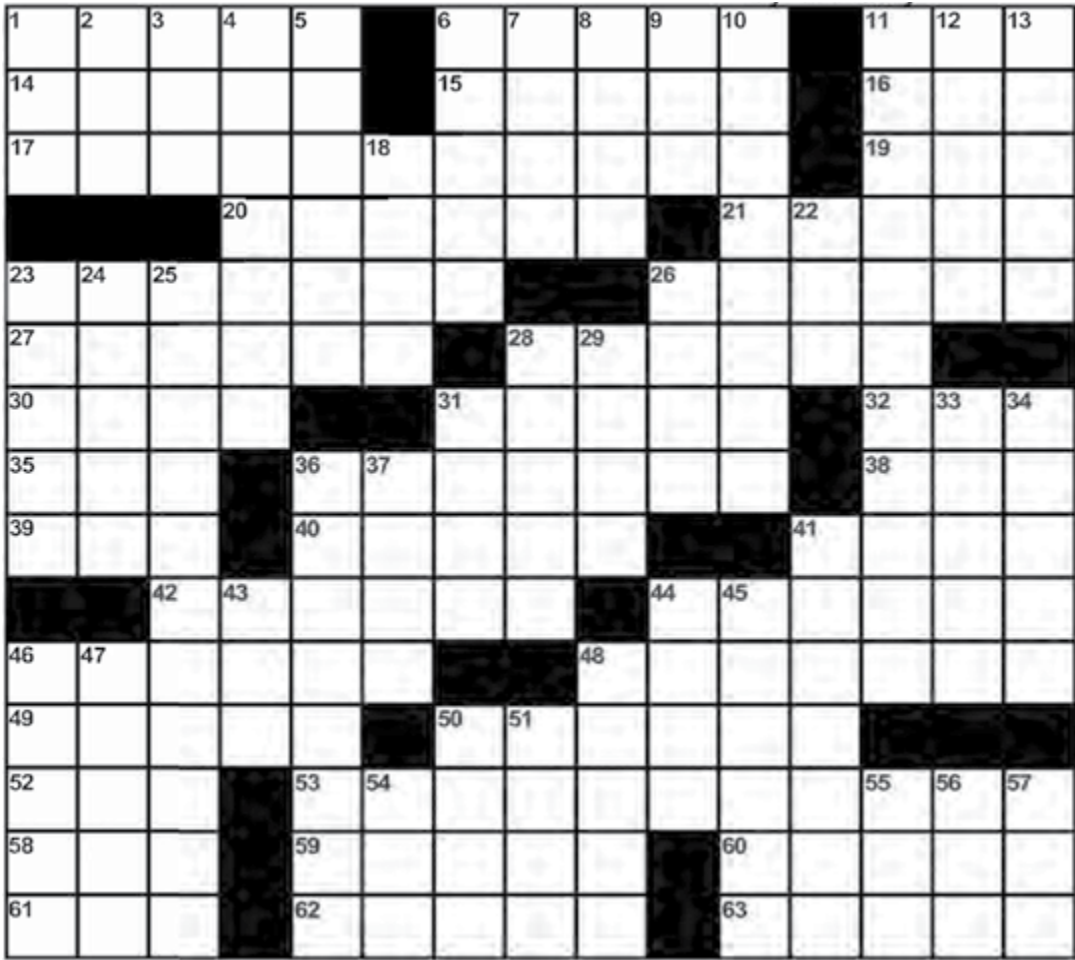
Free insurance

All customers purchasing Nissan vehicles during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle insurance (Oman and UAE only) except GTR, 370Z and Urvan.

Free registration

All customers purchasing Nissan vehicles during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle registration except GTR, 370Z and Urvan.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Alabama city
6) Lost in Paris?
11) Infomercials, e.g.
14) Elite military unit
15) At full speed on the water
16) Dandy
17) Manila's country
19) Transcript fig.
20) Rabbitlike rodent
21) Not this, that or those
23) Clandestinely
26) "The magic word"
27) Tom of Hollywood
28) Cowardly
30) Yamuna River city
31) Prepare for impact
32) Org. in 27-Across movies
35) 100 quintars
36) Like zebras
38) Costa del _
39) Tire letters
40) "Shhh!"
41) Vanity case for madam
42) Fix, in the animal

world
44) Extremely learned person
46) Some tropical fruits
48) Hall-of-famers and such
49) Deprived of nourishment
50) Mystical medicine man
52) Health resort
53) Gulf of Guinea country
58) "_ the season ..."
59) Cognizant
60) Continental currency
61) Yoko of "Double Fantasy"
62) Aired again
63) Prepare, as tea

DOWN

1) It runs slowly in the forest
2) Biblical verb ending
3) Hawaiian freebie
4) Mosquito-transmitted disease
5) Compadres
6) Coral Sea inlet

7) Give off, as light
8) Indian princess
9) Conk out, as an engine
10) Remaining a mystery
11) Kabul's country
12) Dunderheads
13) Extra
18) Ask, as a question
22) Ball prop
23) Massage target
24) Impulses
25) Upper Volta, once
26) Walk back and forth
28) Town news bearer of yore
29) Deeply engrossed
31) Camembert kin
33) Pitcher's place
34) Moves like a butterfly
36) Cop's wheels
37) Sounds of reproof
41) Become more uniform
43) Adam's beloved
44) 18-wheeler
45) Tequila plants
46) Enthusiasm

47) Detach, as a medal
48) Carrying a burden
50) 27-Across, for one
51) Zeus' wife
54) "I_ you one"
55) Anger
56) Fish eggs
57) Psychic power

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Passion and romance are on the agenda, and you're certainly ready for them. You've been dealing with someone else's problems for what seems like week, if not months, and it's definitely time for some fun. If you're at an event but would rather spend time alone with your partner, don't feel bad about ducking out early. Quality time is important to any relationship. Take it.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You aren't responsible for making other people happy. You can only support them in their quest to find their own bliss. So don't buy a ticket for that guilt trip a friend or relative is trying to send you on! Don't react emotionally to this person's plight. Your compassion is admirable, but you can't let it force you to do things that you really don't think are healthy for you. Be a good friend by keeping yourself emotionally healthy and content.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You're always game to meet someone new and unusual as long as they're interesting and, more importantly, fun. The universe has decided to afford you with all that and more right now, so prepare yourself for some wonderful diversions. Different and interesting people are due to come your way to enrich your life. Better take your vitamins. You'll need to keep up any way you can. And don't expect to sleep for more than a few hours.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

A major shakeup could happen in your world today. And just like when tectonic plates shift, these changes could create quite an earthquake. But instead of freaking out and running for cover, you should run right out into the open so you can be the first person to take in the new landscape once everything settles down. Several new opportunities will bubble up from under the surface, and you're in the best position to take advantage.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You could meet a smiling someone who seems a little too good to be true. They can have a good time doing just about anything, and what's worse, they can get along with anyone! What's their secret? Tail them today and find out what they do differently from you. Do they listen more than you do? Do they ask more questions? By the end of the day, you'll finally understand why they seem to have the whole world at their fingertips.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're going to be surrounded by adults all day long, but it might feel like you've been plopped down in the middle of a day-care center! Everyone's childlike behaviour won't bother you too much, though, because when everyone around you is doing nothing but goofing off or having tantrums, you can step up and get a lot done. If you can resist their invitations to play, you can finish up a project that has been on your list for far too long.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Whatever emerges from your lips on a daily basis is always surprising, but it's hard to shock those who know and love you. Today's announcement could come as something of an eyebrow raiser to those who aren't quite so familiar with you or your own startling style. Keep that in mind and try to be gentle. Just a tad. It wouldn't hurt to go easy on anyone who's just now getting to know you. Might make it easier, in fact.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Unexpected news is on the way, the kind that anyone would be just tickled to receive. Whether it was intended for your ears or not doesn't quite matter at this point. You now officially know the scoop. What are you going to do about it? Well, for starters, you can't say a word. You know that. But you might want to think about how this will change things, especially when it comes to earning your daily bread.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You are very focused on one issue right now, and you have strong feelings about it. That's wonderful. But just because you feel strongly about this doesn't mean that anyone else will, even if you can't believe that they don't. Resist lecturing them. Pushing someone to be more aware is going to backfire on you. Just let other people care about what they care about and not care about what they don't care about.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your casual acquaintances are suddenly much more fun to be around than your tried-and-true old buddies. Is this a sign that there's trouble in paradise? Probably not. From time to time, you need a fresh atmosphere for your socializing, and there's nothing wrong with that. Plus, it's more exciting to learn more about the people you don't know very well than it is to rehash old stories with old friends. This is probably a phase, don't lose perspective.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

The annoying or rude actions of the people around you will actually have some positive effects on your day. A person cutting in front of you in line at the coffee shop might cause you to miss out on that last scone, but did you need really need the extra calories anyway? When someone holds the elevator door for a straggler, they might be doing you a favour. Expect to enjoy a few floors of one-on-one time with someone interesting.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You're still worried about that certain work issue, something you really should have been able to let go of several days and maybe even weeks ago. But when you decide it's time to focus, there's really no talking you out of it. A lot might be going on, but getting too involved in it won't help. You have another day left to distract yourself. Use it well.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The Oregon Treaty of 1846, which divided 'the Oregon Country' along the 49th parallel, gave the USA land which later became parts of Montana and Wyoming, and the states of Washington, Oregon and which other?
- A. Iowa
B. Maine
C. Idaho
D. Nebraska
02. What is the name of the Jamaican netball team?
- A. The Proteas
B. The Partridge Family
C. The Moonlighters
D. The Sunshine Girls
03. Where is the largest waterfall in the world by depth and water volume?
- A. Venezuela
B. The Denmark Strait
C. Republic of Congo
D. Laos

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

E	Y	R	E
O	P	O	H
A	L	O	T
H	U	S	S

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

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

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

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

Six killed in blasts at Shiite school in Kabul

Tuesday’s blasts were caused by improvised explosive devices and left eleven others wounded as well

Kabul, Afghanistan - At least six people were killed and 11 others wounded on Tuesday by two bomb blasts at a boys’ school in the Afghanistan’s capital, with social media showing grisly images from the Hazara Shiite neighbourhood.

The number of bomb blasts in the country has significantly declined since the Taliban ousted the US-backed Afghan government in August, but the militant Islamic State group has claimed several attacks since then.

Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran told AFP that Tuesday’s blasts at the Abdul Rahim Shahid school were caused by improvised explosive devices and left at least six people killed and 11 wounded.

“These are preliminary figures. We are at the site and waiting for more details,” he said.

Zadran said a third blast had occurred at an English language centre in the same area, but did not specify whether it was caused by an explosive.

Zadran earlier tweeted that three blasts had rocked the

school, which is in an area mainly inhabited by the Hazara community and has been previously targeted by the militant Islamic State group.

Tuesday’s blasts occurred as students were coming out of their morning classes at the school, a witness told AFP.

Grisly images posted on social media networks showed several bodies lying at the gate and compound of the school.

Images showed patches of blood, burnt books and school bags scattered at the premises. Taliban fighters were seen cordoning off the area.

Victims were taken to hospital, but Taliban fighters kept journalists from the premises.

Attacks on public targets have largely diminished since the Taliban seized power in August last year, but IS continues to operate across the country.

The Taliban have also been blamed previously for attacks targeting the Hazara community, who make up between 10 to 20 per cent of the country’s 38mn population.



Medical staff move a wounded youth on a stretcher outside a hospital after blasts rocked a boys’ school in Kabul on Tuesday (AFP)

Taliban officials insist their forces have defeated IS, but analysts say the militant group is a key security challenge to the hardline Islamists who now rule Afghanistan.

Since seizing power the Taliban have regularly carried out raids on suspected IS hideouts, mainly in the eastern Nangarhar province.

IS has claimed some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan in recent years.

In May last year at least 85 people - mainly girl students - were killed and about 300 were wounded when three bombs exploded near their school in Dasht-e-Barchi.

No group claimed responsibility, but in October 2020 IS claimed a suicide attack on an educational centre in the same area that killed 24, including students.

In May 2020, the group was blamed for a bloody attack on a maternity ward of a hospital in the neighbourhood that killed 25 people, as well as new mothers.

AFP



Pakistan’s PM Shehbaz Sharif leaves after meeting with leaders of the coalition during his visit in Karachi on April 13 (AFP)

No surprises as Pakistan’s new PM names cabinet

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif sprang no big surprises in naming his new cabinet on Tuesday, doling out key portfolios to officials from the two parties that combined to oust Imran Khan after weeks of political crisis.

The cabinet is drawn mostly from Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), two usually-feuding dynastic groups who combined to force a no-confidence vote that ousted Khan on April 10.

How long the government lasts remains to be seen, however, as most of Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) lawmakers have quit parliament and the former cricketer turned politician has taken his fight to the streets to press for an early election - which must be held by October next year.

“It will be an uphill task for the prime minister to pull them together in one direction because some parties have local and regional interests, and some have national interests,” analyst Hasan Askari told AFP.

“If they handle economic issues, other problems will settle down - but if the situation worsens, everyone will blame the PML-N, which is in majority.”

Sharif, brother of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, did not name a foreign minister but that role is expected to go to the scion of another political family, 33-year-old Bilawal Zardari Bhutto.

The PPP’s Bhutto is the son of former president Asif Ali Zardari and assassinated ex-premier Benazir Bhutto, as well as the grandson of another prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was executed in 1979.

If confirmed, the Oxford-educated Bhutto would be one of the world’s youngest foreign ministers and tasked with repairing links with the West that frayed under the leadership of Khan, who accused Washington of conspiring to oust him.

Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan’s first woman foreign minister in the last PPP government, was named deputy.

Economy in doldrums

The key finance ministry returns to Miftah Ismail, a PML-N loyalist who served as deputy and briefly minister during the party’s last tenure from 2013-2018.

He inherits an economy in the doldrums, with crippling debt, galloping inflation and a feeble rupee. In meetings leading up to his appointment, Ismail said improving relations with the International Monetary Fund and getting a loan programme back on track was a key priority, as was improving tax collection.

New Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah, meanwhile, will have to tackle rising militancy and the threat of civil unrest from the huge public rallies Khan has called across the country in the months ahead.

AFP

Rising star in Thai politics faces #MeToo allegations

Bangkok, Thailand - An up-and-coming Thai politician is facing allegations he sexually abused more than a dozen women, in what is fast becoming the country’s most high-profile #MeToo case.

According to Thai police, 14 women formally filed complaints against former Democrat Party deputy Prinn Panitchpakdi, whose father was deputy prime minister and later director-general of the World Trade Organization.

The #MeToo movement - which originated in the United States - swept the globe in 2017 but, until now, Thailand had not seen a similar wave of public accusations of sexual assault against a well-known figure.

On Tuesday, Democrat Party

leader and Deputy Prime Minister Jurin Laksanawisit formally apologised and promised an investigation into the allegations.

“I feel very sorry and would like to apologise to the public for the incident related to Prinn Panitchpakdi,” he said.

Jurin acknowledged he fast-tracked 44-year-old Prinn into a leadership role in Thailand’s oldest political party, which was founded with a pro-royal and conservative agenda.

He also vowed to look into the party’s vetting process and said that he would resign from two committees examining gender equality and promoting women’s rights.

The statement follows increasing calls from women’s rights groups for the party to



Prinn Panitchpakdi (centre) leaves a police station in Bangkok on his way to court to ask for bail on Sunday (AFP)

take Prinn’s alleged misconduct seriously.

The allegations against Prinn have snowballed since he was accused last week of sexually harassing an 18-year-old student.

Following the woman’s statement, he resigned from the Democrat Party.

Since then, more women have come forward to accuse Prinn, with three charges of rape and sexual harassment filed on Saturday.

Lawyer Sittra Biebangkerd, who is representing some of the women, said on Monday he was aware of ‘14 in total right now’, without going into further detail.

Among the accusers is Bangkok Council candidate Anna Vidhyaphum, who alleges that Prinn raped her in 2021.

Prinn has denied all of the allegations, adding he would contest the accusations in court.

He has been released from custody on a US\$20,755 bail and is banned from travelling abroad.

Prinn, a former investment banker, was seen as a rising political star after being appointed the Democrat Party’s deputy leader in 2019, less than three years after joining it.

AFP

Iraq ‘green belt’ neglected in faltering climate fight

Karbala, Iraq - Envisioned as a lush fortress against worsening desertification and sand storms, the ‘green belt’ of Iraq’s Karbala stands as a wilted failure.

Sixteen years after its inception, only a fraction of the 76km crescent-shaped strip of greenery has materialised, though the years proved a deep need for protection against mounting environmental challenges.

Eucalyptus, olive groves and date palms first took root in 2006 as part of a plan for tens of thousands of the trees to form a green protective shield around the city in central Iraq.

“We were very happy because the green belt would be an effective bulwark against dust,” said Hatif Sabhan al-Khazali, a native of Karbala - one of Iraq’s Shiite holy cities that attracts millions of pilgrims every year.

Iraq’s host of environmental problems, including drought and desertification, threaten access to water and livelihoods across the country.

But nowadays, the southern axis of Karbala’s green belt is only about 26km long while the northern axis of the 100 metre wide strip is even shorter, at 22km.

Irrigation is sparse. No one pulls out the weeds anymore. Branches of the stunted olive trees sway between date palms - symbolic of Iraq - that struggle to grow.

“The construction was



A local farmer speaks in a palm and olive grove in the ‘green belt’ area of Iraq’s central city of Karbala (AFP)

stopped,” said Nasser al-Khazali, a former member of the Karbala provincial council.

He blamed ‘lack of interest from the central government and local authorities’, saying: “The funding didn’t follow.”

According to him, only nine billion dinars (US\$6mn) was spent on the northern axis, out of the originally planned 16 billion dinars.

It does little

‘Negligence’ is how Hatif Sabhan al-Khazali explains the fate of the green belt project.

It’s a frequent refrain - along with ‘financial mismanagement’ - on the lips of many Iraqis and

was a driving factor behind nationwide protests against graft, crumbling public services and unemployment that shook the country in 2019.

Iraq has consistently been a low scorer on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, ranking 157th out of 180 countries for perceived corruption levels in state institutions last year.

What was meant to be a buffer against frequent dust storms that envelop the country does little to lessen their impact.

Earlier in April, two such storms blanketed Iraq in less than one week, grounding flights and leaving dozens hospitalised

due to respiratory problems.

According to the director of Iraq’s meteorological office, Amer al-Jabri, sand and dust storms are expected to become even more frequent.

He attributed this increase to ‘drought, desertification and declining rainfall’, as well as the absence of green spaces.

Iraq is particularly vulnerable to climate change, having already witnessed record low rainfall and high temperatures in recent years.

In November, the World Bank warned that Iraq could suffer a 20 per cent drop in water resources by 2050 due to climate change.

Water shortages have been exacerbated by the building of upstream dams in neighbouring Turkey and Iran.

‘Criminal gangs’

These water shortages and the attendant soil degradation have led to a drastic decline in arable land.

Iraq ‘loses around 100,000 dunams (about 250 sqkm) of agricultural land every year’, said Nadhir al-Ansari, a specialist in water resources at Sweden’s Lulea University of Technology.

“This land is then transformed into desert areas,” he said, warning that Iraq should ‘expect more dust storms’ - which would have dire consequences on agriculture and public health.

Ansari blamed this on the Iraqi government and the ‘absence of water planning’.

During the country’s last dust storm, the agriculture ministry assured that it was working on ‘restoring vegetation cover’ in Iraq.

Last year an official with the Ministry of Water Resources referred to ‘several initiatives’ to plant green belts but he said that ‘unfortunately these belts were not maintained’, the state INA news agency reported.

As an example the official cited Karbala, where Hatif Sabhan al-Khazali despairs at seeing the city’s green belt left to ‘criminal gangs and stray dogs’.

AFP

Israel hits Gaza Strip after rocket attack as Jerusalem tensions spike

Jerusalem - Israel carried out its first air strike on the Gaza Strip in months early on Tuesday, in response to a rocket fired from the Palestinian enclave after a weekend of violence around a Jerusalem holy site.

The army also said its special forces had made five arrests overnight in the occupied West Bank, which has seen a string of deadly Israeli raids since an uptick in attacks and demonstrations four weeks ago.

Tensions have focused on the highly contested Al-Aqsa mosque compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem's Israeli-annexed Old City.

Palestinian worshippers gathering there for Ramadan prayers have been outraged by visits by religious Jewish under heavy Israeli police protection - as well as restrictions on their own access.

Jews are allowed to visit the site at certain times but prohibited from praying there.

The violence, coinciding with the Jewish Passover festival as well as the Muslim holy month, has sparked fears of a repeat of last year's events, when similar circumstances sparked an 11-day war that levelled parts of Gaza.

On Monday, warning sirens sounded after a rocket was fired into southern Israel from the blockaded enclave, controlled by the Islamist group Hamas, in the first such incident since



Flames and smoke rise during Israeli airstrikes in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Tuesday (AFP)

early January.

The Israeli military said that the rocket had been intercepted by the Iron Dome air defence system.

Hours later, the Israeli air force said it had hit a Hamas weapons factory in retaliation.

Hamas claimed to have used its 'anti-aircraft defences' to counter the raid, which caused no casualties, according to witnesses and security sources in

Gaza.

No faction in the crowded enclave of 2.3mn inhabitants immediately claimed responsibility for the rocket.

But it comes after weeks of mounting violence, with a total of 23 Palestinians and Arab-Israelis killed, including assailants who targeted Israelis in four deadly attacks.

Those attacks claimed 14 lives, mostly civilians, according

to an AFP tally.

The rocket fire also followed a weekend of Israeli-Palestinian violence in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound that wounded more than 170 people, majority of them Palestinian demonstrators.

Diplomatic sources said the United Nations Security Council was to meet on Tuesday to discuss the spike in violence.

Israeli police said they had re-

fused to authorise a march Jewish nationalists had planned around the walls of the Old City.

A similar parade last year, following a similar wave of violence, was interrupted by rocket fire from Gaza which in turn triggered an 11-day war.

That conflict killed at least 260 Palestinians including many fighters, and 14 people on the Israeli side including a soldier.

Incidents at the Al-Aqsa

mosque compound, the holiest site in Judaism and the third-holiest in Islam, have triggered repeated rounds of violence over the past century.

Hamas has vowed to defend Al-Aqsa's status as 'a pure Islamic site'.

But analysts have said in recent weeks that the movement does not want a war at present, partly because its military capacities were degraded by the last one.

They say Hamas is also wary that a new conflict could prompt Israel to cancel thousands of work permits issued in recent months to residents of impoverished Gaza, where unemployment is near 50 per cent.

But Islamic Jihad, another Palestinian faction which Israel says has thousands of fighters and rockets in the enclave, said on Monday that 'the enemy's threats to cut off aid to Gaza will not force us into silence over what is happening in Jerusalem'.

State Department spokesman Ned Price said Monday that the United States was 'deeply concerned' about the tensions and that senior US officials had been in touch by telephone with their counterparts from Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Arab governments.

'We have urged all sides to preserve the historic status quo' at the Al-Aqsa compound and avoid 'provocative' steps, he said.

AFP

US judge strikes down mask mandate

Washington, US - A US federal judge on Monday struck down the COVID-19 mask mandate for public transportation imposed by the administration of President Joe Biden, prompting major airlines to quickly drop the requirement.

US District Judge Kathryn Kimball Mizelle of the Middle District of Florida said the mask mandate exceeds the statutory authority of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The mandate requiring face masks on airplanes, subways, trains, buses, taxis and other forms of public transportation was recently extended by the CDC until May 3 amid a rise in coronavirus cases.

US airlines and a number of Republican lawmakers have called for an end to the mask mandate, which was issued by the CDC on February 3, 2021, shortly after Biden took office.

In light of the decision, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which runs security at airports, will not enforce directives 'requiring mask use on public transportation and transportation hubs at this time', an administration official said.

After the ruling was announced, United Airlines dropped its mask mandate on domestic flights and some international flights, depending on the rules in the country of arrival.

AFP



This file photo shows France's PM Jean Castex leaving the weekly cabinet meeting at The Elysee Presidential Palace in Paris on April 6 (AFP)

Government to resign if Macron wins: French PM

Paris, France - French Prime Minister Jean Castex said on Tuesday that his government would tender its resignation if Emmanuel Macron is re-elected president, in a bid to provide a 'new impetus' for Macron's centrist party ahead of parliamentary elections in June.

Macron is facing a close race in the run-off on Sunday against far-right veteran Marine Le Pen, with analysts warning that low turnout could prove a wildcard even though most polls show Macron in the lead.

If he is re-elected, "in the subsequent days, as is the tradition, I will present the president with my resignation and that of the government," Castex told France Inter radio. "I'm among those who think a new impetus should be found after the president's re-election," he added.

The parliamentary vote in June will be a further test of Macron's popularity, and renewing his majority will be essential for pursuing his reformist agenda, including an overhaul of the pensions system that would require most people to work

longer before retiring.

There has been speculation that European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde could be offered the post of prime minister, although she sidestepped a question on the issue at a press conference last week.

Opinion polls currently put the centrist Macron at 53 to 56 per cent in the run-off against 44 to 47 per cent for Le Pen, in a much tighter finish than in 2017, when the same candidates faced, off but Macron carried the vote with 66 per cent.

"The game isn't over yet and we certainly can't draw conclusions... that this election, this match, is already decided," Castex said. "We have to convince the French that Emmanuel Macron's programmes are the best for France and for them."

Macron and Le Pen will face off Wednesday evening in their first televised debate of the campaign, which could prove critical for winning over millions of voters, in particular on the left, who have told polling firms they remain undecided.

AFP

7 more COVID deaths in locked-down Shanghai

Shanghai, China - China reported seven more deaths from COVID-19 in Shanghai on Tuesday, after hundreds of thousands of cases in the metropolis during a weeks-long lockdown.

City authorities revealed the first deaths of this outbreak on Monday, with Tuesday's fatalities bringing the official toll to just 10, even as the virus continues to spread. Beijing insists its zero-COVID policy of hard lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines has averted fatalities and the public health crises that have engulfed much of the rest of the world.

But some have cast doubt on official figures in a nation where the vast elderly population has a



An employee works at a facility producing a COVID-19 vaccine, which is undergoing clinical tests, in Shenyang, China, on Tuesday (AFP)

low vaccination rate. By comparison, Hong Kong - which also has a high number of unvaccinated elderly - has tallied nearly 9,000

deaths among 1.18mn Covid-19 cases since the Omicron variant surged there in January.

Unverified social media posts

have claimed Shanghai's deaths are going unreported, but the messages have been quickly scrubbed from the internet.

Shanghai health officials said on Sunday that less than two-thirds of residents over 60 had received two COVID jabs and under 40 per cent had received a booster.

The seven newly reported deaths were all unvaccinated patients, city health official Wu Qianyu told a press conference on Tuesday. They were aged between 60 and 101, and suffered from underlying conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, according to the Shanghai Municipal Health Commission.

The patients 'became se-

verely ill after admission to hospital, and died after ineffective rescue efforts, with the direct cause of death being underlying diseases', the commission said.

Shanghai logged more than 20,000 new and mostly asymptomatic COVID cases on Tuesday, defying officials' efforts to stamp out the infection.

Many of the city's 25mn residents have been confined to their homes since March, with some flooding social media with complaints of food shortages, spartan quarantine conditions and heavy-handed enforcement.

Protest footage has circulated faster than government censors can delete it.

AFP

Macho culture fuels abuses, femicides in Greece

Athens, Greece - As a group of senior Greek coastguard officers sat down for a routine video call last June, the meeting opened with femicide jokes.

"I told my wife, you better behave or I'm getting a pilot's licence. She froze!" sniggered one officer in a video leaked this month by a local news portal after a Greek helicopter pilot murdered his wife last May.

"That's the way to teach them, my friend," replied another participant. "Didn't all little girls want to marry pilots when they were young?" laughed a third officer.

The men were mocking the murder of 20-year-old Briton Caroline Crouch by her Greek husband, Babis Anagnostopoulos, as she slept.

For over a month, he tried to present it as a botched burglary before confessing to the crime that sparked outrage in Greece.

Crouch's killing was one of dozens of similar cases in Greece in recent years, including the



This file photo shows a woman holding a flare as others hold placards during a demonstration in support of victims of rape and abuse and calling for justice, in Athens on January 21 this year (AFP)

gruesome rape and killing of American scientist Suzanne Eaton on the island of Crete in 2019. On average, Greece records 11 femicides per year, deputy minister for gender equality, Maria Syrengela, told parliament in January. She added that a special hotline for abuse complaints had received nearly 7,000 calls last year.

A belated #MeToo awakening in Greece has shed more light

on abuse of women in the country. But Greek activists say the conservative country has yet to fully dismantle traditional, patriarchal attitudes that lead to violence against women, while many have called for a separate crime charge for femicide.

Women 'should not talk much'

Macho culture has deep roots in Greece, say Eleftheria Kouman-

dou and Eleonora Orfanidou, co-hosts of an award-winning daily show on Athens 9,84 city radio that regularly addresses social issues including misogyny and homophobia. "A young girl (growing up) in Greece has centuries of tradition to deal with," Orfanidou told AFP.

"Greek education, the church and justice are conservative institutions built on the patriarchal model," she adds.

Koumandou says her mother, who gave up studying dentistry to avoid 'offending' her marble mason husband, would say women 'should not talk much'.

"We were taught not to display too much intelligence," notes Orfanidou. Greece first gave women the vote in 1952, and in 2020 elected its first woman head of state, former judge Katerina Sakellariopoulou.

But conservative Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis - whose sister was Greece's first female Athens mayor and foreign minister - has just two women ministers in his cabinet of 21.

Beatings of women were common in film a few decades ago - frequently for comic relief - while so-called honour killings over jealousy and adultery featured in popular song lyrics.

"In my school dance group, a folk song about a man who butchers his wife and then mourns her was among our favourites," recalls Orfanidou.

AFP

Major 'offensive' across eastern Ukraine

Russia's defence ministry said that 'high-precision missiles' had hit 13 Ukrainian positions in Donbas

Kramatorsk, Ukraine - Moscow launched dozens of air strikes across eastern Ukraine overnight, its defence ministry said on Tuesday, after Kyiv accused Russian forces of unleashing a major new offensive in the Donbas region.

Russia's defence ministry said that 'high-precision air-based missiles' had hit 13 Ukrainian positions in parts of the Donbas while other air strikes 'hit 60 military assets', including in towns close to the eastern frontline.

Ukraine's armed forces also confirmed that fighting had increased throughout the east just hours after President Volodymyr Zelensky said Russia had kicked off the widely anticipated offensive in the Donbas region on Monday. "The Russian occupiers intensified offensive operations along the entire line of contact," the general staff of Ukraine's armed forces said in a report published early on Tuesday.

Later on Tuesday, Russia's defence chief stopped short of confirming any new offensive but said his forces were committed to capturing swathes of eastern Ukraine.

"We are gradually implementing our plan to liberate the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics," Sergei Shoigu said referring to eastern Ukraine's two rebel regions, which Moscow has recognised as independent states. "We are taking measures to restore peaceful life," he said in a televised meeting with Russian military commanders.

Ahead of the advance, Ukrainian authorities had urged people in Donbas to flee west to escape,



An aerial picture shows coffins being buried during a funeral ceremony at a cemetery in Bucha, Ukraine on Monday (AFP)

We are gradually implementing our plan to liberate the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics

SERGEI SHOIGU

even as officials called off evacuations for a third straight day from frontline cities due to ongoing fighting.

"No matter how many Russian soldiers are brought here, we will fight. We will defend ourselves," Zelensky said on Telegram late on Monday.

In the Donbas town of Novo-

druzhesk, Nadya, 65, said 'we are bombed everywhere'.

"It's a miracle that we're still alive," she said, her voice trembling. "We were lying on the ground and waiting. Since February 24 we've been sleeping in the cellar." Control of Donbas would allow Moscow to create a southern corridor to the occupied

Crimean peninsula.

However, Zelensky's advisor Oleksiy Arestovich offered an alternate view during an interview on Ukrainian television on Tuesday, saying the offensive in the Donbas had been ongoing for 12 days. "They advance by looking for weak points in our defences. As soon as they find them, they

infiltrate them," he added.

In the south, Russia continued its push to capture the besieged port city of Mariupol, as Moscow issued a fresh call for the city's defenders to surrender.

But despite the desperate situation in the city, a senior US Defence Department official on Monday said Mariupol 'is still

contested'.

\$800mn boost

The first shipments of a new US\$800mn US military aid package had begun to arrive at Ukraine's borders this week, for use against Russian forces.

Washington was due to hold a video meeting with allies on Tuesday to discuss the conflict in Ukraine, even as it increasingly provoked the ire of Moscow.

"The United States and Western states under its control are doing everything to drag out the military operation for as long as possible," said Russia's defence chief Shoigu on Tuesday.

"The growing volume of foreign weapons supplies graphically demonstrate their intention to provoke the Kyiv regime to fight to the last Ukrainian."

His comments came as government sources in Spain said Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez was planning to travel to Kyiv 'soon' but did not confirm when for security reasons.

While much of the focus has remained in Ukraine's east, Moscow has also targeted the country's west with air strikes, killing at least seven people in the city of Lviv near the Polish border on Monday.

Lviv has largely been spared bombardment since Russia invaded on February 24, and the city and its surroundings had become a haven for those seeking safety from the war zone.

But even as strikes continued to hit targets across the country, the east appeared to be Russia's primary focus.

AFP



This file photo shows young Houthi fighters after they were released by the Saudi-backed government in the city of Marib on June 7, 2016 (AFP)

'Yemen rebels to stop using child soldiers'

Sanaa, Yemen - Yemen's Houthi rebels have agreed to stop using child soldiers, the United Nations said, after thousands of underage fighters were recruited for the seven-year civil war.

The Houthis will release all child soldiers within six months under a new action plan, the UN said, adding that the warring parties have all now committed to ending 'grave violations' against children. There was no immediate comment from the Houthis about the agreement, which was signed after a fragile, UN-bro-

kered truce started on April 2.

Nearly 3,500 child soldiers have been identified and more than 10,200 children have been 'killed or maimed' since the war started, the UN said.

"The Houthis have signed an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, the killing and maiming of children, and attacks on schools and hospitals as well as other grave violations," a UN statement said on Monday.

AFP

China confirms inking security accord with Solomon Islands

Beijing, China - China said on Tuesday it has sealed a wide-ranging security pact with the Solomon Islands, an agreement the United States and its regional allies fear could give Beijing a military foothold in the South Pacific.

The confirmation came a day after Washington discouraged a security agreement between the countries, with top US diplomats headed to the South Pacific this week to curb Beijing's inroads.

But Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters on Tuesday: "The foreign ministers of China and the Solomon Islands officially signed the framework agreement on security cooperation recently."

He did not say when or where the signing took place.

A draft version of the agreement, leaked last month, rattled Western governments with provisions allowing for Chinese security and naval deployments to the crisis-hit Pacific island nation.



China Police Liason Team officers training Royal Solomon Islands Police Force officers on March 29 this year (AFP)

According to the draft, armed Chinese police could be deployed at the Solomon Islands' request to maintain 'social order'.

Australia is concerned the agreement could see Beijing es-

tablish a military presence less than 2,000km away. Wang on Tuesday accused Western powers of 'deliberately exaggerating tensions' over the pact, and questioned the motives behind US of-

ficials' upcoming visit. The security deal represents a 'normal exchange and cooperation between two sovereign and independent countries', Wang said.

AFP

15 years in jail looms large on Myanmar's Suu Kyi

Yangon, Myanmar - Ousted Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi is expected to hear the first verdict in one of her corruption trials next week, a source close to the case told AFP on Tuesday, where she faces a possible 15 years in jail.

The Nobel laureate has been detained since her government was forced out in a coup last year that triggered mass protests, and she faces a raft of charges that could see her sentenced to more than 150 years in jail.

The 76-year-old has already been handed a six-year sentence for violating COVID-19 rules and walkie-talkie import regulations, but this is the first of her corruption cases to return a verdict. The junta court is expected to rule on Monday on the allegation that she took a bribe from former Yangon chief minister Phylo Min Thein, a source with knowledge of the case told AFP. A guilty verdict could mean a sentence of up to 15 years.

Journalists are barred from the proceedings and her lawyers have been banned from speaking to the press. In November, she and 15 other officials, including Myanmar's former president Win Myint, were also charged with alleged electoral fraud during the 2020 elections.

AFP

One killed, 10 wounded in clash with police in Sri Lanka

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka police shot dead one man and wounded 10 others on Tuesday in the first fatal clash with demonstrators protesting the nation's crippling economic crisis.

The island nation is in the grip of its most painful economic downturn since independence in 1948, with severe shortages of essential goods such as fuel and regular blackouts causing widespread misery.

Huge protests have called for the resignation of the government, which is preparing to negotiate an urgently needed bailout with the International



Protesters shout slogans during an ongoing anti-government demonstration near the president's office in Colombo on Tuesday (AFP)

Monetary Fund. Police fired live rounds at a crowd that had blockaded a highway in the central town of Rambukkana to protest oil shortages and high prices, hospital and police officials told AFP.

The protest was one of many spontaneous gatherings staged around Sri Lanka on Tuesday, after the country's main petrol retailer hiked prices by nearly 65 per cent.

Tens of thousands of angry motorists in various parts of the country blocked arterial roads with mounds of burning tyres to condemn the move.

In the capital Colombo, a large crowd of protesters have maintained a camp outside the seafront office of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa for more than a week, demanding the leader step down. Doctors at Sri Lanka's main children's hospital also staged a protest on Tuesday over a severe shortage of medicines and equipment.

In a bid to address growing calls for his entire government to resign, Rajapaksa on Monday appointed a new cabinet and acknowledged public anger over the ruling family's mismanagement. "People are suffering be-

cause of the economic crisis and I deeply regret it," the president said on Monday.

Sri Lanka is seeking three to four billion dollars from the IMF to overcome its balance-of-payments crisis and boost depleted reserves.

Dozens of Rajapaksa's lawmakers have turned against the administration and on Tuesday took seats on opposition benches in parliament. Sri Lanka's economic meltdown began after the coronavirus pandemic torpedoed vital revenue from tourism and remittances.

AFP

THAI CAVIAR

BLACK

GOLD

Using high-tech harvesting methods, a Thai-Russian partnership is offering a more ethical and affordable product – caviar – which also changes perceptions that Thai cuisine is always spicy

At his upmarket Bangkok restaurant, Michelin-starred chef Thitid 'Ton' Tassanakajohn spoons black caviar onto a plate, adding the newly affordable Thailand-made delicacy to his reinterpreted traditional family recipes.

The luxury food, better associated with chilly northern nations, is breaking into the Southeast Asian country's fine-dining scene, with the 37-year-old celebrity cook able to economically serve the roe thanks to an innovative farm outside the capital.

Using high-tech harvesting methods, a Thai-Russian partnership is offering a more ethical and affordable product, sparing the endangered fish that provide the delicacy from their usual fate of death.

"The price is... more affordable, I would say, compared to the ones that we imported," Ton explained, as he sprinkled caviar over Thai dip 'Lhon Pu' at his restaurant Lahnyai Nusara. Using caviar also helps challenge perceptions that Thai cuisine must always be spicy with strong flavours, he added.

"I think it's opened many doors for many chefs to use it as well," he said.

Milking the sturgeon

Roughly 200km away at the popular seaside resort town of Hua Hin, it is time to harvest 'black gold' at the Thai Sturgeon Farm, which supplies local distributor Caviar House.

Hundreds of the giant fish swim in tanks kept at a balmy 21 degrees Celsius (70 Fahrenheit) - a world away from the chilly Caspian Sea where the species live in the wild.

"No one else has this kind of farm in a tropical climate," the farm's co-owner Alexey Tyutin disclosed.

The fish - considered living dinosaurs - can survive for up to 100 years and are typically up to four metres long. Traditionally caviar producers kill the female fish to extract the eggs, but Tyutin's farm 'milks' the sturgeon.

Using the fish for as long as possible helps make the venture sustainable and profitable, the 55-year-old said. During harvesting, fish are moved to the 'winter room', initially set at six degrees Celsius and increased to 15, before their eggs are extracted.

"Let's say if the fish weighs 25kg, we usually expect about 2.6 to 2.7kg of caviar," Tyutin said, adding that the farm estimates it may produce up to two tonnes this year.

Breeding sturgeons in a simulated environment requires vast amounts of energy - despite the use of solar panels, the monthly electricity bill is almost US\$9,000.

"We are chilling down the water because the water temperature outside is 31 degrees. These fish can't tolerate it and they will die immediately," Tyutin said. But Thailand's tropical climate has given the business a competitive advantage as the higher water temperature helps sturgeons mature at six years old compared



Employees 'milking' a female sturgeon fish for caviar at Thai Sturgeon Farm in the coastal province of Hua Hin

No one else has this kind of farm in a tropical climate

ALEXEY TYUTIN



Alexey Tyutin (L), co-owner of the Thai Sturgeon Farm, and fellow investor and restaurateur Bill Marinelli looking at sturgeon fish in a tank at the facility in Hua Hin

Thai pride

While Caviar House is only selling domestically at the moment - with a tin of the delicacy retailing for between US\$230 and US\$832 - they hope to expand to exporting in the future.

Recent European Union sanctions against Moscow over the Ukraine invasion have targeted caviar, but the restrictions are largely symbolic as Russia is only a small exporter.

Instead, competition comes from China, which has become the market giant, producing 84 per cent of the world's sturgeons, according to a European Commission report.

The industry suffered during the pandemic with high-end restaurants, airlines and cruise ships battered by travel curbs, although some fine-dining establishments adapted by decreasing portions and incorporating them into takeaway meals.

The international caviar market, however, is expected to record a compound annual growth rate of seven percent between 2020 and 2025, according to a 2021 report by Technavio Research.

France, Germany, China, Spain, the United States, Japan and Russia are major markets but demand is fast growing in other parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

Meanwhile, well-heeled Thai foodies and chefs are recognising the benefits of caviar, rich in vitamins, minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids.

"It took only a few days for Thai chefs to start ordering after we sent samples for them to try," farm co-owner Noppadon Khamsai, 43, said.

"They say this is a good product and the importance is it's made in Thailand, and they're really proud to be presenting this Thai product."

AFP

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RAMADAN SOUPS

Hot slurps



Tomato and Carrot Soup

Ingredients
6tbsp olive oil, 1 large onion - minced, 5 large ripe tomatoes - minced, 2 garlic cloves, 1 small green bell pepper
4 large carrots - peeled, 1 small stick of celery, 2tbsp tomato paste, 1-2 sprigs fresh thyme, croutons - to serve

Method
Heat olive oil in a cooking pot over medium heat. Add the onion and caramelize. Add the tomatoes and cook until they get completely mushy and drain all their juices. Stir occasionally with a wooden spatula. Cut remaining vegetables into large chunks and add to the pot as well. Cook for about 5 more minutes, stirring occasionally. Once veggies have softened, stir in tomato paste and thyme. Cook for 2 more minutes and then add 2 litres of water. Simmer, partially covered, for about 1 hour. Blend soup using an immersion blender until it gets nice and creamy. Garnish with thyme, croutons.



Spinach Soup

Ingredients
1tsp oil, 120g spinach (4 cups leaves), 2 garlic cloves, 2tbsp butter, 1½ inch cinnamon
1 bay leaf, 2½tbsp all-purpose flour, 2½ cups milk, 1 cup water, divided), ½tsp salt, 1tsp sugar
½tsp crushed black pepper, 2 to 3tbsp cream, 1tsp olive oil, ¼tsp red chilli flakes – for garnish (optional)

Method
Heat 1tsp oil in a pot and saute sliced garlic for 1 minute. Add the spinach and saute until it wilts and the raw smell has gone completely - 5 to 6 minutes. Cool this and blend to a smooth puree with ½ cup water. Melt butter in the same pot and reduce the heat to low. Add bay leaf and cinnamon, and let them sizzle in the butter for a minute. Add flour and saute until it loses the raw flavour - 2 to 3 minutes. (Do not brown the flour.) Pour milk slowly and mix well. Simmer and let it cook until slightly thick. Then add sugar, black pepper, spinach puree and ½ cup more water. Bring this to a gentle boil and add 2tbsp cream. Let it simmer until the soup thickens and all the raw flavour of spinach is gone. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Pour into bowls garnished with cream, black pepper/red chili flakes, and a drizzle of olive oil. Serve hot.

Tomato Egg Drop Soup

Ingredients
3 medium-sized ripe tomatoes
2 eggs
1tbsp oil
1 stalk scallion - finely chopped
1tsp dried shrimp - optional
1 litre water (around 4 cups)
½tsp salt
1 pinch ground white pepper
¼tsp sesame oil
1 sprig coriander – chopped

Method
Cut a cross on each tomato (opposite the stem). Leave them in hot water (just boiled) for 1-2 minutes. Remove and peel the skin off from the cross-cut. Then, dice them into small cubes. Crack the eggs into a bowl, add 1tbsp water, and whisk until smooth.
Heat up the oil over a high heat in a pot/wok. Fry spring onion and dried shrimp until fragrant. Stir in the tomato pieces and leave to cook until they become a little mushy. Pour in water then put the lid on. When the water begins to boil, uncover, and slowly pour in the egg whilst swirling around with a spoon. Turn off the heat when the soup comes back to a boil. Add salt, ground white pepper and sesame oil. Sprinkle chopped coriander.



If you're not in the mood for quick bites at iftartime, try some interesting soups to whet your appetite

Lentil Soup

Ingredients
1tbsp olive oil, 1 onion - chopped, 2 medium carrots - grated
¾ cup dried red lentils – soaked for an hour, 4 cups vegetable stock
½ cup milk, 1tsp ground cumin, 1tsp chopped parsley – for garnish
A pinch of ground cumin and chili flakes – for garnish

Method
Heat the oil in a large pot over a medium heat. Add the onion and cook for 3 minutes until softened. Stir in the carrots, lentils, stock, milk, and cumin. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 15 minutes or until the lentils are cooked. Puree with a hand held blender and add more water to thin, if desired. Ladle the soup into bowls garnished with chopped parsley, ground cumin and chilli flakes.



Football rallies around Ronaldo after death of baby son

Manchester, United Kingdom - The football world rallied around Cristiano Ronaldo and his partner Georgina Rodriguez on Tuesday after they announced that their newborn son had died.

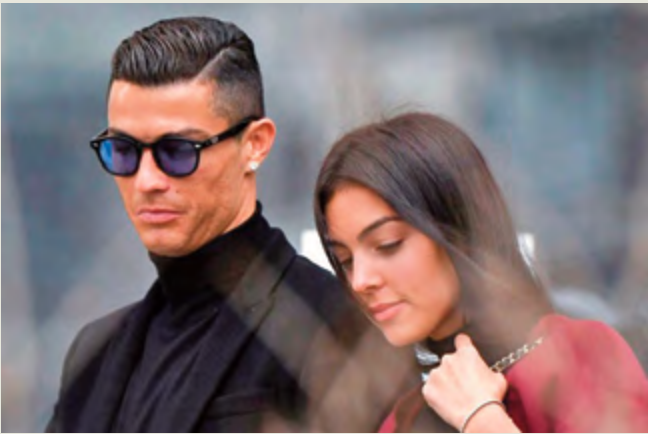
The 37-year-old Manchester United forward had revealed in a social media post last October that the couple was expecting twins. In a post released on Monday on the Portuguese international's Twitter account, they confirmed the birth of a

baby girl.

"It is with our deepest sadness we have to announce that our baby boy has passed away. It is the greatest pain that any parents can feel," Ronaldo and Rodriguez said in a jointly signed statement.

"Only the birth of our baby girl gives us the strength to live this moment with some hope and happiness. We would like to thank the doctors and nurses for all their expert care and support.

"We are all devastated at this



Cristiano Ronaldo and his partner Georgina Rodriguez (AFP)

loss and we kindly ask for privacy at this very difficult time."

The couple, who met during Ronaldo's time at Real Madrid, have a four-year-old daughter together, while Ronaldo has three other children.

The announcement was met with widespread sympathy from across football.

"Your pain is our pain, Cristiano," Manchester United tweeted. "Sending love and strength to you and the family at this time."

On their web page, Real Madrid said that the club and its officials "deeply regret the death of one of the children that our beloved Cristiano Ronaldo and his partner, Georgina Rodriguez, were expecting".

"Real Madrid joins the grief of the whole family and wants to show them all our love and affection," the Spanish giants said.

Rival clubs, among them Leeds United, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, also sent condolences.

"All of us here at Liverpool FC send our deepest condolences to you, Georgina and the family," Liverpool tweeted.

Ronaldo's United teammates also joined the outpouring of sympathy.

"Thoughts are with you and Georgina, brother I'm so sorry," forward Marcus Rashford wrote on Twitter. Goalkeeper David de Gea responded to Ronaldo's announcement with a simple heart emoji.

AFP



Cadiz's Lucas Perez (C) celebrates after scoring against Barcelona in their Spanish League match at the Camp Nou on Monday (AFP)

Barcelona's top-four finish under threat after shock defeat by Cadiz

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona's place in La Liga's top four looks much less secure after they suffered a surprise 1-0 defeat at home to relegation-battling Cadiz on Monday.

Lucas Perez's close-range finish early in the second half condemned Barca to a second consecutive defeat, on the back of their shock exit at the hands of Eintracht Frankfurt in the Europa League on Thursday.

Barcelona stayed second but are level on points with both Sevilla in third and Atletico Madrid in fourth while Real Betis in fifth are only three points behind. Xavi Hernandez's team do have a game in hand over the trio below them.

But the loss means Barca have won only one of their last four matches, that victory coming via an injury-time winner against 19th-placed Levante.

Any hopes they had of making leaders Real Madrid feel uncomfortable are surely over, with Madrid 15 points clear at the top, having played a game more.

"We must be self-critical," said Xavi. "We have to say things to each other's faces. This is Barca and we have to be better. At home we have to show more hunger, more faith, more character. This was a final and we have not played it like that."

Cadiz climb out of the relegation zone to 16th, two points clear of the bottom three.

The defeat by Frankfurt on Thursday was a particularly bitter pill to swallow, given the Catalans effectively ceded their home advantage by allowing more than 20,000 away fans into Camp Nou.

Xavi said on Saturday Barca had felt "robbed in their own home" and one of the club's prominent fan groups boycotted the Cadiz game in protest, with the section behind the goal at one end empty.

"We need everyone," said Xavi. "Barca has to be more united than ever now."

Controversy surrounded Gerard Pique on Monday too, after a report by El Confidencial said the defender's company, Kosmos,

are to receive 24 million euros for their part in moving the Spanish Super Cup to Saudi Arabia. Pique was not involved against Cadiz as he had a hamstring injury. As well as issues around the Frankfurt fans and Pique, Xavi finds himself confronting the team's first real dip since he was appointed in November.

Barcelona can ill-afford to miss out on Champions League qualification, with the club's debts at the start of the season amounting to more than a billion euros.

Cadiz should have been in front at half-time but Perez shot wide after being given a simple finish by Ruben Sobrino.

Ousmane Dembele had

Barcelona's best chance but the Frenchman was unable to finish off a driving run, his shot straight at Cadiz goalkeeper Jeremias Ledesma.

Cadiz continued to create the better chances and two minutes into the second half, they took the lead.

Jordi Alba lost the ball in mid-field and Alex's cross found Sobrino, whose header was parried by Marc-Andre ter Stegen, only for Perez to follow in.

Alex should have put Barca out of sight but fired wide from Ivan Alejo's pull-back before Barcelona's Luuk de Jong, on as a substitute, headed straight at Ledesma.

AFP



Stephan El Shaarawy (2nd L) celebrates his goal with team-mates

El Shaarawy strike dents Napoli's title hopes

Milan, Italy - Napoli's bid for a first Serie A title in 32 years suffered a massive setback on Monday as Stephan El Shaarawy's injury-time equaliser snatched a 1-1 draw for Roma.

Lorenzo Insigne's early penalty looked to have put third-placed Napoli on track to move within two points of league leaders AC Milan with five matches remaining, but El Shaarawy's late intervention left them four points behind.

Reigning champions Inter Milan are two points behind their city rivals in second place, but

with a game in hand.

Luciano Spalletti's Napoli are hoping to lift a first Scudetto since the second Diego Maradona-inspired triumph in 1990, but this bad-tempered draw could prove decisive come the end of the campaign.

The point was not much help to the top-four hopes of Roma, who missed the chance to cut the gap to fourth-placed Juventus to three points. It has been a potentially ruinous spell for Napoli, following a 3-2 home loss to Fiorentina last time out.

AFP

PSG hope to wrap up title but Messi misses out

Paris, France - Mauricio Pochettino is hoping Paris Saint-Germain can clinch the Ligue 1 title on Wednesday despite being without the injured Lionel Messi, as the coach batted away questions about his future in the French capital.

PSG are 15 points clear of Marseille with six games left in the season after beating their rivals 2-1 on Sunday.

That means they could be crowned champions on Wednesday, provided Marseille fail to beat Nantes and PSG better their nearest challenger's result when they travel to Angers.

If Marseille do not slip up, PSG will have another chance to secure their eighth title in 10 seasons - and a record-equalling 10th French crown overall - when they host Lens on Saturday. But despite their strong position, the



PSG will be without Lionel Messi against Angers on Wednesday

end of the season is proving to be something of an anti-climax for PSG, who started the campaign by signing Messi and targeting Champions League glory.

AFP

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RCB V LCG

Du Plessis, Hazlewood star as Bangalore beat Lucknow





BRIEF SCORES:
Royal Challengers Bangalore 181 for 6 in 20 overs (Faf du Plessis 96 (64) 11x4, 2x6, Glenn Maxwell 23 (11) 3x4, 1x6; Holder 2 for 25) beat Lucknow Super Giants 163 for 8 in 20 overs (KL Rahul 30 (24) 3x4, 1x6, Krunal Pandya 42 (28) 5x4, 2x6; Josh Hazlewood 4 for 25) by 18 runs

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



DELHI CAPITALS

VS



PUNJAB KINGS

How Knight Riders fumbled against the genius of Yuzvendra Chahal

Mumbai, India - At the Brabourne on Monday, when Yuzvendra Chahal began the 17th over of the second innings, Kolkata Knight Riders were 65.79% favourites to win. But by the end of it, they had a 9.49% chance.

In the Knight Riders' dugout, though, it was clear that over shouldn't have gone down the way it did. "Probably with four overs to go, we were firmly in the driver's seat," their coach Brendon McCullum said. "Then a couple of silly mistakes and just not handling the pressure as well as we should have cost us the game.

"Forty off four with six wickets in hand, we were still very much in charge of the game. Credit to Chahal, he is just an absolute brilliant bowler. He is one of those guys, pressure situations don't bother him. We talked extensively in the meetings about how he was such a threat, and that we didn't want to give him wickets during key moments of games.

"I think if we had our time



Yuzvendra Chahal in action against Knight Riders

again, we'd probably look to play that over a bit differently. We saw the impact you could have had against the seamers in the last couple of overs with the ball sliding on." It was perhaps

the way the wickets fell that irked McCullum more. Venkatesh Iyer and Shreyas Iyer both charged at him, and were beaten in the flight before falling respectively to a wrong'un and a

Forty off four with six wickets in hand, we were still very much in charge of the game

BRENDON MCCULLUM

legbreak. McCullum would have probably taken 36 off three overs rather than these attempts at hitting sixes.

Having seen two wickets fall, though, McCullum still had hope to cling on to. Pat Cummins owns the joint-fastest fifty in all of IPL, which he hit earlier in this competition. Cummins was slated to come in at the fall of Shreyas' wicket, but his record against spin is precisely what keeps him from becoming an allrounder. In all T20 cricket, he averages 10.75 against spin at a strike rate of 87.75 as against 20.7 and 155.71

against pace.

McCullum wanted to maximise his pace-hitting so he sought to protect him from Chahal. So out came Shivam Mavi ahead of Cummins with one ball to defend and then a free hit available off the last ball against Chahal. Mavi, though, had an almighty swipe at the first ball he faced, bringing Cummins out to face the last ball of the over.

Cummins was expecting the wrong'un, but Chahal was actually not even desperate for the hat-trick. Even here, Royals were taking the more pragmatic option. Chahal said later he would have been happy with a dot, but he didn't want to give Cummins anything in his wheelhouse by turning in.

His memories of the Lucknow Super Giants game were still fresh where he got greedy in the 18th over, ending it with a googly to the No. 10, who smacked it for a six.

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Positives aplenty

Impressive showing in the UAE, especially from Jatinder Singh, Bilal Khan, and Kaleemullah give Oman hopes of making the ODI World Cup Qualifiers in India next year

Dubai, UAE - Oman put up an impressive show at the recent tri-series in the UAE where they took on Scotland and Papua New Guinea in a double round-robin tournament. They were head and shoulders above Papua New Guinea, beating them comfortably in two matches. Even though they lost to Scotland twice, on both occasions they came close to snatching victory.

In the first encounter against Papua New Guinea, Oman restricted their opponents to 224 for 9 and chased the target down with seven wickets and 35 balls to spare. In the second match against the same opponents, Oman amassed 277 for 8 and bowled Papua New Guinea out for 192 in 44.3 overs.

Further, the games that slipped away were matters of fine margins. In their first game of the series, Oman cleaned Scotland out for 215. However, an untimely run-out coupled with an inspired effort on the field from their opponents meant that they fell four runs short at the end of a thrilling run chase. In the other match, Oman fought hard until the very end to defend their total of 225, but a brilliant 37-run knock from Mark Watt sealed the game for Scotland with just one ball to go.

Jatinder Singh was undoubtedly the star with the bat for Oman. He scored 259 runs, including two half-centuries and a magnificent century. Jatinder's 118-run knock against Papua New Guinea on April 12 is the highest ever individual tally for Oman in ODIs. He displayed a wide range of strokes and always had the upper hand against the bowlers.

With the ball, Bilal Khan continued his hot streak and picked up 13 wickets - the highest individual tally of the tri-series. He claimed his third five-wicket haul in the space of nine games in the final match of the tournament. The last time he went wicketless in an ODI for Oman was on September 28, 2021.



Jatinder Singh was by far Oman's best batsman, scoring a total of 259 runs from four outings



Kaleemullah took seven wickets to share the workload with Bilal



Bilal Khan picked up 13 wickets, the highest in the series

tember 28, 2021.

Kaleemullah complemented Bilal superbly in all the games and went on to pick up seven wickets himself. Both of them were equally effective with the new ball as well as the old.

There were other positives too. Khawar Ali and skipper Zee-

shan Maqsood played the supporting act in Oman's games against Papua New Guinea expertly, allowing Jatinder to truly dominate the bowling attack. Ayaan Khan collected a total of 155 runs, with his 68 in the first match very nearly proving enough to take Oman over the

finish line.

Kashyap Prajapati and Mohammad Nadeem were excellent in the third game, as was Fayyaz Butt in the first two.

Overall, Oman continued right where they left off in their last trip to the UAE and played an impressive brand of cricket, one

that was high on quality and competitive spirit. With four games to go, they lead the ICC Men's CWC League 2 table by 16 points, having played 16 matches more than second-placed Scotland and look a great bet to qualify for the ODI World Cup Qualifiers in India next year.



Spain's Tommy Robredo has 12 ATP titles to his name (AFP)

Robredo retires after defeat in Barcelona

Madrid, Spain - Former world number five Tommy Robredo played the last match of his career on Monday, losing 6-1, 6-1 to Bernabe Zapata Miralles at the Barcelona Open.

Robredo, who made his professional debut in Barcelona in 1999 and lifted the title in 2004, had announced he would retire after playing at his home tournament this week.

The 39-year-old won 12 ATP titles and knocked Roger Federer out of the US Open in 2013. He reached seven grand slam quarter-finals.

Zapata Miralles, ranked 119th

in the world, proved too strong for his fellow Spaniard, winning in just over an hour.

Italy's Lorenzo Musetti continued his excellent start to the clay-court season by beating Argentinian Sebastian Baez 7-5, 7-5, to reach the second round.

Musetti defeated world number nine Felix Auger-Aliassime in Monte-Carlo last week.

American Brandon Nakashima also progressed. He beat Spanish qualifier Nicolas Alvarez Varona 7-6 (8/6), 6-3 and will face second seed Casper Ruud in round two.

AFP

Former world champ Khan robbed at gunpoint

London, United Kingdom - Former world champion boxer Amir Khan has revealed he was robbed at gunpoint in London on Monday.

Khan, 35, said he and his wife Faryal were safe after the incident, in which he had a watch stolen after being confronted by two men with a gun.

"Just had my watch taken off me at gun point in East London, Leyton," the British fighter tweeted.

"I crossed the road with Faryal, luckily she was a few steps behind me. Two men ran to me, he asked for my watch whilst having a gun pointed in my face. The main thing is we're both safe."

A statement from the Metropolitan Police said: "Police were called at 21:15 on Monday, April 18 to High Road, Leyton.

"A man aged in his 30s is alleged to have been approached by two males who threatened him with a firearm before steal-



Amir Khan

ing his watch and fleeing. There were no reports of any shots fired or any injuries.

"Police responded and conducted an area search. At this very early stage there have been no arrests.

"An investigation has begun and police are following a number of enquiries."

Khan, the former WBA and IBF light-welterweight champion, was beaten by fellow Briton Kell Brook in a sixth-round stoppage in Manchester in February.

AFP

World number one Djokovic aiming to be 'as ready' as possible for French Open

Belgrade, Serbia - Novak Djokovic said on Monday that he was aiming to be "as ready as I can be" for the French Open as he prepares for just his third tournament of the season in Belgrade this week.

The world number one was deported from Australia ahead of the Australian Open in January over his Covid vaccination status, before also missing Indian Wells and the Miami Open in the United States.

In the Serbian star's absence, Rafael Nadal won a record 21st Grand Slam singles title in Melbourne, moving out of a tie with Djokovic and Roger Federer. Djokovic will be hoping to match his great rival's tally at the French Open, which begins on May 22.

"Roland Garros is the quintessential clay-court tournament and I'm partly already there in my thoughts, in terms of preparation and everything I'm doing at the moment to get there as ready as I can be," Djokovic said in Belgrade.

The 34-year-old also said he was planning to play in the Madrid Masters and the Italian Open ahead of Roland Garros.



I need match practice and this is the surface (clay) that requires a lot of time spent on the court during training sessions, and even more during matches

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

"My current plans include Madrid and Rome," he added. "It depends, really, on my re-

sult here and the shape I'm in. We'll decide then."

Djokovic lost in his opening

match of the Monte Carlo Masters last week to eventual runner-up Alejandro Davidovich Fokina, after a quarter-final exit in Dubai in February.

"I was not fully ready for the tournament in Monte Carlo and I knew that before the tournament started," he said.

"However, I need match practice and this is the surface (clay) that requires a lot of time spent on the court during train-

ing sessions, and even more during matches. I hope to play more matches in Belgrade than in Monte Carlo."

Djokovic won an ATP event in the Serbian capital last season, the week before the start of the French Open, which he won for the second time despite trailing Stefanos Tsitsipas by two sets in the final.

"I had never before played a tournament in the week ahead of Roland Garros but last year I decided to do just that.

"Because it was Belgrade and I needed the feeling that the audience is the wind beneath my wings. It came true, I won the tournament, and it turned out I made a good decision ahead of the French Open."

Top seed Djokovic will face a compatriot when he enters the tournament in the second round -- either Laslo Djere or Hamad Medjedovic.

He could face former US Open champion and two-time French Open finalist Dominic Thiem in the quarter-finals, as the Austrian plays his first ATP event since last June after a series of injury setbacks.

AFP

Ronnie O'Sullivan faces probe after lewd gesture

London, United Kingdom - Former world number one Ronnie O'Sullivan could be sanctioned after appearing to make a lewd gesture at the World Snooker Championship.

O'Sullivan made the gesture as he walked back to his seat after missing a black in the 13th frame of his 10-5 first round victory over David Gilbert on Monday. "We are aware of the incident and it has been referred to the WPBSA disciplinary committee," a World Snooker Tour

spokesperson said.

Six-time world champion O'Sullivan faces a possible fine over the incident. The 46-year-old will meet Northern Ireland's Mark Allen in the second round.

Allen criticised the quality of the table at the Crucible Theatre after a 10-6 success against Scott Donaldson.

"I struggled a little bit with the table," Allen told Eurosport. "It wasn't the best I've ever played on."

AFP

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