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Muscat Nights to kick-start on Thursday

Our Correspondent
Muscat

After a gap of three years, Muscat Festival, re-branded as Muscat Nights, is returning to woo citizens and residents. Starting from January 19 and running until February 4, the event will be specially focused on youth.

The 17-day festivities will take place at four locations: Qurum Gardens, Naseem Park, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) and Oman Automobile Association (OAA).

Speaking at a press conference at the Al Bustan Palace, A Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Sunday, Ahmed bin Mohammed al Hamidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, said, "The goal of Muscat Nights 2023 is not limited to entertainment alone, it wants to promote domestic tourism as well and support local industries by providing a space for social and cultural communication."

Muscat Nights is only the starting point of a series of events that Muscat Municipality has planned for 2023, the chairman said, hoping that "those events will live up to the aspirations of our society and the youth".

The main focus of Muscat Nights will be game zones and food stalls in all the venues. One of the main ideas behind organising Muscat Nights is to encourage people to visit parks and be with nature, Hamidi added.

"Our aim is to give an incentive to people to come out from their homes and engage themselves in physical activities in the parks. We are hoping that people will throng the venue parks in this lovely weather, and enjoy the



The goal of Muscat Nights 2023 is not limited to entertainment alone, it wants to promote domestic tourism as well

AHMED AL HAMIDI

games and other activities planned for the event."

Through this event, he said, "we want to spread joy and build a cultural bridge to connect people through paintings, heritage and art, an arena to show talents, promote health and well-being".

Hamidi confirmed that the activities of Muscat Nights were carefully chosen. "Focus is on the quality of the event, and not on the number of activities. Its two-week duration is very suitable for holding such events."

For future events, the Muscat Municipality chairman informed that they are in consultation with the concerned authorities for a suitable site, which can be designated for holding such entertainment events.

Regarding traffic safety and security for visitors, Brigadier General Mohammed bin Nasser al Kindi, Director General of Operations at the Royal Oman Police said, "We shall be very active during these days and ensure that traffic and safety is at its best. The police will provide guidance, and will deploy members of civil demesne to help if necessity arises."

ROP will also participate in a number of educational shows and exhibitions during the event.

ROHM CELEBRATES ACCESSION DAY WITH A SPECIAL PERFORMANCE



The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) held a special celebration to mark the third anniversary of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's accession to power on Sunday evening. The ceremony included a musical performance conducted by the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra led by maestro Hamdan al Shaely, along with Spanish maestro Placido Domingo. The ceremony was attended by the members of the Royal family, senior government officials, as well as a number of other dignitaries (ONA)

Expectations run high as Oman inch close to Gulf Cup glory

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's national football team is one step away from the final of the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup with its semi-final encounter set against Bahrain on Monday, at 5.15pm. The match will be held at Al-Minaa Olympic Stadium in the Iraqi city of Basra.

On the same day, Iraq, which is hosting the tournament for the first time since 1979 - will play Qatar at the Basra International Stadium in another semi-final.

With Oman being so close to play the final, several sports analysts and football fans excitedly shared their views on the country's chances at the Gulf Cup when reached by *Muscat Daily* for their comments.

Speaking over phone from Iraq, Faisal al Balushi, general supervisor of the Omani National Team Fans, said, "Two-time champions Oman will not give up and will fight till the last minute against Bahrain to reach the final. The Omani team defeated Yemen and Saudi Arabia and managed a draw with Iraq. They were not easy matches."

Balushi informed that the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth in cooperation with OQ, is providing free air tickets to fans



who wish to go to Basra and support the national team.

Khalid al Dagheishi, a sports analyst, said, "Oman did not perform well, despite its victory against Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and a draw with Iraq. However, the team achieved what was required of it by reaching the semi-final. I expect the team to reach the final and win the title."

Ali al Sheyadi, a former player and captain of Suwaiq's Muntaser, reminded that Oman consistently made it to the last four of the Gulf Cup. "Our team

has a great chance to reach the final but it should play an offensive game and not resort to defence like the previous matches. Oman played a very strong friendly before the tournament against Germany in Muscat, and I hope they will play the same way against Bahrain."

In a press conference on Sunday, Oman's coach Branko Ivankovic said, "We are happy to have reached the semi-finals through a difficult group. The match is important for both teams. Our team's goal is to win."



We believe in ourselves and will strive to win and reach the final. I understand the demands of the Omani fans for a great result

BRANKO IVANKOVIC

He asserted that the team was ready despite injuries to a few key players. "The match against Bahrain, the defending champions, will be difficult because it is a stable team and it seeks to regain the title. We believe in ourselves and will strive to win and reach the final. I understand the demands of the Omani fans for a great result."

The coach congratulated the Iraqi people and their fans on successful organisation of the tournament.

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Low pressure to bring rains from Tuesday

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The northern parts of Oman, especially the Musandam governorate, will receive moderate to heavy rains due to a low pressure from Tuesday.

In a statement, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) said, 'Oman will be affected by a low pressure trough on Tuesday and Wednesday. The governorate of Musandam will be affected by

thunderstorms of varying intensity accompanied by active downwind with chances of cumulus clouds.'

The CAA added that sporadic rains are also predicted for the coastal areas along the Sea of Oman.

The condition of the sea will be moderate along most of the sultanate's coasts with maximum wave height of 2.5m and become rough during thunder-showers along the coastal areas

of Musandam and Sea of Oman coast.

In the forecast for Monday, the Oman Met department predicted mainly clear skies over most of governorates with a drop in temperature and advection of medium and high clouds.

'There is also a chance of isolated rains over Musandam governorate and late night to early morning low clouds or fog patches over parts of the coastal areas of the Arabian Sea.'



At least 67 killed in Nepal plane crash



Qatar's Nasser al Attiyah wins fifth title at Dakar Rally

Omani researcher develops app for early detection of breast cancer

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An Omani researcher at the Sultan Qaboos University has developed an app, based on thermography, deep learning and cloud computing, for early detection of breast cancer.

The project, Self-Detection of Early Breast Cancer Application with Infrared Camera and Deep Learning, led by principal investigator Dr Mohammed Abdullah al Husaini, engineer in the Technical Services Department at SQU, is the recipient of the latest edition of the National Research Award.

Husaini won the award in the Young Researcher's category in the Information and Communi-



cation Technologies field.

"Breast cancer is the most common cause of death among women around the world and it is increasing in the Omani society," Dr Husaini said. "Therefore, a new tool based on thermography, deep learning and health application on smartphones and cloud computing has been approved for early detection of breast cancer."

The use of this app will help reduce the need for surgical procedures, including amputation, and the use of radiation devices such as x-rays

DR MOHAMMED ABDULLAH AL HUSAINI

The research team developed a smart app that involves using a DMR-IR database and training a deep learning network for the early detection of breast cancer. The team also designed the application in a graphical user interface and connecting it to the AirDroid application to send thermal images from the smartphone to the cloud and send the results back to the smartphone.

According to Dr Husaini, after repeated experiments, the results of early detection of breast cancer showed high accuracy. The detection accuracy of the system is 99.7 per cent with an error margin of +- 0.18 per cent.

The results also showed the ability of artificial intelligence to detect breast cancer in early stages through artificial networks that the team designed

specifically for the purpose, and the ability of small and inexpensive thermal cameras to give reliable results.

Dr Husaini is confident that the research project would contribute to community awareness of home self-care and reduce the need for surgical procedures, including amputation, if the disease can be detected in early stages. Use of this app will also mean avoiding use of radiation devices such as x-rays, and create an accurate and reliable database with the concerned health institutions.

"This demonstrated the significance of using thermal camera, deep learning, cloud computing and smartphone health applications for early detection of breast

cancer."

Designing the new artificial intelligence network took nearly a year, Dr Husaini said, adding that all the equipment, research and studies were done at his own expense, which was very high.

On winning the National Research Award 2022 instituted by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Dr Husaini said, "The success that I have achieved makes me proud of my abilities."

The research team, which included Dr Mohammed al Husaini, Dr Mohamed Hadi Habaebi, Dr Teddy Surya Gunawan and Dr Md Rafiqul Islam, published their paper in MDPI journal.



THE PLASTIC POLLUTION CRISIS

Notwithstanding the adverse impact of plastics on the environment, the habit of using plastic bags and bottles are imbedded in our lifestyle so much so that we inadvertently keep using them despite knowing the harm that we are causing to the planet. Plastics are non-biodegradable polymeric substances that cannot be digested or decomposed by any micro-organism. In addition, toxic substances are released into the soil when plastic bags perish under sunlight and toxic fumes are released when they are burnt. Many countries have underscored the urgent need for stopping the plastic menace and Oman is one of them. It is taking measures to discourage the use of plastic bags in daily life, including banning the import of such bags. How will this ban help curb the menace? Here is what the *Muscat Daily* readers had to say on the issue.



Vishal Raghavan
Lawyer & social media marketing professional

Plastic has become an unavoidable product in our lives. Today with rapid technology advancement, plastic bags and bottles can be reused. Brands like Decathlon, Adidas etc have products made out of recycled plastic. So instead of banning plastic, we should encourage 'Recycling, Reusing, and Refusing'.

Mohammad Hameed
Private sector employee

Plastic is a big menace to the environment. We may not realise the deep impact that it causes over the decades. They harm not only the environment, but also the human existence. I welcome the move of the government of Oman to take this immediate step (ban) in dealing with the issue.

Salim al Harthy
Cashier

The issue is what is the next option after banning plastics. Paper bags are often expensive and also sometimes it is not possible to carry our own bags. However, I do agree that plastics are a big problem for the environment and the human species in the long run. Banning of plastics from abroad will surely make an impact in the country and in dealing with the menace.

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

Only people's participation will give success, help return to old ways of carrying cloth, jute or paper bags. The government should allow import of bags of alternative materials tax free and make them easily available.

Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

The decision is a welcome step towards the total development of a sustainable and environment-friendly economy for Oman. The imported plastic bags were having very high embodied energy. The embodied energy in plastic is an indicator of how much energy it took to manufacture and transport them. Also, microns in the imported plastic may not match Oman's approved level and in turn can lead to more pollution. Secondly, the plastic bags manufactured here in Oman will be under the surveillance of the Omani government. Thirdly, it will generate revenue for local manufacturers. Eventually the production of cotton and jute bags will flourish as an industry to replace plastic bags. Thus, the menace of plastic can be curbed and controlled finally.

Jayatee Choudhury
Student

A ban on the import of plastic bags will result in an eco-friendly environment, cleaner sea beaches, better survival chances for marine animals, reduced drain clogging in the city and ultimately will offer a better aspect of life.



With our neighbours adopting a four-day working week, there have been talks in Oman to introduce a similar rule. What do you think of the four-day week work culture and would it succeed in Oman?

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

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

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

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International sculptor camp attracts artists from 10 countries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An international sculptor camp in Mudhaibi, North Sharqiyah is witnessing an intense competition among the 14 sculptors coming from ten different countries to chisel unique art pieces.

Called the International Green Forum, the camp commenced on Saturday, but will officially open on Monday under the patronage of the Governor of North Sharqiyah. The works of the sculptors will be displayed at the closing ceremony of the camp on January 26.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Yousuf al Rawahi, a supervisor in the camp, said that the forum, which is being organised by the Al Khadra Team for the second time, brought together 14 artists - five from Oman, and one each from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Sudan, Jordan, Tunisia, Iran, Italy, and Tanzania.

"The camp offers an opportunity to the sculptors to exchange their expertise in the field of mar-



ble, stone and wood carving, besides building bonds with people from different cultures," he pointed out.

According to Rawahi, the camp aims to create a cultural movement in Omani villages by facilitating interactions and exchanges with international artists. "It aims to promote sculpting as an art form among the Omani communities and

young people who are interested in art."

Additionally, installation of outdoor sculptures will also beautify tourist locations and promote Omani tourism, Rawahi added.

Thanking the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for its continued support for such art events, the camp supervisor informed that the Al Khadra Team

plans to organise successive editions of the event in the coming years to attract artists from different countries.

"We are striving, in cooperation with government and private agencies, for establishing an open and permanent sculpture museum, to be the first of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman, to attract tourists and to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

MoL receives more than 23,800 complaints against employers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has received more than 23,800 complaints against employers in 2022, according to Saif Salim al Zaabi, a member of the wage protection programme team at the ministry.

"The Ministry of Labour launched a programme to protect the wages of private sector employees after finding out some real problems in the sector," Zaabi said during an interview with a local radio.

He informed that the ministry recorded 23,890 complaints related to expatriate and Omani workers against employers in the private sector in 2022, of which 13,594 complaints were related to wages.

"Unfortunately, more than 57 per cent of the complaints were related to delayed payment of salaries. There are some employees, who complained about delayed salaries extending up to over seven months, for both expatriates and Omanis."

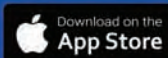


The ministry's programme aims to stabilise the labour market and achieve transparency between workers in the private sector and their employers

He added that the ministry will follow up on any complaints related to delayed salaries and try to limit the practice.

Talking about the wage protection programme, Zaabi said, "The programme aims to prevent any delay in salaries for employees in the private sector. It also aims to stabilise the labour market and achieve transparency between workers in the private sector and employers."

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MoH lab helps identify 19 projects

19 investment projects, 11 investment opportunities identified

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday revealed the outcome of its investment laboratory, held from December 4 to 29 last year, that helped the country to identify several projects in the health sector.

At the 'Laboratory Outcome Announcement Conference', H E Dr Fatma bint Mohammed al Ajmi, MoH Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs, informed that 19 investment projects, 11 investment opportunities, and 14 enabling initiatives have been identified following the laboratory.

The laboratory came up with proposals for several projects and initiatives promoting investments in the health sector.

The conference on Sunday



The ministry will promote these investment opportunities and prepare them to be handed over to entrepreneurs, according to the mechanisms that will be announced soon

DR FATMA BINT MOHAMMED AL AJMI

was held with the support of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit and in cooperation with the Oman

National Investment Programme 'Nazdaher'.

H E Dr Fatma informed that the 'medical industries pillar'

came up with eight projects, most notably the partnership project with the Oman Investment Authority to study the sup-

ply chain for medicines and equipment and the ways of providing them. "The development of the central drug analysis laboratory and pharmaceutical control is one of the most important enabling initiatives in the medical industries pillar."

In the 'health services pillar', two-investment projects have been shortlisted for raising the efficiency of health services, as well as five enabling initiatives to develop the national health insti-

tutions' accreditation system, improve data system supporting health investment, provide incentives and facilities for health investment and empower the drug medical equipment sector.

H E Dr Fatma informed that the health services pillar further resulted in eight investment opportunities to improve the quality and efficiency of health services.

The 'health promotion pillar' resulted in identifying seven investment projects to promote public health for individuals and strengthen efforts to provide healthy patterns that preserve people's lives and health.

This pillar also included three enabling initiatives addressing the health regulations such as public health law, national health policy of Oman, and health centre regulations.

The 'public enablers pillar' came out with two investment projects covering health techniques and technological solutions.

It also had one investment opportunity designated for learning, training and health innovation. The pillar also includes four enabling initiatives concerned with the modern health techniques, medical coding and other

public enablers.

H E Dr Fatma stressed that the lab outcomes included integrated investment opportunities in the four pillars. "The Ministry of Health, other partners and developers will take charge of these opportunities to achieve the desired goals."

The ministry will promote these investment opportunities and prepare them to be handed over to entrepreneurs, according to the mechanisms that will be announced soon, she added.

Dr Halima bint Qalam al Hina, Health Sector Supervisor at Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, stated that developing the health sector has an important economic and social dimension and the ability to attract investors to improve the private health sector potential to support the government health services.

The four-week investment lab last year was held with an objective of encouraging investments in the medical industries, improving the quality and efficiency of health services, and promoting health and public enablers to keep pace with Oman Vision 2040 goals.

Cutting-edge procedure to treat bone marrow, organ transplant complications

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH), in partnership with the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH), has for the first time in Oman started nonsurgical procedures through the extracorporeal photopheresis (ECP) to treat complications in certain organ and tissue transplants.

ECP is a cutting-edge, nonsurgical procedure to treat graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), a complication of bone marrow and stem cell transplants and other autoimmune disorders in children. ECP is also used to treat solid organ transplant rejection.

"In line with the 'Partnership in Health' approach and continuation of the cooperation between the health institutions and hospitals in the sultanate, MoH, in partnership with SQUH, now provides ECP for the first time in Oman," the ministry stated.

This service will be provided in the Blood Diseases Department at the SQUH. "Treatment with ECP is a qualitative leap in



transfusion medicine. It is a therapeutic procedure that purifies the blood from the antibodies resulting from the body's rejection of implanted tissues.'

Until now, patients had to go abroad to receive such treatments for 'indefinite and prolonged periods'.

'The health sector leadership in Oman stressed on the importance of providing the ECP device to reduce the high-cost involved in the treatment.'

The launch ceremony was attended by H E Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, along with H H Dr Fahad bin al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University, Dr Abdulaziz bin Mahmood al Mahrazi, SQUH Director General, Dr Zainab bint Nasser al Balushi, SQUH Deputy Director General for Medical Affairs, as well as a number of senior officials from MoH, SQUH, Armed Forces Hospital and Royal Oman Police Hospital.

Inma funds RO20mn for SME projects

Muscat - The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Fund (inma) funded 141 small and medium projects with around RO20mn in 2022.

Saleh Hilal al Ma'awali, CEO of inma, said that 123 projects - worth RO16mn - were funded through the fund's headquarters in Muscat. While nine projects worth RO3mn were financed through the fund's office in Sohar and nine other projects, worth RO1mn, through its office in Salalah.

The fund aims to expand its services for SMEs in Oman and boost the contribution of those SMEs to the gross domestic product.

Ma'awali added that in order to encourage SME owners to continue their activities and operations, the fund had recently decided to extend the loan payment duration up to eight years for most financing products offered by the fund.

ONA

Fees for visiting forts, castles, heritage sites announced



Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Salim bin Mohammed bin Said al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, issued a ministerial decision (No 334/2023) on Sunday, determining the fees to visit castles and forts, visitor centres, and the world heritage sites in Oman.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) is currently working to hand over the management of many historical sites

to the private sector entities to attract tourists and to achieve the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040.

The decision, however, exempts official delegations and school trips organised by educational institutions from paying the fees.

The ministry has divided the historical monuments into two classes or categories, to determine the visitation fees. The Class 1 category refers to the forts and castles, which have

FEES

CITIZENS AND GCC NATIONALS

Above 12 years	
Class 1	: RO1
Class 2	: 500bz
From 6 to 12 years	
Class 1	: 200bz
Class 2	: 200bz

FOR RESIDENTS

Above 12 years	
Class 1	: RO1
Class 2	: RO1
From 6 to 12 years	
Class 1	: 500bz
Class 2	: 500bz

FOR TOURISTS

Above 12 years	
Class 1	: RO3
Class 2	: RO2
From 6 to 12 years	
Class 1	: RO1
Class 2	: RO1

unique historical and cultural elements, while the Class 2 are ordinary historical sites or visitor centres.

The decision was issued on December 26 and comes into force on the day following its publication in the official gazette.

1,600 table tennis veterans gather for world championship in Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 1,600 players aged 40 to over 90 years of age are competing for 44 world titles at the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023, that kicked off at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) in Muscat on Sunday.

The men's competition boasts many of the world's top ten ranked players including the former world number one Raymond Lui of Hong Kong, number two Petr Wasik from Czechia (Czech Republic), number four Youssef Shalhoub from Lebanon and Mazen Shaouabar representing Palestine, a former world number five.

The women's event is equally competitive with former world number one Pia Toelhoej of Denmark and Ursula Luh-

Fleischer, part of a very strong contingent from Germany, joining the very best veteran players from China, the US, France, India and Japan.

Oman's nine-member team consists of Sajad Baqir, Abdul Ghany Nasser Hassan, Soman Ukkath Variath, Mansoor al Wahaibi, Ismail al Sulaimani, Sultan al Riyami, Salim al Battashi, Saleh al Matrfi and Anwar Abbas.

Mohamed Eldawlaty, competition manager of the championship, affirmed that it is great to return back with the championship after five years of hiatus.

"We are in full readiness to kick off a fantastic event for players and fans for one full week. The event will take place in a spectacular venue at Oman Convention and Exhibition Center which will accommodate more than 100 tables with great



We are ready to kick off a fantastic event for players and fans for one full week. The event will take place in a spectacular venue at OCEC, which will accommodate more than 100 tables

MOHAMED ELDAWLATY



facilities. I believe the players will have a different experience in this edition of the Championships," he said on the day of the inauguration.

Eldawlaty thanked all the volunteers, workers and the organising committee who managed to prepare the floor for all the 100 tables in less than one day, which made the event begin on time.

"The team worked very hard during the past few days to complete all the technical and logistical preparations to make table tennis accessible to veterans of all age categories. The players began their warmup sessions on Saturday ahead of the competition that starts on Monday."

Participants will be able to explore Muscat and further afield on Wednesday, before returning to action on Thursday for the first day of the knockout

round. The semi-finals and finals are scheduled for Saturday, January 21.

First held in Göteborg, Sweden, in 1982, with just 450 participants from 21 countries, the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships have grown to become a major fixture in the global calendar.

Now in its 40th year, this is the first time that the event is being held in this region, allowing Oman the opportunity to showcase its unique culture and world-famous hospitality to a new audience.

The World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 is being organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Oman Table Tennis Association, and the International Table Tennis Federation, with the support coming from Oman Fiber Optic, STAG Sports, Omantel and Belltel.

OQ inaugurates \$463mn ammonia plant in Salalah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

OQ, Oman's global integrated energy group, on Sunday inaugurated its new ammonia plant in Dhofar governorate with an investment cost of about US\$463mn and a production capacity of 1,000 metric tonnes per day of liquid ammonia.

The inauguration ceremony was held under the patronage of H H Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, in the presence of a number of their excellencies, sheikhs, CEOs and local dignitaries.

H H Sayyid Marwan toured the facilities of OQ's new ammonia plant where he was briefed about the production stages and the role played by the plant in supporting the sultanate's economic diversification.

Like other strategic development projects of the group, OQ's ammonia plant in Dhofar contributes to enhancing the in-country value. The value of OQ's procurements from Omani companies for this project amounted to about US\$199mn. The project has also contributed to creating many job and training opportunities. Additionally, it has supported some social investment initiatives in Dhofar governorate.

In his speech at the inauguration ceremony, Talal al Awfi, CEO of OQ Group, said, "The ammonia plant is another economic asset that is being added to OQ's investments in Dhofar governorate which houses three major projects of the group including a methanol plant and



National petrochemical projects would enhance the economic growth and diversification in the sultanate

H H SAYYID MARWAN BIN TURKI AL SAID

Salalah LPG plant, ammonia plant, as well as Raysut Petroleum Products Storage Terminal, which is the oldest facilities of OQ Group in Dhofar."

Awfi said that the new ammonia plant is integrated with the existing 1mn tonnes per year capacity methanol plant, which will enable OQ Group to rationalise cost and optimise performance and production efficiency.

He informed that the plant will export its products to the international markets via Port of Salalah through OQ Trading Limited, the trading arm of OQ Group. He noted that the demand for ammonia products in the global markets is witnessing constant growth leading to higher returns and rendering the

project highly feasible.

"The economic significance of the ammonia plant is paramount in light of its integration with other OQ projects. Ammonia is used in the production of green hydrogen, which is a key component of the OQ Energy Transition Agenda," Awfi added.

Ammonia is used as a key ingredient in the production of fertilisers and is an important intermediate chemical in the manufacturing of synthetic resins, detergents, coolants, synthetic fibres, and polyurethanes, among other applications.

Economic diversification

Speaking on this occasion, H H Sayyid Marwan said, "The na-

tional projects in the petrochemicals sector, implemented by Oman Investment Authority (OIA) through OQ Group, would contribute to enhancing the economic growth and diversification plans in the sultanate to keep pace with the overarching development under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq. These projects also reinforce the economic diversification efforts in the country to be in line with Oman Vision 2040."

H H Sayyid Marwan expressed his happiness over the success achieved with the inauguration of OQ's ammonia plant which was built in line with the highest levels of operational efficiency. He also indicated that this reflects the efforts exerted by OQ Group to leverage the use of Omani natural resources, maximise its benefits and boost the processing industries in the sultanate.

He pointed out that the plant will contribute to supporting the

economic activities in the energy sector, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and provide direct and indirect employment opportunities for Omanis.

On his part, Mulhim bin Bashir al-Jarf, deputy president for investment at OIA and chairman of OQ Group, said, "The ammonia plant is one of the strategic development projects owned by OQ. It goes in line with the drives of OIA to promote investment in heavy and downstream industries by leveraging the Omani natural resources with the objective of increasing to its role in increasing their contributions of to the country's GDP."

"We hope that this project would contribute to achieving added value from its products that will be exported to international markets. This will enhance the position of Omani exports and attract more foreign investments to the economic sectors according to the priorities of Oman Vision 2040," Jarf added.



Bank Muscat crosses RO200mn net profit mark in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Bank Muscat, the largest financial institution in Oman, has reported a net profit of RO200.75mn for the full year 2022 compared to RO189.63mn reported in 2021, recording an increase of 5.9 per cent.

The bank on Sunday announced its preliminary unaudited results for the year ended December 31, 2022.

Its net interest income from conventional banking and net income from Islamic financing increased by 2.8 per cent to RO 344.86mn in 2022 compared to RO335.54mn for the full year 2021.

Non-interest income grew at a higher pace to RO157.96mn for the year ended December 31, 2022 as compared to RO139.94mn in the previous year, mainly due to higher income from sale of investments, the bank said in a press statement.

Bank Muscat's operating expenses for 2022 came at RO207.30mn as compared to RO191.46mn in 2021, an increase

Bank Muscat's net loans and advances increased by 2.4% to RO9.414bn as of December 31, 2022 compared to RO9.191bn a year ago

of 8.3 per cent.

Net impairment for credit and other losses for the year ended December 31, 2022 was RO59.94mn as against RO60.22mn for the same period in 2021.

Bank Muscat's net loans and advances including Islamic financing receivables increased by 2.4 per cent to RO9.414bn as against RO9.191bn as at December 31, 2021.

Customer deposits including Islamic customer deposits decreased by 1.5 per cent to RO8.647mn as against RO8.775mn as at December 31, 2021.

Oman's inflation drops below 2% in December

Muscat - Oman's annual inflation - which is based on the consumer price index (CPI) - dropped below two per cent level in December 2022.

The sultanate's inflation rate stood at 1.98 per cent during December 2022, according to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicated a rise in the prices of main groups in December 2022 compared to the corresponding period in 2021. Prices in food and non-alcoholic beverages group rose by 5.4 per cent, restaurants and hotels by 4.05 per cent, health by 3.82 per cent, and furniture, household equipment and routine household maintenance increased by 2.27 per cent.

Prices in clothing and footwear category increased by 1.09 per cent, recreation and cul-



ture by 1.05 per cent, housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels by 0.63 per cent, transport

by 0.41 per cent and education by 0.05 per cent. Meanwhile, inflation declined in the group of

communications by 0.06 per cent, and stabilised in the tobacco group.

Within food items, prices went up for oils and fats by 19.49 per cent, meats by 8.42 per cent, milk, cheese and eggs by 7.65 per cent, fruits by 6.51 per cent, bread and cereals by 5.1 per cent, and sugar, jam, honey and sweets by 2.33 per cent. Prices dropped for fish and seafood by 5.8 per cent and vegetables by 1.03 per cent.

Al Buraimi recorded the highest inflation rate of 3.3 per cent in December 2022, followed by A'Dakhiliyah (2.5 per cent), North Batinah (2.3 per cent), A'Dhahirah (2.0 per cent), and Muscat (1.8 per cent). The lowest inflations rate was recorded in North A'Sharqiyah, South A'Sharqiyah and Dohfar, which stood at 1.7 per cent for each governorate.

ONA

UAE committed to supporting balance in oil market: Minister

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Suhail bin Mohammed al Mazrouei, UAE's Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, has emphasised the importance of accelerating new investments to meet rising energy demand as a number of OPEC + member countries cut output.

In statements to the Emirates News Agency (WAM) on the sidelines of the Global Energy Forum, which began on Saturday in Abu Dhabi, the minister affirmed the UAE's commitment to providing the necessary support to ensure a balanced oil market in line with its plan to advance the 5mn barrels per day (bpd) production target to 2027.

Emphasising the importance of accelerating investments in gas exploration and production,



Suhail bin Mohammed al Mazrouei

being a key source of energy, the minister said that the world requires trans-country natural gas pipelines, such as the Dolphin

Gas Pipeline project, a natural gas project between Qatar, the UAE and Oman that was the first of its kind to contribute to improved energy security and integration among Gulf countries.

He added that there are geopolitical factors in the region and around the world that influence the global energy map, expressing his hope that the current year 2023 would see more stability in the energy markets, as well as a decline in gas prices and volatility.

"Price variations have a significant impact on the economies of many countries, and since there is such a high demand for gas, we hope for new projects to be launched in this sector," the minister added.

WAM

Twitter offers free ads to woo back brands: WSJ

San Francisco US - Twitter is offering advertisers a new incentive in an attempt to woo brands back to the social media platform, which has seen its ad business deteriorate following Elon Musk's US\$44bn takeover, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The tech company is dangling free ad space by offering to match advertisers' ad spending up to US\$250,000, according to emails reviewed by the Wall Street Journal. The full US\$500,000 in advertising must run by February 28, the emails said.

Twitter didn't respond to a request for comment. The incentives are the latest effort by the company to get brands to spend on its platform. Recently, Twitter



offered advertisers US\$500,000 in free ads as long as they spent at least US\$500,000, WSJ said.

Ad buyers told the Wall Street Journal that the incentive could be used to buy promoted tweets that run during Super Bowl week, a key selling period for Twitter. Advertisers in recent years have flocked to Twitter during the Super Bowl to generate buzz

around their big game marketing efforts. The Super Bowl is Twitter's biggest revenue day of the year, the Journal has reported.

Twitter is facing financial pressure to lure back the many advertisers that have paused their spending since Musk acquired the company in late October. Advertisers bolted largely because of fear over what they said was Musk's approach to content moderation and concerns that their ads would end up appearing near controversial content, the Journal has reported.

Musk said in November that Twitter had suffered "a massive drop in revenue" and was losing US\$4mn a day.

ANI

'Europe will resume imports of Russian gas'

Abu Dhabi, UAE - European countries will eventually resume higher imports of Russian gas, Qatar's energy minister and gas company CEO predicted on Saturday, warning that market volatility could last for years.

Russian gas exports to Europe plunged after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine but Saad Sherida al-Kaabi, head of QatarEnergy, said the situation could change in the future.

"The Europeans today are saying there's no way we're going back" to Russian gas, he told the Global Energy Forum in Abu Dhabi.

"We're all blessed to have to be able to forget and to forgive. And I think things get mended



Saad Sherida al Kaabi

with time... they learn from that situation and probably have a much bigger diversity.

"But Russian gas is going back, in my view, to Europe." Gas exports by Russian energy

giant Gazprom to the European Union and Switzerland fell by 55 per cent last year, the company said this month.

Europe was previously Gazprom's main export market

but supplies were drastically reduced because of sanctions following the Ukraine invasion last February.

A mild winter has spared European countries from having to plunder their gas stockpiles, but Kaabi warned it would be harder this year to replenish back-up supplies.

"Luckily they haven't had a very high demand for gas due to the warmer weather. The issue is what's going to happen when they want to replenish their storages this coming year, and there isn't much gas coming into the market until '25, '26, '27," he said.

"So I think it's going to be a volatile situation for some time." AFP

China's 2022 growth seen as lowest in 40 years

Beijing, China – China's economic growth for 2022 is expected to have been among its weakest in four decades after the twin crises of the pandemic and property woes, analysts said ahead of Tuesday's GDP announcement.

Ten experts interviewed by AFP forecast an average 2.7 per cent year-on-year rise in gross domestic product (GDP) for the world's second-largest economy, a sharp plunge from China's 2021 growth of more than 8 per cent.

It could also be China's slowest pace since a 1.6 contraction in 1976 - the year Mao Zedong died - and excluding 2020, after the Covid-19 virus emerged in Wuhan in late 2019.

Beijing had set itself a growth target of around 5.5 per cent for 2022 but this was undermined by the government's "zero-Covid" policy, which put the brakes on manufacturing activity and consumption.

Strict lockdowns, quarantines and compulsory mass testing prompted abrupt closures of manufacturing facilities and businesses in major hubs - like Zhengzhou, home of the world's



A file photo of a vegetables market in Beijing, China

biggest iPhone factory - and sent reverberations across the global supply chain.

Beijing abruptly loosened pandemic restrictions in early December after three years of

enforcing some of the harshest Covid measures in the world.

‘Growth is slowing’

China is battling a surge in Covid cases that has overwhelmed its

hospitals and medical staff.

This is likely to reflect in 2022's fourth-quarter growth, which will also be announced on Tuesday alongside a series of other indicators such as retail, in-

dustrial production and employment.

"The fourth quarter is relatively difficult," said economist Zhang Ming of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in

Beijing.

"No matter whether it's by the metrics of consumption or investment, the growth is slowing."

China's exports took their biggest plunge since the start of the pandemic in December, contracting 9.9 per cent year-on-year, while consumption was in the red in November and investment has slowed.

"The three horse carriages of the Chinese economy are all facing a relatively evident downward pressure in the fourth quarter," Zhang said.

Rabobank analyst Teeuwe Mevissen echoed Zhang, saying the final quarter will "almost certainly show a decline because of the fast spread of Covid" after the loosening of health restrictions in December.

"This will affect both demand and supply conditions for the worse," he said.

Problems in the property sector are also still weighing on growth, Mevissen said.

This sector, which along with construction accounts for more than a quarter of China's GDP, has been suffering since Beijing started cracking down on exces-

sive borrowing and rampant speculation in 2020.

This regulatory tightening marked the beginning of financial worries for Evergrande, the former Chinese number one in real estate that is now strangled by huge debt.

Real estate sales have since fallen in many cities and many developers are struggling to survive.

However, the government appears to be taking a more conciliatory approach to reviving this key sector.

Measures to promote "stable and healthy" development were announced in November, including credit support for indebted developers and assistance for deferred-payment loans for homebuyers.

Some analysts took these measures as a reason for optimism.

"The transitional phase will likely be bumpy as the country may need to grapple with surging cases and increasingly stretched health systems," warned analyst Jing Liu of HSBC, predicting a slowdown in the near term.

AFP

Full brunt of financial tightening yet to materialise, IMF cheif says

Washington, US – Countries have yet to see the full impact of tightening financial conditions, IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said last week, warning that central banks have some way to go in their inflation battle.

Global growth is expected to slow further this year, as central banks including the US Federal Reserve have raised interest rates to cool surging prices.

While sectors like housing have been reeling in the United States for example, the labor market remains strong with low joblessness.

"As long as people are employed, even if prices are high, consumers spend.... But we all know that the impact of tightening financial conditions is yet to bite, in terms of unemployment," Georgieva told reporters in a briefing on the world economy.

"Inflation remains stubborn, and in that sense, the job of central banks is not yet done," she said.

This suggests central banks may need to continue hiking interest rates, walking a fine line between easing demand and avoiding tipping economies into recession.

Doing so comes with risks, and Georgieva stressed the need to watch how tightening condi-



Kristalina Georgieva

tions hit the labor market and possibly translate into "more tensions between employers and workers."

Governments have been quick to provide policy support thus far, adding a buffer between consumers and surging food and energy costs, but this policy space is "shrinking," she cautioned.

Bottoming out

The International Monetary Fund also expects the global slowdown to "bottom out" towards year-end, and for the world economy to trend towards a higher growth trajectory in 2024, Georgieva said.

The IMF maintains that a "global recession can be avoided" even if some countries

see downturns.

But this is subject to an absence of negative shocks like growing social unrest and spillovers between countries, climate events, or a worsening in Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"We are now in a more shock-prone world," she said.

While tighter financial conditions will have a "dramatic" impact on countries with high debt levels, Georgieva said the IMF does not see a "systemic debt crisis on the horizon."

She added that a new global sovereign debt roundtable is set to meet for the first time in February, on the sidelines of a Group of 20 finance officials meeting, bringing key creditors and private finance together.

Weighing in on specific coun-

tries, Georgieva noted that China needs to "stay the course" in re-opening from nearly three years of a strict zero-Covid policy that has battered business activity.

China's rebound from its latest surge in coronavirus cases since recently lifting lockdowns, quarantines and mass testing would have significant implications globally, she said.

The world's second biggest economy used to deliver up to 40 per cent of world growth.

"What is most important is for China to stay the course, not to back off from that reopening," Georgieva said.

If so, it could turn into a "positive contributor" to average global growth by mid-year or thereabouts, she added.

Meanwhile, Georgieva expressed optimism over "remarkable" market resilience in the United states, with Covid-era support helping consumer demand in the world's biggest economy.

"It gives some... expectation that the US would avoid falling into a recession," she said, adding that a potential downturn will likely be very mild.

"For now, the dynamic seems to be more indicative for a soft landing," she said.

AFP

Tesla slashes electric vehicle prices in US and Europe

San Francisco, US – Tesla announced it will cut the price of its best-selling electric vehicle models up to 20 per cent in Europe and the United States, launching a price war as more rivals hit the market.

Shares in the Elon Musk-led company have plummeted for more than a year and fell as much as 4.5 per cent in early trading on Friday, before recovering some lost ground.

"It's no secret that demand for Tesla is starting to see some cracks in this global slowdown for 2023," said analyst Dan Ives of Wedbush Securities.

However, Ives said the price cut was the "right move" and "a clear shot across the bow at European automakers and US stalwarts (GM and Ford) that Tesla is not going to play nice in the sandbox."

Tesla has already lowered prices twice in China in recent months and offered rare promotions in North America late last year.

According to social media posts, the price cut in China caused disgruntled Tesla owners to swarm showrooms angry that they had missed the second round of discounts.

In 2022, the group delivered a record 1.31mn electric vehicles, a



Tesla has already lowered prices twice in China in recent months and offered rare promotions in North America late last year

40 per cent year-on-year jump.

But that was still lower than Musk's long-term goal of boosting deliveries by an average of 50 per cent a year.

Investors are concerned that sales will slow down due to the economic downturn as well as rising interest rates that make it more expensive to borrow

money to buy a car.

Observers also point to the arrival of multiple competitors in the electric vehicle market, with major auto builders now offering a line-up of models, including in the luxury segment long dominated by Tesla.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the discount now enables buyers of Tesla's US-made Model Y to benefit from a US tax incentive by putting the vehicle below a US\$55,000 cap.

The US\$7,500 tax credit on US-made EV cars, part of US President Joe Biden's climate plan, has been harshly criticized as protectionist by European governments and manufacturers.

AFP

Pakistan's economy grinding to a halt as forex reserves dry up

Karachi, Pakistan – Thousands of containers packed with essential food items, raw materials and medical equipment have been held up at Pakistan's Karachi port as the country grapples with a desperate foreign exchange crisis.

A shortage of crucial dollars has left banks refusing to issue new letters of credit for importers, hitting an economy already squeezed by soaring inflation and lacklustre growth.

"I have been in the business for the past 40 years and I have not witnessed a worse time," said Abdul Majeed, an official with the All Pakistan Customs Agents Association.

He was speaking from an office near Karachi port, where shipping containers are stuck waiting for payment guarantees - packed with lentils, pharmaceuticals, diagnostic equipment and

chemicals for Pakistan's manufacturing industries.

"We've got thousands of containers stranded at the port because of the shortage of dollars," said Maqbool Ahmed Malik, chairman of the customs association, adding that operations were down at least 50 per cent.

State bank forex reserves this week dwindled to less than US\$6bn - the lowest in nearly nine years - with obligations of more than US\$8bn due in the first quarter alone.

The reserves are enough to pay for around a month of imports, according to analysts.

Pakistan's economy has crumbled alongside a simmering political crisis, with the rupee plummeting and inflation at decades-high levels, while devastating floods and a major shortage of energy have piled on further pressure. The South Asian



This picture taken on January 11 shows a general view of the Karachi sea port (AFP)

nation's enormous national debt - currently US\$274bn, or nearly 90 per cent of gross domestic product - and the endless effort

to service it makes Pakistan particularly vulnerable to economic shocks.

Teetering on a tightrope

Islamabad has been pinning its hopes on an IMF deal brokered

under the last Pakistani leader Imran Khan, but the latest payment has been pending since September.

The global lender is demanding the withdrawal of remaining subsidies on petroleum products and electricity aimed at helping the population of 220mn with the cost of living.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif this week urged the IMF to give Pakistan some breathing space as it tackles the "nightmarish" situation.

Zubair Gul, a 40-year-old father of four and daily wage labourer in Karachi, said it has become "hugely difficult" to live on his earnings.

"I have to queue up for two or three hours to purchase subsidised flour - the regular prices are not affordable," he told AFP.

For Shah Meer, an office worker, borrowing from relatives

or using credit cards are the only ways to get by.

"A common man cannot afford to buy milk, sugar, pulses or any necessity you name," he said.

With an election due at the end of the year, implementing - or campaigning on - the tough conditions demanded by the IMF would be political suicide, but Pakistan is unlikely to secure fresh credit without making at least some cutbacks.

On Thursday, the United Arab Emirates agreed to roll over US\$2bn owed by Pakistan and provide the country with an extra loan of US\$1bn, helping it to avoid immediate default.

Islamabad won some relief last week when donors pledged over US\$9bn to help with recovery efforts after devastating monsoon floods left almost a third of the country under water last year.

AFP

42 Abu Dhabi hosts 'future coders' of the emirate

In celebration of World Logic Day, 42 Abu Dhabi, the UAE capital's innovative and disruptive coding school, collaborated with ADIA to host 400 Emirati high school students in the school's campus to enable them to explore their potential as the future coders of the Emirate.

The event allowed students to discover 42 Abu Dhabi's revolutionary learning model, which aims to create a diverse and inclusive education infrastructure that empowers a future-ready workforce, a press release said.

The event came as part of ADIA's Computer Science and Math Development track, which was launched under its Early Preparation Programme (EPP), in line with ADIA's efforts to invest in a talent pool of young UAE nationals who will contribute to unlocking the Emirate's digital transformation.

During the event, students were provided with an in-depth understanding of computational thinking, algorithms, abstraction and pattern



recognition problem-solving techniques that are at the foundation of computer science and many other subject areas and careers. Following the session, students completed an online problem-solving assessment designed to help them explore their interests in computational

thinking and computer science. Once the students successfully completed the challenge, they explored the school's innovative campus, and took a deep dive into 42 Abu Dhabi's peer-to-peer learning methodology, which fosters young talents to enable them to build innovative

solutions and accelerate the Emirate's digital economy. The event also allowed students to uncover the interpersonal skills which the coders' acquire at 42 Abu Dhabi to enable them to secure leading positions in digital fields. These skills include collaboration,

adaptation, creativity and critical thinking skills. Marcos Muller Habig, acting CEO of 42 Abu Dhabi, said, "We are honoured to support ADIA's EPP in hosting 400 young Emirati students with an interest in pursuing science and technology studies, as these are fields that

are increasingly important for Abu Dhabi's future development. This event was an opportunity for us to highlight 42 Abu Dhabi's leading role as a talent incubator that is developing and upskilling the Emirate's youth in the coding field."

"42 Abu Dhabi's participation in this initiative comes in line with our strategic vision to equip UAE nationals, empower national talents to pursue specialised careers in vital industries and create a community which enables people from all walks of life to learn how to code." he added.



Bank Nizwa partners with IFIN for 'Goods Financing'

A progressive bank built on innovation, Bank Nizwa has been embracing the latest technological advancements to remain at the forefront of spearheading digitalisation in the local community.

In line with the same, the bank has furthered its partnership with the leading Islamic FinTech provider, Islamic Finance Initiation Network (IFIN), to introduce instant Islamic 'Goods Financing' to its customers, a press release said.

This partnership will enable Bank Nizwa to leverage IFIN's cloud-based platform to make Islamic financing processes quicker, easier and hassle-free. Eliminating the need to visit a branch, the bank's customers can now apply and obtain instantaneous finance to purchase goods from a list of authorised dealers in the sultanate.

These include Danube Home, Enza Home, Fahmy Furniture, Muscat Furniture, ID



Khaled al Kayed

Design, Mustafa Sultan Electronics, Sky Orbits, Al Madina Cement and others.

Following the success of Bank Nizwa's 'Instant Auto Finance' proposition that helped customers avail on-the-spot financing with a record '10-minute financing process' time, the bank has continued to join hands with IFIN to set new industry benchmarks with pio-

neering digital financing solutions.

Khaled al Kayed, CEO at Bank Nizwa, said, "Staying true to our digital transformational agenda, Bank Nizwa, through such strategic collaborations with leading FinTechs, will continue to introduce first-of-its-kind Shari'ah-compliant financing solutions to offer enhanced value to clients. The instant 'goods financing' proposition has also helped us to strengthen our bonds with retail institutions whilst enabling us to contribute to advancing the dynamic business environment."

He added, "Bank Nizwa has been committed to playing an active role in driving transformational change in a thriving financial ecosystem. We will continue to focus on delivering a seamless banking experience with a comprehensive suite of bespoke Shari'ah-compliant financial solutions that are geared at positively influencing the lives of our customers."

Set to revolutionise the in-store shopping experience for customers, Bank Nizwa's instant Islamic goods financing solution, besides significantly reducing the finance applications' turn-around-time, will also reduce operational costs while boosting efficiency and competitiveness.

By mirroring Bank Nizwa's increased attention to protecting customers' data, IFIN's platform will also ensure the highest levels of cybersecurity. Maintaining utmost transparency in all operations, the bank's customers will also be given absolute clarity of the bank's profit margins and instalment plans upon application and at the time of signing the contract.

Partnering with a reputable body like IFIN, which is the world's first Shari'ah-compliant, multi-institutional, multi-product, Islamic FinTech, Bank Nizwa has reiterated its commitment to the nation's digitalisation goals.



W Muscat offers Gulf Cup 2023 fans a new 'Fanzone'

Looking to watch your favourite team playing at the Arabian Gulf Cup? W Muscat's Fanzone by Meduse is where you should be.

Catch the region's biggest football event at this cool spot and experience exhilarating moments while you enjoy the live streaming of matches. Fans can revel in the celebration with Meduse flavours, mega screens, exciting eats, and bevies by

booking their spot now. Football buffs can show their favourite team loads of love at the Fanzone which is open from 3pm to 12 midnight till January 19, a press release said.

Gerald Chevasson, general manager of W Muscat said, "Join us nights of top-notch Arabia soccer action at the ultimate destination for sports fans. Our Fanzone has been a popular

choice for football fans since the World Cup, thanks to it happening in perfect ambience with upbeat vibes and delicious plates.

"It makes perfect sense for fans to head down here during the Arabian Gulf Cup games and have a good time with their friends and other sports enthusiasts. At W Muscat, we are on a quest to connect, engage and expand worlds."

Ooredoo offers Gulf Cup bundle

The football fever in the region has not yet subsided and with fans soon heading to Iraq for the Arab Gulf Cup Tournament 2023, Ooredoo is making sure they can share the fun and excitement with friends and family back home in Oman.

Going above and beyond to meet its customers' data needs wherever they roam, both Hala and Shahry users travelling to Iraq during the tournament will be able to enjoy a special Ooredoo Iraq Passport coverage, a press release said.

Ooredoo's Iraq Passport bundle will offer a fantastic unlimited data experience, while users will also be able to 'Roam Like Home' by enjoying local voice rates on roaming and applicable to local calls, receiving calls and calls made to Oman.

Mercedes-Benz Oman redefines digital luxury

Mercedes-Benz Oman has launched its revamped e-Commerce store, with an all-new interface and innovative functionalities.

The new and improved website is better designed, more engaging and easier to navigate - offering updated stock listings for new and certified pre-owned vehicles, a press release said.

As part of Mercedes-Benz Oman's commitment to creating a memorable and personalised customer experience, users can now enjoy a seamless browsing experience with the ability to search for vehicles by model, trim, budget, and other filters. They can then select a vehicle of their choice, whether new or certified pre-owned, and either reserve it online by making a deposit, or submit their details to get a finance application.

Potential customers now also have the option to select their delivery dates and delivery location. Finally, a new online payment facility means that they can pay online via credit and debit card at the accessory store and for the vehicle reservation deposit.



Further delivering on its digital promise, Mercedes-Benz Oman created and launched an exclusive online store where brand enthusiasts can explore the most distinctive merchandise collection and vehicle accessories line from Mercedes-Benz.

Scott Shears, General Manager - Passenger Cars of Mercedes-Benz Oman, said, "Mercedes-Benz Oman continues to find ways to offer a more convenient and enhanced retail experience that meets the needs of our discerning customers. The new e-Commerce platform has been re-designed to provide luxury at the click of a button, showcasing the very best of Mercedes-Benz's accessories and collection and allowing our customers to further immerse themselves in the Mercedes-Benz brand lifestyle that goes beyond cars."

Zawawi Trading Company (ZTC) is the first Mercedes-Benz retailer in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to set up such an online store - offering a distinctive selection.

McLaren, Gulf Oil renew ties

Luxury supercar company McLaren Automotive has announced the renewal of its partnership with Gulf Oil International as its Official Lubricant and Fuel Partner for 2023.

As McLaren's official engine oil supplier, and following rigorous powertrain testing in 2021, the renewal of the relationship means Gulf Formula Elite will remain first fill lubricant in all McLaren Automotive supercars and hypercars leaving the McLaren Production Centre.

The creation of Gulf Formula Elite was the result of both technology teams working collaboratively, developing and testing a lubricant which would offer the ultimate protection for McLaren's high performance V8 and V6 engines.

Gulf Formula Elite is an advanced full synthetic engine oil that provides the ultimate protection, even in the most extreme conditions, to deliver peak performance.

Nissan celebrates 20 Years of the X-TRAIL in M E

Following the global launch of the all-new, fourth-generation Nissan X-TRAIL and in anticipation of its Middle East debut early next year, Nissan looks back at the decades-long journey of this benchmark-setting SUV and its reputation as the perfect companion for all adventures.

Conceived as a compact SUV for a versatile lifestyle, the X-TRAIL's popularity is built on performance-oriented styling, class-leading technology, and everyday utility, complimented with an engaging driving experience on all terrains, a press release said.

The compact SUV's unique identity combines two elements, 'X' and 'Trail', with the former indicating the active lifestyle of its customers and the latter implying a track or rough road. By fusing these two components together, Nissan made a bold statement and solidified the X-TRAIL's reputation, since it was introduced to the brand's line-up in 2001, as one of the best-selling models in the industry's largest SUV segment, focused on delivering functionality, comfort, technology and safety.

Thierry Sabbagh, president, Nissan Saudi Arabia, INFINITI Middle East and managing director, Nissan Middle East, said,



"The Nissan X-TRAIL is a key model in our SUV line-up, matching high quality and reliability with desirable comfort and flexibility. Competing in an extremely popular automotive segment, it caters to the varied needs of a growing demographic with innovative upgrades, high value, and class-leading performance."

"The all-new fourth-generation X-TRAIL, which is set to launch in the region early next year, builds on three generations of success and will continue to deliver exciting and engaging driving experiences for families and adventurers across the Middle East."

Spanning four generations and over twenty years, the Nissan X-TRAIL's legacy is built on a series of global milestones. This includes, the First Electronic Four-Wheel-Drive System in a Compact SUV in 2001, the World's Most Advanced 4x4 Technology in 2007, the world's Best-Selling SUV in 2014, and the All-New Nissan X-TRAIL in 2022

The all-new fourth-generation Nissan X-TRAIL, which was launched globally last year and is set to make its Middle East debut early next year, has already begun to attract the attention of fans in the region. Representing one of the most comprehensive model redesigns in Nissan's history, the all-new X-TRAIL is among the brand's most technologically advanced SUVs to date and its elevated, premium styling serves as a true reflection of its spirit - versatile and adventurous, with no compromise on comfort.

Islamic Arts Biennale to exhibit over 60 contemporary works

Saudi Arabia's inaugural Islamic Arts Biennale is set to bridge the past, present, and future through 60 contemporary and over 15 never-before-exhibited works, in addition to 280 artefacts, delivered through a unique multi-sensorial experience, at the iconic Aga Khan award-winning Western Hajj Terminal in Jeddah from January 23 to April 23.

The terminal will also host two separate pavilions presenting an unprecedented display of delicately crafted historical objects, originally housed in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah and in the Masjid Al-Haram in Makkah, among contemporary artistic expressions inspired by these Holy Sites, a press release said.

Themed 'Awwal Bait' - meaning 'First House', in reference to the Holy Ka'bah in Makkah - the historic first edition of the Islamic Arts Biennale will feature over 60 established and emerging artists from around the globe,

over 60 new commissions, 280 artefacts and over 15 never-before-exhibited works of art, that will connect the past, present, and future through the integration of historic objects and contemporary works.

Reflecting on this pivotal moment in Saudi Arabia's cultural evolution, Farida al-Huseini, Islamic Arts Biennale director, said, "For a very long time, the world has perceived Islamic Arts through a very specific lens, one that has often restricted or defined its boundaries. With the Islamic Arts Biennale, we are working to broaden that definition, and enable a deeper and more nuanced exploration of the Islamic arts."

Artistic Director Sumayya Vally, added, "Seeing the biennale come to life through the voices and perspectives of our artists has been profound. Each of them has boldly and sensitively taken on the opportunity of this platform to contribute to an emerging discourse on Islamic arts."



ABQ wins award for stellar academic experiences

ABQ Education Group recently won the Signature Luxury 100 award for 'stellar academic experience in Oman' at a prestigious event held at Crowne Plaza Muscat.

The award was presented by H H Sayyid Muadh Bin Dheyab Bin Hamad al Said, as well as Atulya Sharma, United Media Services CEO, and Said Mashani, deputy CEO. The event was also attended by several dignitaries and leaders in the corporate world, a press release said.

ABQ's award for their commitment to providing a world-class learning experience, and offering an environment that fosters educational, physical, social and cultural development of all students' was received by Group CEO, Humayun Kabir.

Kabir said, "We are extremely proud and honoured to be receiving this prestigious 'Signature Luxury 100 award'. As a Group, we strive to consistently deliver a world-class learning experience to our students. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ABQ staff for their unwavering dedication and commitment which made this remarkable achievement possible."

Kabir continued, "With innovation being at the core of our educational product, our fundamental objective remains the transformation of young people's lives, and we focus on achieving that through superlative education. The fruit of this approach is seen in our annual examination results, with ABQ schools consistently placed in the top positions."

Formula E reveals new winners' trophy

Ahead of the first race of Season 9 in the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship held last Saturday (14 January) in Mexico City, Formula E has revealed a new set of race winners' trophies with an iconic design inspired by technology and electrification as part of their new brand identity.

London-based studio Beta Design Office designed and engineered the trophy to coincide with the debut of Formula E's new GEN3 race car - the fastest, lightest, most powerful and efficient electric race car ever built, a press release said.

The energy burst-like design of the new trophy is heavily inspired by the power features of the GEN3 - the third-generation Formula E car racing at the very limit of innovation and pushing the boundaries of development in EV technology. The first electric open wheel race car to break 200mph, the GEN3 acts like a power station on wheels, generating more than 40% of energy used in the race during the race itself, and more than doubling the regenerative capability of the previous GEN2 car to 600kW.

The brief was to create an iconic new race trophy for the GEN3 era. It was vital that it conveyed electrification, speed, and movement, whilst also retaining elegance and modernity.

Designers at Beta were influenced by real life components of the world's first all-electric motorsport world championship. The trophy comprises 44 fins: 22 larger fins representing the 22 drivers competing in Formula E, and 22 smaller fins representing their cars on the track. The trophy form takes inspiration from automotive spokes, heat sinks and cores within a power cable, combined with flowing lines seen in automotive body panels.

Anodised aluminium was chosen as the primary material for its lightweight, rigid qualities, which also enabled an accurate gold and silver colour-match. It was vital that the final creation felt high-end and premium in keeping with the FIA World Championship status of the sport.

Henry Chilcott, chief marketing officer, Formula E, said, "We tasked Beta with creating a trophy that would be the pinnacle expression of our new brand identity. Inspired by the instant torque of electric acceleration, the trophy speaks to our sport's role as a powerful catalyst for change, whilst also capturing the excitement and speed of electric racing. We can't wait to see it lifted in celebration at our first race of Season 9 in Mexico City on Saturday 14 January."

Mark Reilly, co-founder and creative director, Beta, added, "We wanted the trophy design to create a sense of electricity, the essence of a cup but with the burst of acceleration. Creating a narrative in projects is important for us at Beta. Both Harry [Mitchell, Co-Founder & Creative Director] and I are fans of motorsport and we wanted the design to act as a symbol of the exciting and fast-paced evolution of Formula E, and a vision for the future."

The 2023 Hankook Mexico City E-Prix opens Season 9 of the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship this week. Iconic motorsport names Maserati and McLaren will line up for the first time on a Formula E grid where they will compete with Porsche, Jaguar and Nissan among the 11 teams to race the GEN3 car for the first time.

Sharjah Chamber receives business delegation from Colombia

The Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) has discussed economic cooperation and ways to boost business relations with a high-level business delegation from the Arab Colombian Chamber of Commerce.

The discussions were held during the Sharjah-Colombia business forum organised by the Chamber on the sidelines of the Colombian business delegation's visit to the emirate of Sharjah, headed by Juliana Cabrejo, CEO of the Arab Colombian Chamber of Commerce. The meeting was attended by Raghda Eman, member of the SCCI's board of directors, a press release said.

Eman said, "The UAE's vision and aspirations are primarily focused on enhancing the country's economy and achieving



qualitative leaps by supporting economic, commercial, and investment partnerships, and expanding bilateral relations with many promising countries, including Colombia."

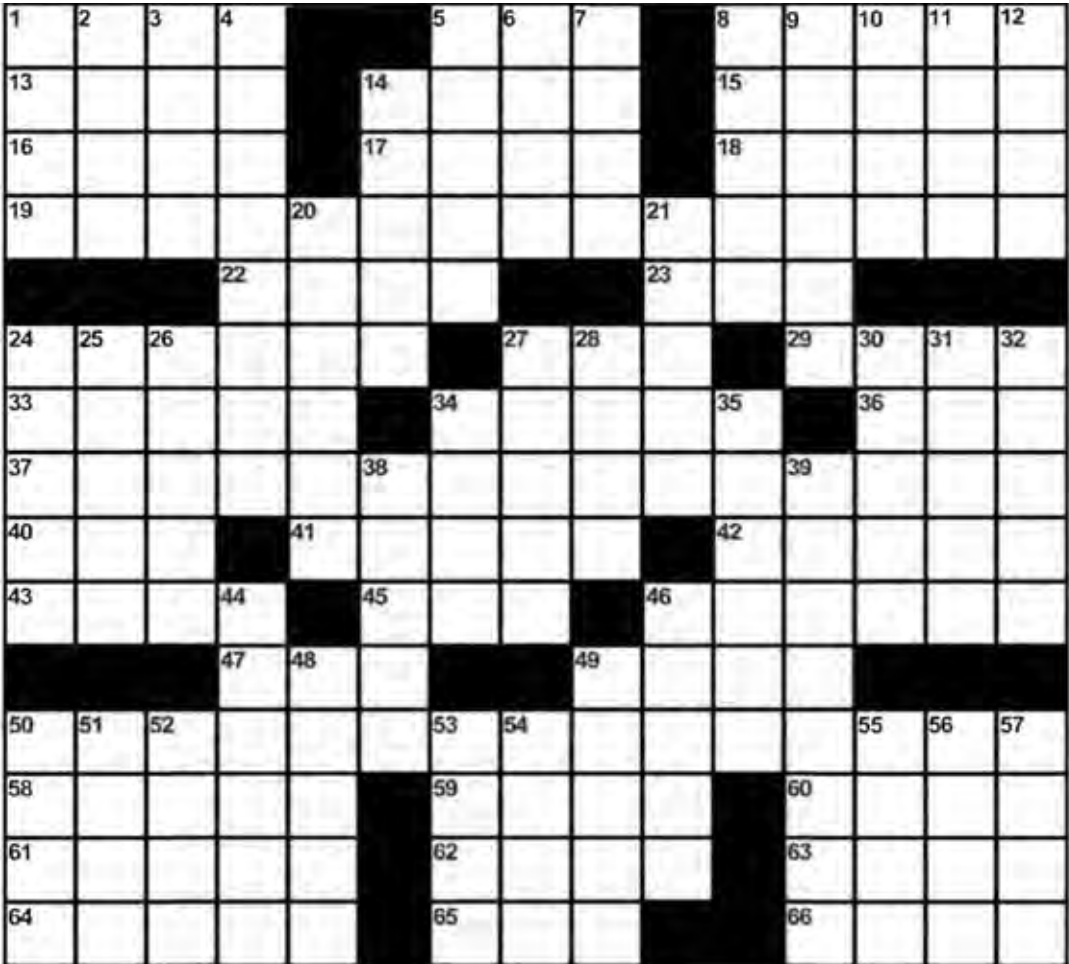
She added, Colombia is the third largest economy in South America, a major source of raw materials, and an important gateway for companies based in the UAE to access the wide economic opportunities offered by the region. In addition, the UAE is Colombia's largest trading partner in the Arab world, with

understanding that brings together members of both Chambers to achieve qualitative leaps in various sectors," She said.

Emphasising the importance of the meeting, Cabrejo said that the gathering has been a valuable opportunity for Colombian companies and members of the Arab Colombian Chamber of Commerce to exchange expertise and explore investment opportunities in various sectors, especially in coffee trading.

Cabrejo added that Sharjah has international capabilities in all fields and can support Colombian companies with its economic expertise. She outlined investment opportunities available in Colombia, which is one of the most stable Latin American economies.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Famed biblical trio
- 5) Pharmaceuticals over-seer, briefly
- 8) Walloped, old-style
- 13) With the level bubble deadcenter
- 14) It signifies approval
- 15) Fete
- 16) Encircle with a band
- 17) Ending with "hard" or "soft"
- 18) Soul
- 19) Do a clerical job
- 22) Break in relations
- 23) They make frequent stops
- 24) Express dissent
- 27) Many millennia make one
- 29) Artist Chagall
- 33) Small bit
- 34) Thin narrow groove
- 36) Expire
- 37) 800mph
- 40) Gallery display
- 41) Devoted
- 42) City on the Arkansas

River

- 43) "... we forget ..."
- 45) Cinematic rat
- 46) Large bird dog, briefly
- 47) Be a suitor
- 49) Hop, skip or jump, e.g.
- 50) Hospital VIP
- 58) Certain Arabian Peninsula native
- 59) Certain something
- 60) Small rivulet
- 61) Drivel
- 62) Communicate silently
- 63) Meager
- 64) Animal in a roundup
- 65) Dead south minus 135 degrees
- 66) Nugent and Danson

DOWN

- 1) Prefix with "phone"
- 2) Passionate
- 3) It might make you sick
- 4) Roundabout
- 5) Elaborate banquet
- 6) Blowgun ammo
- 7) On the safe side?
- 8) Astute
- 9) Belief in one causal prin-

ciple

- 10) "Step ..."
- 11) Thick reference book
- 12) Historic periods
- 14) Fleet
- 20) Small coin
- 21) Encounter with the law
- 24) Butcher's scraps
- 25) Lean on the horn
- 26) Isn't serious
- 27) Wharton's Frome
- 28) Kind of surgery
- 30) No longer a minor
- 31) Shampoo bottle word
- 32) Chest material
- 34) Eyelid protuberance
- 35) Back of the boat
- 38) Mechanical being
- 39) Eruption
- 44) Emotional pang
- 46) Alternative to a convertible
- 48) Willow
- 49) Border
- 50) Holds up
- 51) Send out
- 52) Big blow
- 53) Life of Riley

- 54) Archaeological site
- 55) Rub the wrong way

- 56) Dove into third
- 57) Shade-providing trees

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Today, conflict could lead to some very rewarding and constructive exchanges between you and someone else. Of course, that doesn't mean you should go out looking for a fight, but it does mean that if someone causes a bit of friction in your life, then they are someone you should spend a little bit more time with! Wouldn't it be boring if everyone agreed with everything you said? Celebrate the fact that people all have their own way of thinking about things.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You're likely to spend a lot of time daydreaming about the future, but it will be time well spent! It's never too early to make a plan, especially one that you think could help you achieve a major goal. Thoughts about where you want to live next, who you want to grow old with, or what kind of family you want will be swimming around your head, and you should give them some thought whenever you can. Be open to change too. What you think you want desperately today might seem silly tomorrow.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Are you hungry for a new adventure? Of course you are! There's so much in life to discover, and today is just as good as any other day to start exploring! Travel is a great idea right now, especially if it's to a foreign country. Get online and start planning your next trip. If you don't have the time or the finances for such an elaborate expedition, just grab some friends and check out a restaurant that serves food from a country you'd like to visit. Feed your wanderlust with food.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Hold your fire today when someone bursts onto the scene and comes dangerously close to messing up something you've been working on for a very long time! You might want to rip their head off and tell them to get lost, but you have to be tolerant of their presence and listen to what they have to say whether you like it or not. This is a politically delicate situation, and they have to have their say. Let them feel like they're doing something, and then you can continue down your planned path.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

It might feel like there are too many overbearing people in your life right now. Everyone seems to know exactly what you should do next, and they aren't shy about telling you! These bossy people truly do have your best interests at heart, so try not to be too angry about their meddlesome ways. Just smile and thank them for their interest, but make it clear that you are in charge of your life and, right or wrong, your decisions are the ones that will guide your life.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

It won't be easy to get alone time today. Your presence will be much in demand from two different groups. So if you're craving some solo hours, you could be facing a tough challenge. If you can, just give in and get together with the people who are clamoring for your attention. There will be plenty of time in the coming days to go off on your own and think or relax. For now, you need to try to find happiness in the energy generated when you're in the midst of others.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Feel like you've been on a roller-coaster ride over the past few days? If so, you're in for some welcome news: all signs point toward this being a very good day for you! It will be full of just enough of a mix of new, exciting things and old, comforting things to keep you smiling. A nice surprise in the afternoon will remind you of how much you're loved by the friends you've chosen to be in your life. You are on the right track and you totally know it.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Talking about your hopes for the future with friends and family members is a nice way to pass the day, but it does little to make actual changes happen in your life. It might be time to take a break and go off on your own for a while. Solitude will reignite your individualism and remind you that you're ultimately the only person who can take you where you want to go in life. Get back in touch with the things you (and only you) want for yourself. Start making them happen.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

It might not feel good to give up some of what you want today, but a compromise is called for. It could be something as minor as choosing a different place to eat because of someone's dietary preferences, or it could be as major as altering your entire schedule to make things easier on someone else. Propose that things go their way this time but maybe your way next time. You don't have to roll over and let them walk all over you, but you should give a little bit more.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you feel like you're stuck at a crossroads today, you simply need to remember your plans for the future in order to know exactly where you need to go. It's more important than ever for you to stick to your initial path and not veer off into tantalizing new projects or adventures. Put the blinders on if you have to, because you need to stay focused on what lies ahead of you. Resist anyone's invitation to try something a little bit different today.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today, you might have to watch yourself when you're exposed to your greatest temptation. If it's cookies or cake, you should preemptively fill up on vegetables so you won't give in to the sweet stuff. If it's that certain someone who always gets your heart beating faster, you should just get out of there as quickly as you can! You know what's bad for you, and you know you need to stay away from it right now. So do whatever you have to do get out of the danger zone.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You have a lot of wishes for where you want your career to go from here, and one of these wishes could come one giant step closer to being reality today. The work you've been putting in is going to pay off very soon, but you should still give it some nudges here and there. Ask a few penetrating questions, and you'll love what you hear. The effort you make today can yield exciting last-minute invitations, so be ready to go at a moment's notice.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The Jewish King Solomon was the son of whom?

- A. Saul and Ahinoam
- B. Ahab and Jezebel
- C. Rehoboam and Maacah
- D. David and Bathsheba

02. In what sport does the equipment include a spider, a hook rest and a half butt?

- A. Shooting
- B. Fencing
- C. Gymnastics
- D. Snooker

03. The London market at Billingsgate, now situated close to Canary Wharf in Docklands, London, deals in what?

- A. Fruit, vegetables and flowers
- B. Fish
- C. Meat
- D. Fruit and vegetables

Answers: 1.D 2.D 3.B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

P	L	P	Y
A	R	I	L
O	N	I	L
A	O	T	T

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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



Israeli left wing protesters attend a rally against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new hard-right government in the coastal city of Tel Aviv on Saturday (AFP)

Israel: Protesters rally against new hard-right government

Tel Aviv, Israel - Tens of thousands of people protested in central Tel Aviv on Saturday against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new hard-right government, which critics say threatens Israeli democracy. Protesters braved the rain for the rally, brandishing signs with slogans decrying a 'government of shame' and urging: 'bring down the dictator', AFP correspondents said.

Israeli media reported 80,000 people joined the rally, citing police sources. Police gave no official estimate after reporting 20,000 protesters earlier in the evening.

The demonstration is the biggest since Netanyahu's new government took power in late December in Israel, a country of just over nine million.

"The situation is worrying and scary," said 22-year-old protester Aya Tal, who works in the high-tech industry.

"They want to take away our rights... We must unite."

Other rallies were held in Jerusalem, outside the prime minister's and the president's residences, and in the northern city of Haifa, local media reported. Already Israel's longest-serving premier, Netanyahu returned to power at the head of a coalition with extreme-right

parliament.

'Save democracy'

The crowd filled the streets surrounding Tel Aviv's Habima Square and chanted 'democracy, democracy', according to an AFP correspondent.

Opposition parties had called

In Israel, which does not have a constitution, the Supreme Court currently has the authority to repeal laws it considers discriminatory. Former Supreme Court judge Ayala Procaccia told the crowd the Israeli public 'will not accept... the destruction of the basic values of our system'.

"We are at a fateful moment for the future of Israel," she said.

The new government has also announced intentions to pursue a policy of settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank and carry out social reforms that have worried members and supporters of the LGBTQ community.

The rally included messages against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and calls to protect the rights of the LGBTQ community.

"There's no democracy with the occupation," read one sign.

'Fight'

Netanyahu is the first sitting Israeli prime minister indicted

while in office. He denies the charges against him of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

The leader of right-wing party Likud was ousted from office in 2021 after a record 12-year run by a motley coalition of parties, elected on the heels of anti-corruption protests that called for Netanyahu's resignation.

His return to power ended an unprecedented period of political gridlock that forced five elections in less than four years and deepened social divisions.

The leader of centre-left opposition party Labour, Merav Michaeli, was among several politicians at the Tel Aviv rally, as was former foreign minister Tzipi Livni.

Former defence minister Benny Gantz, now in the opposition, shared on Twitter a video of himself at the demonstration.

"We'll fight in the Knesset, we'll fight in the media, we'll fight on the streets," Gantz told protesters.

AFP

Palestinians flay 'execution' of man at West Bank checkpoint



Palestinian women mourn during the funeral of Ahmad Kahla in the village of Rammun in the occupied West Bank, on Sunday (AFP)

Rammun, Palestinian Territories - Palestinian officials on Sunday condemned what they labelled the 'execution' of a Palestinian man at an Israeli checkpoint in the occupied West Bank, while the army said he was shot during a 'violent confrontation'.

The ministry slammed the 'heinous execution' of Ahmad Kahla, 45, who was shot dead in the morning by troops near the village of Silwad north of Ramallah. The Israeli military said soldiers opened fire during a 'violent confrontation' in which an unnamed person had 'attempted to take hold of one of the soldiers' weapons'.

The man's son, Qusai Kahla, told AFP he was in the car with his father when they were stopped at the checkpoint.

"Soldiers came and they sprayed pepper spray on my face and pulled me out of the car," the 18-year-old said at the family

home in Rammun village.

"I don't know what happened after that," he said. "I found out from my uncle that my dad was killed."

Israel's military, meanwhile, said the Palestinians had refused to stop and soldiers used 'riot dispersal means in order to detain one of the suspects in the vehicle'.

Kahla was shot in the neck, the Palestinian health ministry said. The army said no troops were hurt.

A military spokesperson said they had no information to add regarding the weapons used to stop the vehicle, or whether the civilian was unarmed when he was killed.

The official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported soldiers forced Kahla out of his vehicle before shooting him at 'point blank' range.

AFP

Bomb kills at least five at DR Congo church

Beni, DR Congo - A bomb killed at least five people on Sunday after detonating in a church in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the army said. Details of the attack remain hazy, but military spokesman

Antony Mualushayi said the 'terrorist act' happened in a Pentecostal church in North Kivu province's Kasindi, a town on the border with Uganda.

Mualushayi later told reporters that at least five bodies had been taken to the morgue following the blast, in what he called a provisional death toll.

Joel Kitaua, a local civil society figure, put the death toll at eight and said 27 other people

had been wounded.

AFP was unable to independently confirm the toll.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the attack. Mualushayi said that one suspect - a Kenyan - had been arrested. The DRC's communications ministry said on social media that the attack was apparently carried out by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) group. The ADF - which the Islamic State group claims as its affiliate in Central Africa - is active in the Kasindi area. It has been accused of slaughtering thousands of Congolese civilians and carrying out bomb attacks in Uganda.

AFP

Eight dead in Somalia bombing claimed by Al-Shabaab

Mogadishu, Somalia - Police said on Sunday that eight people were killed in a roadside bombing claimed by Al-Shabaab in central Somalia where a major offensive is underway to retake territory from the militants.

The attack occurred on Saturday afternoon in Buloburde, a city in Hiran district where government forces and clan militias have been battling the Al-Qaeda-linked insurgents since the middle of last year.

The bomber detonated a car laden with explosives near an administrative building, said Abdulahi Mohamud, a local police



Demonstrators attend a rally against the Al-Shabaab militant group in Mogadishu on Thursday (AFP)

commander. "Five people were killed on the

on Israelis to join the demonstration - organised by an anti-corruption group - to 'save democracy' and in protest at a planned judicial overhaul.

Justice Minister Yariv Levin announced on January 4 a controversial plan to hand more powers to lawmakers in appointing judges and overriding Supreme Court decisions.

spot, while three others died overnight in hospital," he said on Sunday, adding the bomber had been planning to destroy the city's main bridge before redirecting the attack at a civilian area.

Witnesses said the explosion damaged buildings and the city's main mosque.

"I saw the bodies of five people. Two were elders coming out of the mosque," said Muhidin Sokorow, who witnessed the blast.

Separately, police said a car

bomb was detonated in Jalalaqi, another town in Hiran, but only the attacker died.

A second attack was foiled and the suspect detained trying to flee a vehicle packed with explosives, police said.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for all three attacks in a message transmitted via its communication service.

The militants have been waging a bloody insurgency against the frail internationally-backed central government for 15 years.

AFP

Ukraine puts Dnipro toll at 21 after wave of Russian strikes

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine said on Sunday that the death toll had risen to 21 after a Russian missile slammed into a tower block in the city of Dnipro during a massive wave of strikes causing power outages and blackouts across the war-torn country.

Officials said more than 40 people were still missing after the Dnipro strike on Saturday, which came as Ukraine celebrated the Old New Year holiday and as Britain became the first Western country to offer Kyiv the heavy tanks it has long sought. At least 21 people were killed and 73 others wounded in the attack on the Dnipro tower block, Ukraine's regional council head Mykola Lukashuk said.

A 15-year-old girl was among the dead, officials said, after dozens of people were pulled from the rubble, including a



Rescuers work on a residential building destroyed after a missile strike, in Dnipro on Sunday (AFP)

woman brought out by rescuers on Sunday.

"Rescue operations continue. The fate of more than 40 people remain unknown," regional governor Valentyn Reznichenko

said. The strike destroyed dozens of flats in the apartment block leaving hundreds of people homeless, said Kyrylo Tymoshenko, a senior official at the presidency.

The Ukrainian army said the block was hit by an X-22 Russian missile that it lacked the capacity to shoot down.

"Only anti-aircraft missile systems, which in the future may be

provided to Ukraine by Western partners... are capable of intercepting these air targets," it said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Saturday pleaded for more Western military weapons, saying that Russian 'terror' could be stopped only on the battlefield.

"What is needed for this? Those weapons that are in the warehouses of our partners," Zelensky said.

British tanks

On Saturday, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged to provide Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine, the first Western country to supply the heavy tanks Kyiv has been demanding.

The tanks would arrive in Ukraine in the coming weeks, Downing Street said, adding that Britain would also train the

Ukrainian Armed Forces on how to use them. Russia's embassy in Britain warned that 'bringing tanks to the conflict zone... will only serve to intensify combat operations, generating more casualties, including among the civilian population'.

At least 21 people were killed and 73 others wounded in the attack on the Dnipro tower block

Moldova, Ukraine's southwestern neighbour, said it had found Russian missile debris on its territory after Saturday's strikes.

"Russia's brutal war against Ukraine directly impacts

Moldova again," President Maia Sandu tweeted, posting photographs of the wreckage.

Ukraine's energy facilities were still reeling on Sunday from what was a 12th wave of large-scale Russian attacks on energy infrastructure in recent months.

The attacks targeted power infrastructure in the Kharkiv, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zaporizhzhia, Vinnytsia and Kyiv regions, Energy Minister German Galushchenko said.

On Sunday, operator Ukrenergo said energy infrastructure was 'being restored' but that the attacks had 'increased the energy deficit'.

"The period of outages may increase," it acknowledged.

AFPZelensky said Ukraine shot down 20 of the more than 30 Russian missiles fired.

AFP

More classified documents at Biden home

Five additional pages of classified material were found at Joe Biden’s family home in Delaware

Washington, US - Five additional pages of classified material have been found at Joe Biden’s family home in Delaware, the White House said on Saturday in a new twist in a politically sensitive affair for the president.

It was the latest in a series of revelations about the apparently improper storage of papers dating from Biden’s time as Barack Obama’s vice president. Biden has said he had no intention of keeping any classified documents.

White House lawyer Richard Sauber said the latest papers were found after he visited the home on Thursday to oversee the transfer to the Justice Department of a first batch of documents found a day earlier in a room next to the home’s garage.

Biden’s personal lawyers searching the garage at the home in Wilmington, Delaware - where the 80-year-old president often spends weekends - had found a document marked classified in the garage itself.

As these attorneys lacked the necessary security clearance to read it, they notified the Justice Department, Sauber said in a statement.

A 1978 law obliges US presidents and vice presidents to hand over their emails, letters and other official documents to the National Archives.

Sauber said he does have the necessary security clearance, so he then went to the Delaware house to check out the situation for himself. That is when he found the other five pages, he said. He said all documents were ‘immediately and voluntarily’ handed to the Justice Department.

Republican criticism

Critics of Biden have seized on the steady series of revelations to argue that he has not been transparent and forthcoming.

Others papers had been found on November 2 at Biden’s former office at a Washington think tank, where he had offices after leaving the Obama White House.

The president’s attorneys had also found ‘a small number of documents,’ potentially confidential, on December 20 in the Wilmington garage, and alerted the Justice Department.

Amid rising furore over the discoveries in Washington, US Attorney General Merrick Garland on Thursday named Robert Hur as an independent prosecutor to investigate Biden’s handling of classified documents.

The issue is an unwelcome distraction for Biden as he prepares to announce whether he will seek a second term.

The disclosures have prompted comparisons to the case of former president Donald Trump, who is also being investigated by a special counsel for storing hundreds of classified materials at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida and allegedly obstructing government efforts to retrieve them.

In contrast, Sauber emphasised that Biden had returned where documents from my time as vice president were stored, and they finished the review last night.”

The first cache of Biden documents was discovered in November, a week before last year’s midterm elections, but only acknowledged by the White House on Monday, prompting accusations from Republicans that it was kept secret for political reasons.

Republicans, newly in control of the House of Representatives, have vowed to launch an inquiry to be headed by James Comer, a conservative from Kentucky who chairs an oversight committee.

“The Biden White House’s secrecy in this matter is alarming. Equally alarming is the fact that Biden aides were combing through documents knowing there would be a Special Counsel appointed,” Comer said in a statement.

“Many questions need to be answered but one thing is certain: oversight is coming,” he said, condemning what he called ‘President Biden’s three strikes against transparency’.

AFP



US Attorney General Merrick Garland names an independent special counsel to probe President Joe Biden’s alleged mishandling of classified documents at the US Justice Department in Washington, DC on Thursday (AFP)

It was the latest in a series of revelations about apparently improper storage of papers dating from Biden’s time as Barack Obama’s vice president. Biden has said he had no intention of keeping any classified material

documents ‘immediately and voluntarily’ when they turned up. “I take classified documents and classified material seriously. We’re cooperating fully (and) completely with the Justice Department’s review,” Biden told reporters on Thursday.

“As part of that process, my lawyers reviewed other places



Policemen arrest a protester during a demonstration against the government of Peruvian President Dina Boluarte in Lima on Thursday (AFP)

Protest-hit Peru declares state of emergency in capital Lima

Lima, Peru - Peru’s capital Lima was under a state of emergency on Sunday, along with three other regions, as the government responded to weeks-long protests against President Dina Boluarte that have seen at least 42 people killed.

The state of emergency, in force for 30 days, authorises the army to intervene to maintain order and suspends several constitutional rights such as freedom of movement and assembly, according to a decree published in the official gazette.

It covers Lima and the regions of Cusco and Puno, as well as the port of Callao adjacent to the capital.

Supporters of ousted president Pedro Castillo have taken to the streets and blocked roads across the South American country since December, demanding fresh elections and the removal of Boluarte, who has refused to step down.

Protests have been announced for Monday in Lima as well as the marginalised southern Andean regions, which have been the epicenter of the unrest.

Some groups of protesters from the south plan to travel to Lima for a ‘takeover of the city’.

“We have the decision to go to Lima (from Monday), yes or yes,” said Julio Vilca, a protest leader from the province of Ilave, in the Puno region. “We cannot indicate the time, because what we want is to travel in unity.”

More than 100 protest roadblocks were in place across Peru on Saturday.

The airport in Cusco, gateway to the famed Machu Picchu site, reopened on Saturday after being shuttered on Thursday, the second time it had been closed due to the protests.

Trains to Machu Picchu were still suspended, and local unions say tourism workers are losing out on up to seven million sols (US\$1.7mn) a day due to the crisis. The mass anti-government demonstrations first broke out in early December, after Castillo was ousted from office for attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree, seeking to prevent an impeachment vote against him.

Peru has been politically unstable in recent years, with 60-year-old Boluarte being the sixth person to hold the presidency in five years.

Castillo, who was being investigated in several fraud cases during his tenure, has been remanded in custody for 18 months, charged with rebellion.

The unrest has been largely concentrated in the southern Andes, where Quechua and Aymara communities live.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which visited the country this week, has said that in order to end the crisis, these groups need to be better integrated into Peruvian society.

Authorities insist radical groups are behind the protests, including remnants of the Shining Path communist guerrilla group.

AFP

California takes another storm-pounding

Salinas, US - US President Joe Biden has declared a major disaster in California, as the latest in a succession of storm systems blew into the state, bringing heavy flooding to already waterlogged regions and threatening snowfalls of up to six feet.

The latest system was expected to bring ‘heavy lower-elevation rain, significant mountain snow, and strong winds,’ with ‘another surge of Pacific moisture’ expected on Monday, the National Weather Service (NWS) said.

It predicted ‘disastrous flooding’ across the lower Salinas River valley, a key agricultural region south of San Francisco Bay.

Late on Saturday, Biden ‘declared that a major disaster exists in the State of California and ordered Federal aid to supplement State, tribal, and local recovery efforts in the areas affected by severe winter storms, flooding, landslides, and mudslides’, the White House said in a statement.

The declaration makes federal funding available for relief to affected people, including temporary housing and repairs.

At least 19 people are known to have died from storm-related causes in the last three weeks.

Among them were drivers found in submerged cars, people struck by falling trees, and a husband and wife killed in a rockfall.

Rising waters and unsuitable conditions resulted in a halt in the search for five-year-old Kyle Doan, who was swept away in floodwaters as his mother tried to pull him to safety from their car,



Water drips from a rose near a house flooded by the Salinas River near Chualar, California, on Saturday (AFP)

the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff’s office said on Saturday.

An AFP journalist saw the Salinas River overflowing its banks in many spots, at times covering farm fields for hundreds of yards, even as the rain continued under leaden skies. In Spreckels, a community a few hundred yards from the river, most residents had opted not to evacuate despite warnings from authorities.

“It looks like we might have missed kind of the worst of it,” said Robert Zagajski, out walking his dog under a light rain.

A few miles away, 30-year-old farm worker Erick Diaz watched the flooded fields from his home near the river. Despite evacuation orders, he too had remained.

“I have nowhere to go and for the moment everything is fine,” he said.

But Governor Gavin Newsom warned Californians that they were not in the clear yet: “We’re not done,” he said on Saturday after visiting impacted residents.

Urging them to remain vigilant, he said Californians should continue to exercise ‘common sense over the course of the next 24 to 48 hours’. Nearly 26mn Californians remained under a flood watch on Saturday evening, according to the NWS, with tens of thousands under evacuation orders and advisories.

The storms of recent weeks were originally welcomed - coming after years of drought - but by now have brought ‘disastrous’ flooding, officials have said.

AFP

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AFP

Philippines: Death toll in storms rises to 27

Manila, Philippines - At least 27 people have died in storms across the Philippines this month, authorities said on Sunday, as forecasters warned of continued heavy rains in the disaster-prone country.

Heavy downpours and flooding have plagued the nation’s southern and central islands since the Christmas weekend, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes.

Since the start of the year, at least three storms have killed 27 people across the country. Eleven people were reported injured and three are missing.

The state weather forecaster PAGASA warned Sunday of heavy rains over the Bicol peninsula.

AFP

Brazil riots ‘strengthened’ Lula’s hand: Analysts

Rio De Janeiro, Brazil - By ransacking government buildings in their fervent opposition to leftist Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Brazil’s January 8 rioters may have strengthened his hand, at least temporarily, analysts say.

Many even among the backers of defeated far-right ex-president Jair Bolsonaro were shocked by the pillaging of national heritage buildings and artefacts.

Immediately after the storming of the presidency, Congress and Supreme Court, Lula gathered leaders of the three institutions - many of them from the political right -- for a unanimous condemnation of the events.

Presenting a united front, they affirmed publicly that democracy would not be allowed to falter just three decades after the fall of Brazil’s military dictatorship.

‘The events (of January 8) had the opposite effect’ of what was intended, said Mayra Goulart, professor of political science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). “Lula will no doubt emerge stronger. These assaults have created a climate of national unity for the defense of democracy,” she told AFP.

The riots happened exactly one week after Lula’s inauguration went off with much pomp and ceremony, but in the absence of Bolsonaro who left the country two days earlier and dodged the traditional duty of



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (AFP)

Immediately after the storming of the presidency, Congress and Supreme Court, Lula gathered leaders of the three institutions - many of them from the political right - for a unanimous condemnation of the events

handing over the presidential sash. Thousands forced their way into the seats of power, smashing windows and furniture, destroying priceless works of art, and leaving behind graffiti messages calling for a military coup.

The military did not rise to the

call. More than 2,000 alleged rioters were detained, and the authorities are tracking those suspected of having masterminded and financed the revolt that shocked Brazil and the world.

An investigation has been opened into a possible role played by Bolsonaro, whose justice minister was arrested on Saturday for possible collusion with the vandals. Condemnation from abroad was unanimous.

Washington, Moscow, Beijing, the European Union, Paris and Latin American capitals expressed their full support for the new president of Brazil - a country that was isolated from the global stage under Bolsonaro.

“The international uproar will reinforce the position of Lula, who will be perceived as an important leader who can contribute to strengthening multilateral forums,” said Goulart.

‘Balanced attitude’

Leandro Gabiati of consulting firm Dominium said Lula’s image has been ‘strengthened’ by his perceived firm but fair handling

of the mop-up operation.

Bolsonaro’s in turn, has been harmed. Lula ‘was challenged and he did quite well,’ said Gabiati, citing ‘a balanced attitude that somehow restored normalcy’ without an air of retribution.

Lula’s government has been firm: ‘fascists’ found guilty of involvement in the riots will face sentences of up to 30 years for ‘terrorism.’

As the net also tightened around suspected organisers of the uprising, the government announced a reshuffling of the police and security forces.

Security at the presidential palace, it announced, will be cleansed of any remaining Bolsonaro sympathisers left over from the previous administration. Lula will have to ‘take exemplary sanctions in order to avoid a repeat of this type of demonstrations’, said Gabiati.

And even as he needs to deal urgently with pressing problems such as poverty and hunger, Lula will be forced to ‘expend energy in the investigations... of the putschists’, added Goulart.

AFP

At least 67 killed in Nepal plane crash

The aircraft plummeted into a steep gorge, smashed into pieces and burst into flames in Pokhara

Pokhara, Nepal - At least 67 people were confirmed dead on Sunday after a plane with 72 on board crashed in Nepal, police said, in the Himalayan country's worst aviation disaster in three decades.

Those on board the ATR 72 twin-engine turboprop aircraft that plummeted into a steep gorge, smashed into pieces and burst into flames in the central city of Pokhara included six children, officials said.

As light faded late on Sunday and soldiers extracted bodies with ropes and stretchers out of the 300-metre-deep (1,000-foot) ravine, there was no word on the fate of the five people still unaccounted for.

"We are actively working to retrieve and identify the bodies as soon as possible and hand (them) over to their families," police official AK Chhetri told AFP at the crash site, which was still smouldering and strewn with aircraft debris, including the mangled remains of wings and passenger seats.

A local official had earlier said that 'some survivors' had been taken to hospital, but this was not confirmed by the aircraft's operator Yeti Airlines or other officials. Yeti spokesman Sudarshan Bartaula told AFP that 15 foreigners were on board, including five Indians, four Russians and two South Koreans, with one passenger each from Argentina, Australia, France and Ireland. The



Rescuers gather at the site of the plane crash in Pokhara on Sunday (AFP)

rest were Nepalis.

'Like a bomb'

The flight from Kathmandu slammed into the gorge between Pokhara's domestic and brand new international airport on Sun-

day, shortly before 11am (0515 GMT). An unverified clip shared on social media purportedly showed the plane flying low over a residential area before banking sharply to the left, followed by a loud explosion.

"I was walking when I heard a loud blast like a bomb went off," said witness Arun Tamu, 44, who was around 500 metres away and who posted live video of the blazing wreckage on social media.

"A few of us rushed to see if we can rescue anybody. I saw at least two women were breathing. The fire was getting very intense and it made it difficult for us to approach closer," the former soldier told AFP.

It was unclear if anyone on the ground was injured.

Rescue workers rushed to the site littered with debris, trying to put out several raging fires that were sending thick black smoke billowing into the sky.

Poor record

Nepal's air industry has boomed in recent years, carrying goods and people between hard-to-reach areas, as well as ferrying foreign mountain climbers.

But it has been plagued by poor safety due to insufficient training and maintenance. The European Union has banned all Nepali carriers from its airspace over safety concerns.

The Himalayan country also has some of the world's most remote and tricky runways, flanked by snow-capped peaks with approaches that pose a challenge for even accomplished pilots.

The weather is also notoriously capricious and hard to forecast, particularly in the mountains, where thick fog can suddenly obscure whole mountains from view. Last May, all 22 people on board a plane operated by Nepali carrier Tara Air - 16 Nepalis, four Indians and two Germans - died when it crashed.

Air traffic control lost contact with that twin-propeller Twin Otter shortly after it took off from Pokhara and headed for Jomsom, a popular trekking destination.

Its wreckage was found a day later, strewn across a mountain-side at around 4,400 metres (14,500 feet) above sea level.

After that crash, authorities tightened regulations, with planes to only be cleared to fly if there was favourable weather forecast throughout the route.

AFP



Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan (ANI)

Pakistan provincial assembly dissolved on orders of ex-PM Khan

Lahore, Pakistan - The provincial assembly in Pakistan's most populous province, Punjab, was dissolved late on Saturday, in a move orchestrated by former prime minister Imran Khan as part of a bid to force early general elections.

The country has been gripped by political instability since Khan was ousted in a no-confidence vote and replaced last April by a shaky coalition led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

The South Asian nation is also battling a severe economic crisis. It is drowning in debt, facing galloping inflation and dwindling foreign exchange reserves as the economy tries to claw to recovery from last year's devastating monsoon floods. Punjab Governor Baligh Ur Rehman on Saturday signed a letter ordering the appointment of a caretaker chief minister, replacing Khan's coalition partner Chaudhry Pervez Elahi's government.

Elahi had advised the governor to dissolve the assembly earlier this week, with Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party seeking a provincial election. Khan's party continues to command popularity, and is expected to also dissolve the provincial assembly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where it holds power in a coalition

government.

Fresh elections to the Punjab assembly - which governs vital services for roughly half of Pakistan's 220 million citizens - must now be held within 90 days.

Provincial polls in Pakistan have historically been held at the same time as general elections, although the synchronicity is not constitutionally mandated.

A countrywide general election is due in October 2023, and Khan's manoeuvre heaps financial and logistical headaches on Sharif's administration.

PTI spokesman Fawad Chaudry previously told AFP the dissolutions were planned as 'a huge pressure tactic'.

Khan was ousted from office as the economy began to backslide and he lost the support of Pakistan's military, which has ruled the country for roughly half of its 76-year history and continues to wield control over major aspects of governance and policy. Since then, Khan has staged a series of huge and rousing rallies, touting a claim that he was ousted by a US-led 'conspiracy'. The US State Department and Sharif's government have denied the allegations.

In November, Khan was shot at a party rally, an assassination bid he blamed on Sharif.

AFP

Gunmen shoot dead 'fearless' Afghan woman ex-lawmaker, her bodyguard

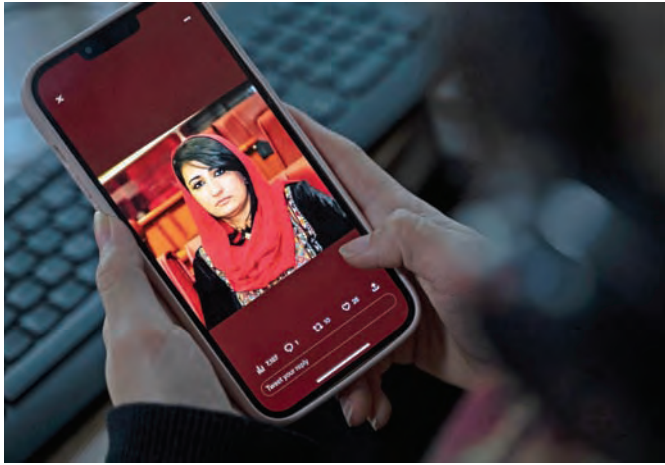
Kabul, Afghanistan - Gunmen shot dead an Afghan former lawmaker and one of her bodyguards in the capital Kabul in a night-time attack at her home, police said on Sunday.

Mursal Nabizada had been a member of parliament in the US-backed government that was overthrown by the Taliban in August 2021.

"Nabizada, along with one of her bodyguards, was shot dead at her house," Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran said.

"The security forces have started a serious investigation into the incident," he said, adding that a brother of the former lawmaker was also wounded in the attack, which took place during the night between Saturday and Sunday.

Nabizada was a 'fearless



A woman looks at a picture of former Afghan lawmaker Mursal Nabizada on her mobile phone (AFP)

champion for Afghanistan', former lawmaker Mariam Solaimankhil said on Twitter.

"A true trailblazer - strong, outspoken woman who stood for what she believed in, even in the

face of danger," she wrote.

"Despite being offered the chance to leave Afghanistan, she chose to stay and fight for her people," she added.

Nabizada, 32, hailed from the

A true trailblazer - strong, outspoken woman who stood for what she believed in, even in the face of danger. Despite being offered chance to leave afghanistan, she chose to stay and fight for people

MARIAM SOLAIMANKHIL

Hannah Neumann, a member of the European parliament, in response to the killing. "She was killed in darkness, but the Taliban build their system of gender apartheid in full daylight."

Women had worked in prominent positions across Afghan society in the two decades since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, with many becoming judges, journalists and politicians. Many women in such professions have fled the country, however, since the Taliban returned to power.

Taliban authorities have rapidly squeezed women out of almost all areas of public life, banning them from secondary and higher education, public sector work and even from visiting public parks and baths.

AFP

Germany: Cops injured in coal mine protests

Lützerath, Germany - Around 70 police officers have been injured in environmental protests at a German village being razed to make way for a coal mine expansion, police said on Sunday.

In an operation that began on Wednesday, hundreds of police have been removing activists from the doomed hamlet of Luetzerath in western Germany.

The site, which has become a symbol of resistance to fossil fuels, attracted thousands of protesters on Saturday, including Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg.

Some of the protesters clashed with police.

AFP

Vande Bharat Express, a symbol of new India: PM

New Delhi, India - Highlighting the Centre's thrust on connectivity and infrastructure development, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the Vande Bharat Express is a symbol of the resolve and potential of New India and shows that the country seeks the best in everything.

He flagged off the Vande Bharat Express, connecting Secunderabad with Visakhapatnam, on Sunday via video conferencing. This is the eighth Vande Bharat Express to be launched by the Indian Railways. Addressing the occasion, Modi said: "Glad to flag off Vande Bharat Express between Secunderabad and Visakhapatnam. It will enhance 'Ease of Living', boost tourism and benefit the economy. In this festive environment, it is a gift for the people of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh."

He said Vande Bharat Express, in a way, will connect the shared



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi flags off the Vande Bharat train via video conferencing, on Sunday (ANI)

culture and heritage of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

Modi said: "Vande Bharat Express signifies that India wants the best of everything. The Vande Bharat Express is a symbol of the resolve and potential of New India. It is a symbol of that India which wants to give better facilities to all its citizens. This is a symbol of an India which is heading toward self-reliance after coming out of its colonial mindset."

"It is a symbol of that India which has started on the path of

rapid change, an India which is restless to realise its dreams and aspirations, an India which wants to reach its goals swiftly," he said.

PM Modi said connectivity expands the possibilities of development with it. Connectivity-related infrastructure, Modi said, not only connects two places but also connects dreams to reality. It connects manufacturing to the market and talent to the platform, he added.

The prime minister also paid tribute to soldiers and ex-service-

men on the occasion of Army Day. He said the Indian Army is known for its bravery and professionalism. "Every Indian is proud of the Army. Indian Army's contribution towards the security of the nation and its borders, its valour is unparalleled," he added.

The Union Minister of Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw and Union Culture Minister G Kishan Reddy were present in person on Platform No 10 of Secunderabad railway station from where the train was flagged off.

ANI

OUT IN THE OPEN



Rafael Nadal facing tough test in Australian Open defence

Melbourne, Australia - Rafael Nadal opens his Australian Open title defence Monday feeling vulnerable and against a dangerous young opponent.

The first Grand Slam of the year kicks off at Melbourne Park with the men's world number one ranking at stake.

Spanish great Nadal, 36, has lost six of his past seven matches, including his opening two this year, ahead of a difficult after-

noon clash on Rod Laver Arena against Britain's in-form Jack Draper. "Probably one of the toughest first-round (games) possible, being seeded," said the 22-time Grand Slam winner and top seed. "Young, powerful, growing very, very fast on the ranking, playing well."

The fast-improving Draper, 21, made the semi-finals of the Adelaide International this week and said he would not be overawed,

despite Nadal being an idol.

"I want to go and compete hard and really play well and I want to go and win the match, of course. So that will be the plan," he said.

Nadal surged to the title last year with a thrilling five-set win over Russia's Daniil Medvedev, who faces American Marcos Giron on centre court in an evening match.

His run to a first Australian crown since 2009 came in the absence of nine-time champion Novak Djokovic, who is back this year and heavy favourite after missing the 2022 event when he

I want to go and compete hard and really play well and I want to go and win the match, of course. So that will be the plan

RAFAEL NADAL

was deported over his Covid vaccination stance.

The 35-year-old Serbian begins on Tuesday against Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena, bidding not just for a 10th title and to equal Nadal's 22 Slams, but to reclaim the top world ranking.

"I like my chances," said Djokovic, who is in form, winning at Adelaide last week after ending 2022 with another ATP Finals triumph.

He can return to the top by lifting the trophy. So can Norway's Casper Ruud and Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas, according to the governing body ATP.

World number three Ruud can also become world number one by reaching the final, as long neither Djokovic nor Tsitsipas win the title.

If none of those scenarios play out, the reign of Carlos Alcaraz, who is not playing in Melbourne due to injury, will continue.

Tsitsipas opens his campaign against France's Quentin Halys on Margaret Court Arena, with Ruud in action on Tuesday.

5 MEN TO WATCH AT AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Melbourne, Australia - Nine-time Melbourne champion Novak Djokovic returns after being banned from last year's Australian Open while Rafael Nadal is defending champion.

World number one Carlos Alcaraz is out injured however and the great Roger Federer is another missing following his retirement.

Here are the five men to watch when the first Grand Slam of the year begins on Monday:

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

The Serb is back at Melbourne Park for the first time since winning his ninth title in 2021 and says he "likes his chances". He was kicked out of the country ahead of the tournament last year over his Covid vaccination stance.

The 21-time Grand Slam winner also missed the US Open for the same reason, but won Wimbledon and is heavy favourite at his most successful major despite a niggling hamstring injury.

RAFAEL NADAL

The 36-year-old Spaniard made the most of Djokovic's absence to win the title in 2022, outlasting Daniil Medvedev over five sets in a more than five-hour thriller. He made history in the process - the first man to achieve 21 Grand Slam singles crowns, making it 22 when he won a 14th French Open title. Now a father, Nadal struggled to find his best form at the ATP Finals in November and lost both of his matches at the recent United Cup.

DANIIL MEDVEDEV

The 26-year-old Russian was unable to match his run to the Melbourne final at the French or US Opens last year and never had a chance at Wimbledon after being banned due to the Ukraine war.

He did win two titles and spent 16 weeks as world number one. But it was an underwhelming year in the eyes of the 2021 US Open champion, who has slipped to eight in the rankings.

STEFANOS TSITSIPAS

The world number four burst onto the scene at the Australian Open in 2019 when as a 20-year-old he dethroned defending champion Federer in the last 16. He went on to reach the semi-finals that year and again in 2021 and 2022, highlighting the consistency that has made him a mainstay of the world's top 10 for nearly four years. However, a Grand Slam crown remains elusive

NICK KYRGIOS

Love him or hate him, Kyrgios is a showman and nowhere more so than on home turf in Melbourne, drawing huge and rowdy crowds. While his frequent tantrums have long overshadowed his talent, the enigmatic Australian had a stellar 2022, making a barnstorming run to a first Grand Slam singles final at Wimbledon, losing to Djokovic. He has never gone past the Australian Open quarter-finals and his build-up has been hampered by an ankle injury, but the unpredictable Kyrgios is an outside chance



Samantha Stosur

Former US Open champ Stosur to retire after Aus Open

Melbourne, Australia - Veteran Sam Stosur said Sunday that the Australian Open would be her final tournament, ending a 23-year career in which she won a singles Grand Slam title and seven others in doubles.

The 38-year-old Australian's greatest moment came when she defeated Serena Williams to win the singles crown at the 2011 US Open. This week will mark her 21st Australian Open.

"That was certainly a dream of mine to achieve that, and I did," she told reporters of her Flushing Meadows triumph. "That's a moment I'll never forget."

"I'm very fortunate that I have so many great memories, yeah, from the sport, winning, losing, travelling, on and off the court," she added at Melbourne Park, where she will play in the doubles with France's Alize Cornet.

Stosur reached a career-high ranking of four in the world in singles and one in doubles after making her Grand Slam debut at the 2002 Australian Open.

Top seed Swiatek inspired by Barty

Melbourne, Australia - World number one Iga Swiatek said Saturday she was ready for an "intense" opening Australian Open match while paying tribute to retired champion Ashleigh Barty for inspiring her to greater heights.

Top seed Swiatek is clear favourite having dominated women's tennis following the retirement in March last year of Barty.

The Australian, who is pregnant, dropped into Melbourne Park on Saturday for "kids' day" and enjoyed a light-hearted practice hit with Swiatek, who took over from her as world number one.

"I have like huge respect for Ash. She really gave me huge motivation at the beginning of last season to get even better.

I'm kind of grateful for that," said Swiatek.

The Pole seized on Barty's retirement to dominate 2022, securing eight WTA titles and becoming the first woman in six years to win two Grand Slams in the same season - at Roland Garros and New York.

Now she has her sights on a maiden title at Melbourne Park, which would leave her needing only a Wimbledon championship to complete a career slam of all four majors.

With retired great Serena Williams and two-time Melbourne winner Naomi Osaka also missing, it is almost certain that there will be a new name on the Daphne Akhurst trophy.

The only former title-holders in the draw are out-of-sorts Sofia Kenin, who won in 2020, and



Ashleigh Barty (L) and Iga Swiatek at an event on 'Kids Tennis Day' in Melbourne on Saturday (AFP)

Victoria Azarenka, whose second Australian Open triumph was a decade ago.

Swiatek begins on Monday

against Jule Neimeier, the German world number 68 who reached the quarter-finals at Wimbledon last year.

More recently, the pair clashed in the last 16 at the US Open, where Swiatek had to dig deep after dropping the first set

before going on to win the tournament.

"It's not going to be easy," she said of Neimeier.

"But any match in a Grand Slam is always more intense and more stressful than other tournaments. I'll be ready for it."

American world number three Jessica Pegula will also fancy her chances. The 28-year-old played a central role for the victorious USA team at the United Cup to continue her red-hot form from the end of the 2022 season, which included lifting a second singles trophy at the WTA 1000 in Guadalajara.

She plays Romania's Jacqueline Cristian first up.

Sixth seed Maria Sakkari and seventh seed Coco Gauff are also in action Monday, as is Azarenka - against Kenin.

5 WOMEN TO WATCH

Melbourne, Australia - World number one Iga Swiatek is the favourite to win an Australian Open women's draw shorn of some of its biggest recent stars.

Ashleigh Barty, who lifted the trophy 12 months ago, and Serena Williams have retired, while the 2019 and 2021 winner Naomi Osaka is pregnant and absent.

Here are the five players to watch:

IGA SWIATEK

The 21-year-old seized her opportunity after the retirement of Barty to dominate 2022, securing eight WTA titles and becoming the first woman in six years to win two Grand Slams in the same season

- at Roland Garros and New York.

After losing the Australian Open semi-final to Danielle Collins, Poland's Swiatek did not look back, embarking on an incredible 37-match winning streak.

ONS JABEUR

The Tunisian world number two appears to be on the cusp of a Grand Slam breakthrough, having been runner-up at Wimbledon and the US Open last year.

The 28-year-old has set herself a 2023 target of toppling Swiatek from the number one ranking and becoming the first Arab and African woman to win a Slam.

Late bloomer Jabeur was 26 when she lifted her maiden WTA title in 2021 at Birmingham, adding Madrid and Berlin trophies last year.

JESSICA PEGULA

The 28-year-old world number three comes into Melbourne Park after starring for the victorious USA team at the United Cup, where she won four of her five matches and beat Swiatek.

Pegula, whose parents are the billionaire owners of the Buffalo Bills NFL franchise, reached the Australian Open quarter-finals in 2021 and last year, where she was outclassed by a rampant Barty.

With Barty out of the way she could prove the biggest challenge to Swiatek.

ARYNA SABALENKA

The explosive Belarusian promised she would be up for a "big fight" at the Australian Open after winning in Adelaide this month for the 11th WTA title of her career.

The 24-year-old left-hander sprung back into form

last season, reaching the semi-final at the US Open and the WTA Tour finals championship match.

Sabalenka can suffer hugely from nerves, which were all too obvious at her two season-opening tournaments in Australia last year when she was reduced to tears as her serve collapsed.

COCO GAUFF

The 18-year-old goes into Melbourne Park on a high after winning her third WTA title at the Auckland Classic this month and warned Saturday that her "best is yet to come".

The seventh seed first won hearts as a 15-year-old in 2019 at Wimbledon when she arrived as a qualifier and reached the last 16, beating five-time champion Venus Williams along the way.

Last year she reached her first Grand Slam final, losing to Swiatek at Roland Garros.

ANNIHILATION

Virat Kohli's 166 helps India crush Sri Lanka by record 317 runs in the third one-day

Thiruvananthapuram, India - Virat Kohli smashed an unbeaten 166 to help India beat Sri Lanka by 317 runs and record the highest ever victory margin in a one-day international as they swept the series 3-0 on Sunday.

Kohli's third century in his last four matches and a 116 by opener Shubman Gill powered India to 390-5 in Thiruvananthapuram.

Fast bowler Mohammed Siraj then returned impressive figures of 4-32 as India bowled out the tourists for 72 in 22 overs as India went past New Zealand's 290-run thrashing of Ireland in 2008.

A 131-run second-wicket stand between Gill and Kohli stood out after India elected to bat first. Gill put on 95 runs for the opening wicket with skipper Rohit Sharma, who made 42, to set the tone for the team's batting domination.

Rohit missed out on a fifty after he fell to Chamika Karunaratne but Gill kept up the attack with Kohli and raised his second ODI hundred, celebrating it with a fist bump.

Gill smashed Jeffrey Vandersay for four fours in the over after the ton, but was soon bowled off a slower delivery from Kasun Rajitha.



"King Kohli" put on another century partnership with Shreyas

lyer, who hit 38, and went on to record the ton with his arms and bat raised to an applauding

crowd. The ball before Kohli got his hundred saw a nasty collision at

the square-leg boundary between Vandersay and Ashen Bandara, with both fielders

stretched off. Dunith Wellalage came in as a concussion substitute for Van-

dersay and batted for the tourists at number eight.

Kohli changed gears after his 46th ODI century - three behind Sachin Tendulkar's all-time record of 49 - as he smashed Karunaratne for two successive sixes.

Kohli, who surpassed Sri Lankan great Mahela Jayawardene's 12,650 ODI runs to enter the top five all-time run getters, reached his 150 in 106 balls and finished off with 13 fours and eight sixes.

Sri Lanka were never in the chase after Mohammed Siraj struck thrice in his first five overs including the wickets of Avishka Fernando, for one, and Kusal Mendis, bowled on four.

The tourists kept losing wickets to Siraj's pace and swing and the quick also ran out Karunaratne with a direct throw that caught the batsman off guard and out of his crease at the striker's end.

Mohammed Shami and Kuldeep Yadav picked two wickets each to flatten Sri Lanka's batting with 28 overs to spare, with the tourists losing nine wickets and injured Bandara not batting.

AFP



Nasser Al-Attiyah (R) and his co-driver Mathieu Baumel celebrate after winning the Dakar Rally on Sunday (AFP)

Qatar's Al Attiyah wins his fifth title at Dakar Rally

Dammam, Saudi Arabia - Qatari driver Nasser al Attiyah on Sunday won his fifth Dakar Rally driver's title and second in a row, with Argentina's Kevin Benavides securing his second motorbike crown.

The 52-year-old Al Attiyah won three stages and had more than an hour's advantage in the overall standings over Frenchman Sebastien Loeb, who also finished runner-up last year.

Al Attiyah's Toyota teammate Lucas Moraes of Brazil finished third on his debut in the iconic test of endurance which reached its climax in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

Al Attiyah took the overall lead after the third stage, having built up a commanding advantage in the first week and deployed a safety-first strategy in the second half of the race.

"We just finished and I'm so happy. It was a difficult Dakar for everyone," said Al Attiyah.

"It's crazy to manage to defend my title. I'm very happy to win five times, and Mathieu (his co-driver Mathieu Baumel) four... Sorry, Mathieu!"

"We didn't have to attack like crazy. We managed to get through the second week and win the Dakar at the end, that's what really matters."

Loeb gave it all he could as he won a record six successive stages in the second week. But

the 48-year-old Frenchman had lost so much time on the first part of the race that it was a lost cause.

"After the beginning of the Rally we had we could not hope for better than this," said Loeb.

"Nasser was so consistent that he was unbeatable, he produced a brilliant performance without any mistakes."

Moraes - whose co-driver Timo Gottschalk was Al Attiyah's partner in his first win in 2011 - was proud as punch to be the first Brazilian to finish in the top three.

"It was important for the rally community in Brazil because it had never happened before," he said.

"I'm going to celebrate with all the Brazilian photographers."

'Incredible'

The car category may not have had a lot of suspense about it but the motorbike title race more than made up for it with plenty of thrills and spills.

Benavides, the 2021 champion, edged out Australian Toby Price by 43 seconds with Skyler Howes of the United States finishing third.

Benavides - who celebrated his 34th birthday during the race - trailed two-time champion Price by 12 seconds entering Sunday's 14th and final stage.

Driven Al Attiyah shooting for Qatari sporting immortality

Paris, France - "My story is included in the history books for school children" Nasser Al Attiyah proudly told ESPN in 2017 and with Sunday's fifth victory in the Dakar Rally he has guaranteed another chapter will be added.

The 52-year-old shares top billing as Qatar's most accomplished sportsman with high jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim but it is the latter's Olympic gold medal - he shared the title in Tokyo in 2021 - that Al Attiyah would covet more than anything.

Al Attiyah has competed in every Olympics in skeet shooting since the 1996 Games in Atlanta showing the same gritty determination he has done in umpteen Dakar Rallies to secure himself a medal of any kind.

Eventually it arrived as he won a shoot-off in the 2012 Games in London beating Russian Valeriy Shomin - improving on his fourth place in 2004.

"This time I told myself that I must win the medal - for my country, for all Arabs," Al Attiyah told Sport360.

"I have everything in my home except an Olympic medal. It means so much."

Al Attiyah - who was winning only Qatar's fourth ever Olympic



Qatar's Nasser Al-Attiyah in action at Dakar Rally (AFP)

medal - had really hit his sporting straps as it came a year after the first of his victories in the Dakar Rally.

Four Dakar Rally wins later - with his co-pilot and the man he calls his best friend Mathieu Baumel - and failing to medal at the Rio Games in 2016 his appetite is far from sated.

He still entertains hopes of winning gold in the 2024 Games in Paris and inspiring more Qatari school children to take up either shooting or car racing.

"After reading about me, a lot of youngsters want to participate in shooting and racing," he says.

Al Attiyah once had three sports on the go but dropped horse riding fearing a hand injury would prevent him competing in his other two sporting pursuits.

'Helped me excel'

His love of derring-do and daredevilry had pushed him towards becoming a pilot as well but then he shelved it.

"I had dreams of becoming a

pilot, especially since my cousins were pilots and I was the youngest among them," he told Jordan News in 2021.

"They graduated from flight school in the UK."

However, a chance opportunity to partner another cousin in a Rally persuaded him his feet belonged on the ground and not up in the air.

His father Saleh it was, though, who had set him on the path to both his preferred sports.

Saleh bought him a Nissan Pa-

trol when he was 18 and he enjoyed instant success nationally whilst Al Attiyah senior also took him hunting.

"My father said 'Nasser, you are a hunter. If you want to improve, you need to practice clay pigeon,'" Al Attiyah told ESPN.

"It will help you concentrate and help your mind to be strong".

"And later when I realised I was getting good at it, I decided to keep shooting."

Al Attiyah says that far from one proving to be a distraction they complement each other.

"Juggling between two professional sports and feeling the pressure to be the best in both is very challenging," he told Qatari website Q Life in 2018.

"Shooting has helped me excel in rally driving because of the immense concentration needed. It helped me stay mentally strong."

For the moment Al Attiyah awaits a new generation to replace him.

"The Qatar government says if you find another Nasser, we will let you retire," he told ESPN.

"Until now there is no one else like me, so I keep shooting."

If that results in him winning gold in Paris next year then he may have a history book solely devoted to him.

Badminton king Axelsen secures Malaysia Open title

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Danish ace Viktor Axelsen stormed to victory in the final of badminton's Malaysia Open on Sunday, successfully defending his title by outgunning Japan's Kodai Naraoka.

The world number one only needed 40 minutes in Kuala Lumpur to secure his first trophy of the year, displaying top form to walk away with the match 21-6, 21-15.

Wasting no time in the first game, Axelsen immediately went on the offensive, raining his signature pinpoint smashes on a defenceless Naraoka.

He then kept up the pressure in the second game against a visibly exhausted opponent to



Viktor Axelsen celebrates after beating Kodai Naraoka in the final of Malaysia Open in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday

clinch the win.

Naraoka, who played 362 minutes in the tournament before his showdown with Axelsen, said the run had taken a toll on his body.

"I did feel tired coming into this game, but I still did my best. But he used his height well, and his smashes were too powerful for me," said the world number seven.

Their match-up followed a hard-fought semi-final between the two at the World Tour Finals last month.

In the women's final, Japanese player Akane Yamaguchi took the title by beating South Korea's An Se-young 12-21, 21-19, 21-11.

AFP

BIODIVERSITY
CRISIS

Madagascar's mammals

RESTORING MADAGASCAR'S UNIQUE BIODIVERSITY WOULD TAKE MILLIONS OF YEARS

The extinction risk to Madagascar's mammals, including unique species like the lemur, threatens a biodiversity crisis that would take more than 20 million years to heal, scientists warned last week.

The southern Indian Ocean island has been cut off from the African continent for over 80 million years - a separation that has developed an extraordinary array of plants and animals, many of which cannot be found anywhere else on Earth.

After humans settled on the island about 2,500 years ago, however, many species such as giant lemurs, elephant birds and dwarf hippos started to disappear, and some 30 mammal species are already extinct.

In a study published in Nature Communications, palaeontologists from Europe, Madagascar and the United States analysed how long it would take for mammal diversity on the large island nation to recover to pre-human levels.

If the losses were stopped now, it would take three million years for nature to recover with the emergence of similar complex mammal species to replace the ones already lost, they found. But if the 128 mammals currently listed as endangered were to also go extinct, that recovery time would dramatically increase to 23 million years.

Researchers said the study

highlights the urgency of protecting Madagascar's biodiversity.

"If the endemic fauna and flora of Madagascar goes extinct, there will be a collapse of ecosystems on the island," study co-author Luis Lima Valente, senior researcher at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center in the Netherlands.

"This will have dramatic implications for human livelihoods in the region, leading to starvation and mass emigration."

Extinctions gather pace

Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot, meaning it has a large population of species that cannot be found anywhere else.

The researchers were surprised to see that Madagascar would take less time to return to pre-human diversity relative to other islands, attributing this resilience to the fact that human-caused extinctions started relatively recently. But its high levels of biodiversity mean that if the extinctions continue, Madagascar would take much longer than other islands to recover.

"Biodiversity hotspots harbour a large concentration of threatened species - they are not necessarily more vulnerable than other regions, but are places of special concern because there is more diversity to lose in them than in other parts of the globe," Valente said.

The island also serves as an important measure of human impacts.

The main drivers of biodiversity loss on Madagascar include land use conversion for agriculture, habitat degradation, invasive species, climate change and hunting, according to the study.

According to an assessment by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2020, over 100 Madagascar lemur species are threatened, while about 40 per cent of the island's original forest cover was lost between the 1950s and 2000.

"Even isolated/inaccessible and relatively large patches of forest on Madagascar are starting to experience the influence of habitat destruction and climate change," said Valente.

To calculate how long it would take for the same number of extinct or threatened species to evolve again, researchers looked at evolutionary return time - or the time it would take for species in a region to return to a given level of diversity.

Valente said, "this gives us a temporal perspective on the impact of humans - it shows that our actions have implications for temporal scales that are hard to even imagine. At the same time, this shows that if we act now to protect species we have the chance of saving millions of years of evolution. That is an impactful message to give."



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If things continue this way, we may reach, during the next three to four years, the threshold of two million tourists in Petra every year

SULEIMAN FARAJAT

Tending to his camels in Petra, Jordan's spectacular archaeological marvel hidden deep in a desert canyon, Hussein Bdoul is all smiles - the tourists are back! After years in which the COVID-19 pandemic turned the storied 'Rose City' into a ghost town, the father of seven is back at work, offering visitors rides on his decorated animals.

"Tourism has returned and the numbers are even greater," said Bdoul, 35, wearing Bedouin garb with a red keffiyeh scarf over his long black hair, reflecting on a resurgence last year.

"At the time of the coronavirus pandemic, we did not see anyone in Petra. It was a disaster for the town where 90 per cent of people work in tourism. We hope from God Almighty that people will stay wel," he said.

Jordan tourism authorities confirm that Petra is back in business and drew 900,000 visitors last year, close to the record of one million set in 2019. Jordan as a whole received 4.6 million visitors in 2022 - almost four times the level from 2020 - earning the country US\$5.3bn.

Top draw Petra, famous for its stunning temples hewn out of the rose-pink cliff faces, is a United Nations World Heritage site and was chosen as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World in a 2007 online poll.

Built in 312 BC as the capital of the ancient Arab kingdom of the Nabateans, which fell to the Romans in 106 BC, the ancient city remained unknown in the West until a Swiss traveller visited it in 1812.

'Rose City'

TOURISTS SURGE BACK TO JORDAN'S DESERT MARVEL - PETRA



Visitors tour near the Treasury at the ruins of the ancient Nabatean city of Petra in southern Jordan (AFP)



Sigh of relief

"This place and the colours are incredible," marvelled French student Alia, 16, taking a break from exploring with her mother to check out a souvenir stand.

Around 1,700 people make a living from Petra as tour guides, trinket sellers or by taking visitors through the site on donkeys, horses, camels or electric

buggies.

"We breathed a sigh of relief when we saw the return of tourists," said Muhammad Samahin, 16, selling drinks while sitting on woven rugs inside the Moon Cave near the famed Treasury site.

Suleiman Farajat, head of the Petra Development and Tourism Regional Authority, said the post-pandemic tourism

comeback had exceeded all expectations.

"At the height of the pandemic, there were days when there were no tourists in Petra," located 230km south of the capital Amman. The recovery was helped by official promotional campaigns in new overseas markets, low-cost airline flights and new hotel rooms, said Farajat.

Petra now has 4,000 rooms, and permits have been granted for three new five-star hotels, so capacity will soon almost double from 2019, he said.

"If things continue this way, we may reach, during the next three to four years, the threshold of two million tourists in Petra every year," he predicted.

AFP



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