

# Omani-Saudi committee formed for Dhahirah economic zone

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

An Omani-Saudi committee has been formed to oversee the development of the Integrated Economic Zone in Dhahirah. The committee will supervise the establishment of an Omani-Saudi company that will manage and operate the economic zone.

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has issued a decision to form the executive committee, chaired by Ahmed bin Hassan al Deeb, Deputy Chairman of OPAZ.

The committee includes several officials of OPAZ and Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Investment, Economic Cities and Special Economic Zones Authority and the Saudi Development Fund.



Rub al Khali border crossing

The committee is responsible for several tasks, most notably supervising the implementation of a memorandum of understanding signed between OPAZ and the Saudi Economic Cities

and Special Economic Zones Authority in the field of economic development for special economic zones and free zones.

The committee will also develop a plan for the development,

execution and management of the zone, including all programmes and initiatives, and monitor their implementation.

The committee will work towards exchanging successful

experiences and practices in the management and operation of economic zones between the two countries. It will also coordinate to hold informative workshops for traders and investors about the zone in both countries.

Mahmoud bin Hamoud al Rawahi, General Manager of Planning and IT Sector at OPAZ, and a member of the committee, said, "OPAZ has completed the consultancy studies related to the Integrated Economic Zone project in Dhahirah, which has been allocated 388sqkm of investment land. OPAZ has also provided the relevant documents, which support providing the funding required for developing the project's first phase, covering an area of 20sqkm."

Continued on Page 03

## Royal Decrees ascribe public utility status to three dam projects

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued three Royal Decrees on Tuesday reading as follows:

**Royal Decree No 20/2023** ascribes public utility status to the project of constructing dams for protection against floodwater (ANS02 & ANS03) in Wadi al Ansab in the wilayat of Bausher, Muscat.

**Article 1** states that the construction of the flood protection dams ANS02 & ANS03 in Wadi al Ansab in the wilayat of Bausher, Muscat, as defined in the memo and diagram attached to this decree, is henceforth deemed a public utility project.

**Article 2** stipulates that authorities concerned may expropriate, through direct implementation, the properties and land necessary for the project aforementioned in Article 1, along with all

the installations therein in accordance with the Public Utility Expropriation Law promulgated by Royal Decree 64/78.

**Article 3** states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

**Royal Decree No 21/2023** ascribes public utility status to the project of constructing a dam for protection against floodwater in Wadi Tahwa, in the wilayat of Al Kamil Wa al Wafi, South Sharqiyah.

**Article 1** states that the construction of the flood protection dam in Wadi Tahwa, in the wilayat of Al Kamil Wa al Wafi, as defined in the memo and diagram attached to this decree, is henceforth deemed a public utility project.

Continued on Page 03



Huthi political leader Mahdi al Mashat (L) welcomes Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al Jaber and his delegation in Sanaa on Sunday

## Yemen prisoner swap to start Thursday as peace hopes rise

Dubai, UAE - A prisoner exchange involving hundreds of detainees from Yemen's brutal civil war will start on Thursday, a Yemeni government official said, against a backdrop of rising hopes for peace.

Nearly 900 prisoners, most of whom were fighting with the Huthis, will be flown between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which leads the military coalition fight-

ing on behalf of the ousted government, the official said on Tuesday.

The Arabian Peninsula's poorest country has been at war since the Saudi-led intervention began in March 2015, months after the Iran-backed Huthis seized the capital Sanaa.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, through direct and indirect causes, and

Yemen is suffering one of the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations.

The prisoner exchange, the biggest since October 2020, will last three days and involve multiple cities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, said Majid Fadael, the official spokesman for the government delegation negotiating the exchange.

The Huthis will release 181 prisoners, including Saudis and Sudanese, in exchange for 706 detainees held by government forces, according to an agreement reached last month in Switzerland.

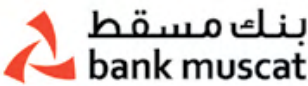
"All arrangements have been completed... to implement the agreed-upon exchange process," Fadael tweeted.

"The first day of the exchange

process will be through reciprocal flights of the Red Cross between Aden-Sanaa and Sanaa-Aden," he added.

The exchange agreement was struck days after a landmark announcement that regional heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Iran, long at odds, would seek to restore diplomatic ties after a hiatus of seven years.

AFP



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# Caution advised when gymming

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Gymming during Ramadan can be a challenge for many people. However, fitness enthusiasts never let go any opportunity and never miss a day at the gym. Though the number of people seen in gyms across the city usually drops during Ramadan, there is a rush just after iftar.

About working out during Ramadan, Aymaan L, instructor at Millennium Gym, Ruwi, said, "It is safe to work out during this time. However, there are some precautionary measures that one must follow. One needs to consult an instructor and plan a workout chart properly. There must be some modification of the core exercises and compound ones."

He prefers not to do full body workouts and most of his 'students' do push and pull on alternate days. He advises changing exercises according to the fasting schedule to avoid injuries. "Many sure you do not toil too much with excess weights and instead engage in compound training like deadlifts, squats and bench presses."

According to Mohammad Sulaiman, instructor of a hotel gym, the best times to work out are a few hours after iftar and just before suhoor. "Make sure to have lots of liquids as there is a loss of water due to sweating. One also needs to plan workouts based on the time you eat and sleep. Avoid working out during the hottest part of the day."

Sulaiman also urges those who gym regularly to reduce the intensity and duration of their workout during Ramadan.



*Avoid high protein intake during Ramadan. A lot of water is needed to break down the protein, but during Ramadan people normally have less water*

JAISON P MATHAI

A common advice from most instructors is to reduce the repetition of sets and divide push-pull fairly instead of full body workouts in one single day. While rest is also important, sleep is a critical recommendation during the month.

Jaision P Mathai, instructor at Perfect Fitness, described Ramadan as a "very good time" for exercise. "But one must have a gap of at least

two hours after food."

He also advises his clients to avoid high protein intake during Ramadan. "A lot of water is needed to break down the protein, but during Ramadan people normally have less water. It is also advisable to avoid powder."

Most gyms in the city are open from 2pm till midnight during Ramadan.

## Endowment initiative launched in Jabal Akhdar



Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs launched a project called 'Endowment Arrow' in Jabal Akhdar on Monday.

The launch ceremony was held under the aegis of H E Dr Mohammed bin Saeed al Maamari, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

Yasser Salim al Omari, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Zakat Committee in Jabal Akhdar, said, "The project aims to support needy families, develop endowment assets, achieve self-sufficiency in various vol-

untary projects, and involve all segments of society in carrying out endowment projects that benefit the community."

According to Omari, Endowment Arrow will support the people of Jabal Akhdar, especially needy families, who will benefit from various religious programmes, including teachings of the Quran, and building mosques and Quran schools.

"The project also aims to create opportunities for sustainable returns for needy families, enhance charitable contributions and build a permanent headquarters for the Zakat Committee in Jabal Akhdar," Omari added.

## Municipality launches campaign to inspect beauty parlours

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has launched an inspection campaign across beauty parlours in Bausher during Ramadan.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality said, 'A female inspection team has been inspecting parlours in the wilayat of Bausher to ensure these are ready to receive a rush of customers just before Eid al Fitr.

'The campaign is intended to educate owners of hair salons and beauty parlours about maintaining hygienic conditions when offering their services, and ensuring the application of necessary health safeguards.'



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## Our Correspondent

### Muscat

Mohammad al Amri, another resident, expressed concern over



MOHAMMAD AL AMRI

the fact that water has been standing in the area for several weeks, yet nothing has been done. "The worry is that even in summers, this water does not

According to Ministry of Health data, 17 cases of dengue were registered in the wilayat of Bausher, seven in Seeb and two in Amerat last year.



Vocational and technical education will be imparted from the next academic year in the fields of business administration and information technology in Nusseibeh bint Kaab School and Hafsa bin Rashid School in Muscat governorate, and Halima al Saadia School in the wilayat of Suwaiq, and Kaab bin Barsha School in

The programme includes basic subjects - Islamic education, Arabic language, mathematics and social studies; four specialised subjects in business administration - Introduction to Business, Commercial Marketing, Commercial Decision-making, and Training in Business World; and specialised subjects in the field of information technology - Information Systems Management, Database Management, Programming and Development, Robotics and Social Media in Business.

## Our Correspondent

A statement by MoH said that the Directorate General of Health Services in Muscat is carrying out a campaign to combat *Aedes aegypti* mosqui-

MoH has urged people to take necessary steps to eliminate mosquito breeding sites by properly covering water tanks and cleaning these every five days. The ministry also requested people to dispose

'Used tyres, empty cans and damaged household utensils should be disposed appropri-

Dengue fever spreads through female *Aedes aegypti*

Mosquitoes breed in stagnant water, mostly in disposed containers left outdoors.

## Continued from Page 01

The first phase includes the establishment of infrastructure, roads, electrical installations, water and sewage networks, industrial waste treatment, and necessary facilities for the zone, in addition to providing engineering consultancy services for the project (design and supervision). "The remaining part of the zone will be developed as part of future expansions to

Rawahi confirmed that establishing the land port marks one of the priorities in implementing infrastructure facilities of the Integrated Economic Zone project in Dhahirah. The has been established to maximise the benefits of its strategic location on the border with Saudi Arabia. It is located about 20km from the border crossing

OPAZ aims to contribute to stimulating bilateral trade between Oman and Saudi Arabia, as well as enhancing efforts for economic development and diversification, opening new opportunities for the Omani and Gulf economies, and drawing on the competitive advantages and attractiveness of the location, a press release

The economic zone in Dhahira will have a leading role in the development of the governorate and enhancing bilateral trade between the two countries. It is expected that the zone will also have an important role in creating job opportunities for Omanis, and attracting Saudi companies to establish their projects in Oman and form economic partnerships in various economic activities.

## Continued from Page 01

**Article 2** stipulates that authorities concerned may expropriate, through direct implementation, the properties and land necessary for the project aforementioned in Article 1, along with all the installations therein in accordance with the Public Utility Expropriation Law promulgated by Royal Decree 64/78.

**Article 3** states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

**Article 1** states that the construction of the flood protection dam Z4C in Wadi al Zuhaimi in Liwa, North Batinah, as defined in the memo and diagram attached to this decree, is henceforth deemed a public utility project.

**Article 3** states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

ONA

**Muscat** - The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) announced that it has registered more than 1,440 violations against expatriate workers of transporting passengers without a licence. It also registered 546 violations against expatriates for transporting and delivering goods without a licence.



# Tender



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## University of Technology and Applied Sciences

### Electronic Local Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender Committee at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences announces the offering of the practices shown in the following table:

| M | practice number | Subject                                                                                                            | Companies that are eligible to participate                                                                           | Document's Price                   | Last date for electronic purchasing | Last date bid submission  |
|---|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | 24/2023         | Supply and installation of office furniture for the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Musandam Branch | Companies and institutions specialized in this field and registered with the Tender Board excellent degree and first | (25)<br>Twenty five<br>Riyal Omani | 21/04/2023<br>14:30 pm              | 01/05/2023<br>at 10:00 am |

• Where you can purchase the tender documents electronically from Tuesday 11/04/2023, starting from (7:30 am) through the link below:

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

• All bidding companies must attach with their bids electronic temporary tender bond in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified by one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, not less than (1%) of the bid value, addressed to the name of the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee, and valid for a period of (90) days from the date of bid submission. The bid must be submitted sealed by the authorized person, and submitted with the electronic bidding system of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in the name and number of the tender only.

• Preference in awarding will be given to small and medium enterprises registered with the Authority for SME development and whose bid includes the biggest percentage of Omanisation and a biggest purchase percentage of national products.

• The University shall not be bound to accept the highest or any other bid.



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# Fitch revises its outlook on Oman to 'positive'

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Fitch Ratings on Tuesday revised its outlook on Oman's long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating (IDR) to 'positive', from 'stable', and affirmed the sultanate's rating at 'BB'.

The rating agency said that the positive outlook reflects Oman's lower government debt-to-GDP ratio, with high oil prices and spending restraint reducing external liquidity risk. S&P Global Ratings recently also upgraded its outlook on Oman to 'positive' from 'stable'.

Fitch said, 'The outlook also incorporates our expectation that the government remains committed to fiscal consolidation. Fiscal reform should be sufficient to limit a deterioration of Oman's budget, debt-to-GDP ratio and external position under our assumption of lower oil prices this year and next.'

Oman's government debt-to-GDP ratio fell to 40 per cent in 2022, from 61 per cent at end-2021, and Fitch expects it to reach 37 per cent by end-2024.

Fitch projects a government budget surplus of 2.3 per cent of GDP in 2023, against 4.9 per cent in 2022, Oman's first surplus since 2013.

'We assume the average Brent oil price will fall to US\$85 a barrel in 2023, while production will be limited by OPEC+ production caps agreed in April 2023, leading to a 9 per cent



drop in total revenue. This is despite higher tax revenue on stronger tax enforcement and economic activity,' Fitch said.

The rating agency forecasts a budget surplus of 0.1 per cent of GDP in 2024, as a small rise in oil production is likely to be insufficient to counter the effect of lower oil prices of US\$75 per barrel Brent on Oman's budget revenue.

'Non-oil tax revenue should rise to 5.6 per cent of non-oil GDP, from 5.2 per cent in 2022; a modest increase as we do not factor in a mooted value added tax (VAT) hike at this stage,' Fitch added.

Fith noted that high oil prices and global inflationary pressures

have led the Omani government to pause some measures included in its medium-term fiscal plan, including a rise in the VAT rate and the introduction of personal income tax.

'On the spending side, the timeframe for the elimination of the electricity subsidy, accounting for 1.2 per cent of GDP in 2022, has been extended to 10 years, from five. The government also put in place a fuel-price cap in 2022 that is to remain until at least end-2023 at a cost of about 1.1 per cent of GDP during the year under our oil price assumption,' the rating agency said.

Nonetheless, Fitch expects continued restraint on current

spending and the partial implementation of the fiscal plan to allow Oman's fiscal breakeven oil price to decline to US\$67 per barrel in 2025, a significant improvement from US\$77 per barrel in 2022.

Fitch projects the sultanate's general government debt to fall to 37 per cent of GDP in 2023 and be broadly stable in 2024, below the 'BB' peer median of 54 per cent.

According to Fitch, oil production will contract as Oman plans to cut production by 40,000 barrels per day from May 2023 as part of OPEC+'s cuts, while liquefied natural gas export facilities will be at full capacity.



## BankDhofar proposes merger with Ahlibank

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Oman's second largest lender BankDhofar has proposed to explore the possibility of a merger with smaller rival Ahlibank.

The board of directors of BankDhofar has submitted a non-binding offer to the board of directors of Ahlibank to explore the possibility of a merger deal between two banks, according to a disclosure filed by BankDhofar to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

'Any transaction, should it proceed, is subject to obtaining approvals from the relevant regulators and respective boards of directors and shareholders of BankDhofar and Ahlibank. Further announcement will be made if and when appropriate,' BankDhofar said.

In a separate filing to the Omani bourse, Ahlibank confirmed the receipt of non-bind-

ing offer from BankDhofar for the possible merger.

The bank said, 'Ahlibank is in receipt of a non-binding offer from BankDhofar expressing its desire to explore a possibility of merger between Ahlibank and BankDhofar. The board of directors of Ahlibank will study the offer and any material developments in this regard will be announced in due course.'

BankDhofar's total assets stood at RO4.317bn as of December 31, 2022. The bank reported a net profit of RO34.17mn for the financial year 2022, recording a growth of 36 per cent compared to RO25.12mn net profit in the previous year.

Ahlibank's total assets reached at RO3.075bn as of December 31, 2022. The bank's net profit for the full year 2022 grew 19.9 per cent to RO33.1mn compared to RO27.6mn in the previous year, demonstrating the

bank's sustained growth strategy. If materialised, the merger of BankDhofar and Ahlibank would create a larger lender with total assets of approximately RO7.4bn.

Global credit rating agency Moody's recently said that the GCC region's banking sector will witness a rise in merger and acquisition activity enabling future synergies.

'Consolidation among the GCC banks brings scale to support the diversification of Gulf economies away from oil, and benefits in revenue and cost synergies,' Moody's said. The rating agency noted that the merged banks will gain pricing power, enhancing their deposit-gathering ability and pushing up net interest income.

Moody's added that the merger and acquisition growth will help offset the banks' rising operating expenses, and boost cost-efficiency further.

## CBO issues RO44mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) on Tuesday announced the issuance of government treasury bills with two different maturities worth a total RO44mn.

The value of allotted treasury bills amounted to RO24mn, for a maturity period of 28 days. The average accepted price reached RO99.638 for every RO100 treasury bill, while the minimum accepted price arrived at RO99.635. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 4.7145 per cent and 4.7317 per cent, respectively.

The value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO20mn, for a maturity period of 91 days. The average accepted price reached RO98.746 for every RO100 treasury bill, and



the minimum accepted price arrived at RO98.745. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 5.0297 per cent and 5.0936 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 5.5 per cent while the discount rate on the Treasury Bills Discounting Facility with the central bank is 6.0 per cent.

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

censed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates. The government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

## Abraj becomes first API certified Omani company for integrated fracturing services

Muscat - Abraj Energy Services, a leading provider of oil and gas services, announced that it has become the first company in Oman to receive the API Q2 2nd Edition Certification for integrated fracturing services from the American Petroleum Institute (API).

This milestone marks Abraj's commitment to providing high-quality services that adhere to global industry standards and its dedication to serving as a market leader within the oil and gas service industry.

The API Q2 2nd Edition Certification covers all of Abraj's services and validates the company's ability to consistently meet customer needs, industry standards, and regulatory requirements. This certification is a testament to Abraj's robust quality man-



agement system, which focuses on competency, service design, contingency planning, supply

chain controls, preventive maintenance, inspection, service quality plans, and change

management.

"We are thrilled to have achieved this significant milestone, and we are proud to be the first company in Oman to receive this certification," said Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services. "This recognition is a testament to our team's hard work and dedication to providing high-quality services that meet and exceed our customers' expectations," he added.

Abraj is committed to delivering reliable, cost-effective, and sustainable solutions to its customers while maintaining the highest levels of safety, quality, and environmental stewardship. With this certification, Abraj demonstrates its continued commitment to achieving excellence in all aspects of its operations.

## Global PC shipments plunge 29% in rough economy

Paris, France - Shipments of Apple Macs plunged during the first quarter of this year as the global personal computer market suffered due to tough economic conditions, market research reports said on Monday.

Weak demand, excess inventory, and a worsening macroeconomic climate contributed to a "precipitous drop in shipments of traditional PCs" in the first three months of this year, according to the report from IDC.

PC shipments globally tallied 56.9mn, some 29 per cent less than the same period a year earlier, the research firm said.

Shipments of Apple Mac computers, which are in the premium segment of the market, shrank more than 40 per cent in the quarter, IDC and Canals, another research firm, reported.



"Consumers and businesses will remain cautious about outlays on new PCs in the short term," said Canals analyst Ishan Dutt.

"Demand across all customer segments remains dampened, with more pressure arising from further interest rate increases in

the US, Europe and other markets, where reducing inflation is a top priority."

Lenovo had the largest share of the PC market with slightly more than 22 per cent, despite shipments slipping 30 per cent when compared with the same quarter a year earlier, the market

trackers reported.

The declines represented "a coda to the era of Covid-driven demand" for PCs and a return to a pre-pandemic trend, according to IDC.

The PC market was expected to improve later in the year as the global economy improves and consumers become interested in upgrading to the latest Windows operating system.

"By 2024, an aging installed base will start coming up for refresh," said IDC Devices and Displays research vice president Linn Huang.

"If the economy is trending upwards by then, we expect significant market upside...If recession in key markets drags on into next year, recovery could be a slog."

AFF

## Oil prices rise over supply jitters

Muscat - Oil prices rose on Tuesday over ongoing tight supply concerns after the production cut decision of major producers in OPEC+, while bearish data from China limited further price upticks.

International benchmark Brent crude traded at US\$85.36 per barrel at 0707 GMT, a 1.4 per cent increase from the closing price of US\$84.18 a barrel in the previous trading session.

At the same time, US benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded at US\$80.48 per barrel, a 0.93 per cent rise after the previous session closed at US\$79.74 a barrel.

Since the OPEC+ group unexpectedly agreed to cut production beginning in May, the global oil market has been under supply



pressure.

Following this, Russia announced last month its intention to reduce crude oil production by 700,000 barrels per day, a larger cut than previously pledged.

Meanwhile, fears of weakening oil demand were intensified

after China reported worse-than-expected economic data, signalling a delay in the country's oil demand recovery.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), China's consumer inflation dropped last month, but manufacturing prices remained bearish.

The consumer price index (CPI) increased by 0.7 per cent year-on-year in March, down from 1 per cent in February, and reaching the weakest rate since September 2021.

However, demand concerns were eased when the World Bank on Monday revised up its global economic growth forecast for 2023 to 2 per cent, from its previous projection of 1.7 per cent in January.

Agencies

# Credit Suisse rescue averted catastrophe: Swiss president

Bern, Switzerland – Swiss President Alain Berset told lawmakers Tuesday that letting banking giant Credit Suisse collapse would have triggered a catastrophe, as he defended the orchestrated takeover by UBS.

Berset addressed an extraordinary session of parliament that was called to debate the controversial March 19 deal that his government arranged in double-quick time behind closed doors.

Letting Credit Suisse go bankrupt once the stock markets reopened on March 20 "would potentially have created an international financial crisis with devastating effects for Switzerland, for companies, for private customers but also for the reputation of our country", the president said.

"The demise of Credit Suisse is not the demise of Switzerland. It is the loss of a bank; a large bank but only a bank. Nothing more, nothing less."

The three-day session at the Federal Assembly in Bern was called after lawmakers found themselves before a fait accompli.

The merger dramatically changes the financial landscape in the wealthy Alpine country, which stakes much of its national prestige on sound bank-



Swiss President Alain Berset

Suisse would have found itself, in all likelihood, in default on March 20 or 21," Berset said.

Rather than bankruptcy, nationalisation or attempting to restructure a bank in which confidence was shot, the takeover was considered the most likely option to restore market confidence, the president told the 46-member Council of States, the upper house of parliament.

"The situation on the financial markets has calmed down, but it has not stabilised definitively. And our country, Switzerland, is shaken by this painful episode," said Berset.

"It is worth remembering the fundamentals that have made,

and still make, our country: trust, security, reliability, fairness, freedom and responsibility. We must do everything not only to preserve them, but also to strengthen them."

The debate will shift to the 200-seat National Council lower chamber from 5:15 pm (1515 GMT).

### \$120bn in play

Amid fears of contagion following the collapse of three US regional banks, Credit Suisse's share price plunged, despite reassurances from the central Swiss National Bank (SNB).

But that failed to restore investor confidence, and fearing a bloodbath when the markets re-

opened on March 20, the government, the SNB and the FINMA financial regulator strangled UBS into a US\$3.25bn takeover the day before.

Some 109bn Swiss francs (US\$120bn) have been put on the table between government guarantees and the liquidity the SNB made available.

In the heat of the moment, parliament's finance delegation had to authorise the credit release without lawmakers having a chance to debate and scrutinise the arrangements.

The National Council wants to examine the guarantees granted to prop up the rescue, the possibility of legal action against Credit Suisse's governing bodies and the regulation of banks considered "too big to fail". The government has calmed some of the anger in parliament by stripping Credit Suisse's executive board of their 2022 and 2023 bonuses.

As for the thousands of Credit Suisse jobs on the line, Berset said this was something the government "deeply regrets".

"We have, of course, made the new leaders of UBS aware of their social responsibility on this and expect them to clarify the situation quickly," he added.

AFP



# China consumer inflation falls below 1% in March

Beijing, China – China's consumer price inflation fell below one percent in March, official figures showed Tuesday, a sign of weak demand as the world's second largest economy tries to recover from its pandemic-driven slump.

The March consumer price index (CPI) – the main gauge of inflation – came in at 0.7 per cent, down from the one percent seen a month earlier, according to the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

Beijing is targeting an average inflation rate of three percent for 2023, which is still far below the current rates of many developed economies. Analysts had expected a faster pace in March, with economic activity picking up again after the abandonment of zero-Covid restrictions at the end of 2022. The producer price index (PPI), which measures the

cost of goods leaving factories, shrank for the sixth consecutive month, with prices falling 2.5 per cent – indicating lower margins for businesses.

"Economic recovery is on track but not strong enough to push up prices," Zhiwei Zhang of Pinpoint Asset Management wrote in a note.

"This suggests the economy is still running below its potential," he added, suggesting the data made an interest rate cut more likely. Fresh fruit prices rose 11.5 per cent year-on-year, and pork, the most consumed meat in the country, jumped 9.6 per cent.

The cost of fuel for transport fell 6.4 per cent.

Globally, commodity and food prices are rising, though China has remained relatively unscathed by increases linked to the war in Ukraine.

AFP

# Twitter ad revenue seen plummeting 28% in 2023

San Francisco, US – Twitter's income from advertising will fall by 28 per cent in 2023, a closely watched forecast said Tuesday, as the platform struggles under the ownership of Elon Musk.

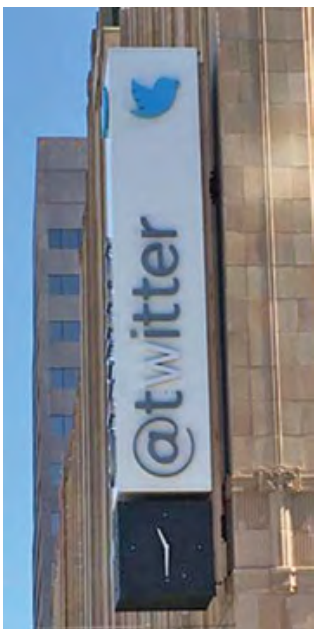
Analysts at Insider Intelligence said they were slashing an earlier worldwide revenue estimate of US\$4.74bn by more than a third to US\$2.98bn as trust in the platform deteriorates.

"The biggest problem with Twitter's ad business is that advertisers don't trust Musk," said Jasmine Enberg, principal analyst at Insider Intelligence.

"Twitter needs to unravel Musk's personal brand from the company's corporate image to regain advertiser trust and bring back ad dollars," she added.

Musk's tumultuous takeover of Twitter has already seen several major advertisers suspend their activity on the platform after the Tesla tycoon loosened the reins on content moderation and laid off over half of a 7,000 strong workforce.

According to research firm



Pathmatics, in January fourteen of the top 30 advertisers on Twitter stopped advertising on the platform since Musk took charge on October 27.

Insider Intelligence noted that Musk's efforts to build up a subscription service "won't make up for the lost ad revenue."

Musk's leadership has also

cooled Twitter's remaining users, with Insider Intelligence forecasting a two minute drop in time spent on the platform to 34 minutes per day – TikTok's users stay on the app for almost an hour.

Insider Intelligence said the drop in usage was due to the proliferation of hateful content and technical glitches on the platform, as well as a failure to expand into social video and pose a challenge to TikTok.

"Twitter engagement is still heavily dependent on the news cycle," said Enberg. "The takeover saga caused a spike in time spent in 2022 that has now dissipated, as users have lost interest in Musk's antics."

Musk is set to speak at a major marketing conference in Miami on April 18 in a likely effort to woo back major advertisers to Twitter.

Musk bought Twitter for US\$44bn, though he has since written down the company's value to half that.

AFP

# Global stock markets climb as investors await US inflation data

London, UK – Asian and European stock markets mostly rose Tuesday after an Easter break, with focus turning to the release of US inflation data later in the week.

The upcoming consumer and wholesale price reports follow figures last week showing a healthy rise in new US jobs that reinforced expectations of another Federal Reserve interest rate hike next month.

"It does appear the US payrolls have seemingly steadied the ship," said SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes amid fears of recession as the Fed keeps on tightening borrowing costs aimed at cooling elevated inflation.

In Asia, data out of China showed consumer prices rose less than expected in March and factory costs dropped, suggesting there remains some weakness in the world's second-largest economy even as it reopens after the lifting of Covid restrictions.

It does, however, provide the



People's Bank of China with room to unveil further growth-boosting measures.

The "economic recovery is on track but not strong enough to push up prices", said Zhang Zhiwei at Pinpoint Asset Management.

"This suggests the economy is still running below its potential. There is room for fiscal and monetary policies to boost growth further."

The US Consumer Price Index for March will be released on Wednesday. Investors are also preparing themselves for the start of first-quarter earnings season, with banking titans JP Morgan and Citigroup among those reporting on Friday.

The corporate results will be closely watched following the recent banking crisis that shattered confidence in the financial sector. On currency markets Tues-

day, the yen rose against the dollar, even though the new head of Japan's central bank, Kazuo Ueda, said no major rate hikes were on the horizon, adding that the country's long-standing loose monetary policy remained "appropriate".

Elsewhere, bitcoin traded above US\$30,000 for the first time in 10 months following a recent run higher.

AFP

# China to require 'security assessment' for new AI products

Beijing, China – New AI products developed in China will have to undergo a security assessment before being released and must reflect "core socialist values", a sweeping new draft law by the country's internet regulator showed Tuesday.

The fresh regulations come as a flurry of Chinese companies rush to develop artificial intelligence services that can mimic human speech since San Francisco-based OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November, sparking a gold rush in the market.

Rapid advancements in AI have stoked global alarm over the technology's potential for disinformation and misuse, with deepfake images and people shown mouthing things they never said.

"Before providing services to the public that use generative AI products, a security assessment shall be applied for through national internet regulatory departments," the draft law, released by the Cyberspace Administration of China, reads.

The draft law – dubbed "Administrative Measures for Generative Artificial Intelligence Services" – aims to ensure "the healthy development and standardised application of generative AI technology", it read.

AI-generated content, it continued, needs to "reflect core socialist values, and must not contain content on subversion of state power".

It must also not contain, among other things, "terrorist or extremist propaganda", "ethnic



hatred" or "other content that may disrupt economic and social order."

The Cyberspace Administration of China said it was seeking public input on the contents of the new regulations, which under Beijing's highly centralised political system are almost certain to

become law.

### 'Strictest so far'

"The new CAC draft document is one of the strictest measures for generative AI so far," Andy Chun, adjunct professor at City University of Hong Kong, told AFP.

Companies submitting secu-

urity assessments will need to "be very careful to ensure each data source used for AI learning must be within guidelines, accurate, unbiased, and not infringe on IP rights of others," he said.

"Ensuring accuracy is hard. No generative AI system to date can do that," said Chun.

The regulatory crackdown comes as China's tech giants ramp up their efforts in the closely-watched sector.

Alibaba's cloud computing unit on Tuesday unveiled its own product called Tongyi Qianwen, which is expected to be rolled out across the tech giant's office workplace communications software and household appliances.

CEO Daniel Zhang said in a statement that the software came in a "technological water-

shed moment driven by generative AI and cloud computing".

And Baidu – which operates the country's leading search engine – released its own "Ernie Bot" AI chat product last month.

But investors were unimpressed by the bot's display of linguistic and maths skills at an unveiling, sending shares falling by as much as 10 per cent.

ChatGPT is unavailable in China, but the American software is also gaining a base of Chinese users who use virtual private networks to get around the ban, deploying it to write essays and cram for exams.

And a 24-year-old Shanghai blogger caused a stir this month when he used AI technology to "resurrect" his dead grandmother, producing lifelike im-

agery of his interactions with the deceased relative.

Beijing has announced ambitious plans to become a global leader in the field of AI by 2030, and consultancy group McKinsey estimates the sector could add about US\$600bn every year to China's gross domestic product by then.

But it has also warned that deepfakes present a "danger to national security and social stability".

Beijing in January enforced new rules that would require businesses offering deepfake services to obtain the real identities of their users. They also require deepfake content to be appropriately tagged to avoid "any confusion".

AFP

# Xiaomi launches Redmi Note 12 Series in Oman

Country Head of Xiaomi Oman and Bahrain Eddi Li and Retail Manager of Oman Tayyab Naqvi on Tuesday announced the highly anticipated international release of Redmi Note 12 Series. The popular lineup features four exciting devices: Redmi Note 12 Pro+ 5G, Redmi Note 12 Pro 5G, Redmi Note 12 5G, and Redmi Note 12, with prices starting at RO77,900.

Adhwa Al Billa Technology Sole Distributor for Xiaomi products in Sultanate of Oman is proud to launch the Xiaomi Redmi Note 12 Series and continues to bring flagship-exclusive features to upper-mid range devices, redefining photography and overall user experiences said Faris al Juma – CEO ABTL.

Building upon the incredible success of Redmi Note 11 Series, Redmi Note 12 Series once again delivers remarkable enhancements to the features that matter most to its fans. These upgrades include the camera system, battery life, charging speed and user-friendly design, all offered at an exceptional value. With the global launch of Redmi Note 12 Series, Xiaomi is demonstrating once again its commitment to making high-



end smartphone features accessible to more people in the world. Also launched was Redmi Watch 3, a stylish new smartwatch featuring a bright and clear display, various sports and health functions, and accurate multi-system GPS connectivity.

The headline-maker in Redmi Note 12 Series is Redmi Note 12 Pro+ 5G1 with its powerful triple camera system. Featuring a

flagship-level 200MP main camera with OIS, an ultra-wide camera and a macro camera, the top-of-the-line device aims to redefine photography for the upper mid-range smartphone segment. Redmi Note 12 Pro 5G also offers a great photography experience, offering a large, powerful IMX766 sensor with OIS, ultra-wide and macro cameras for impressive shots even

in low-light scenarios. With powerful AI software algorithms, elevated image processing speeds and other useful utility features further complete the overall camera usage experience.

Both Redmi Note 12 Pro+ 5G and Redmi Note 12 Pro 5G will delight users with its remarkably bright and vivid 120Hz Flow AMOLED displays, which are

Dolby Vision® and Dolby Atmos® supported. Together with their flexible P-OLED materials that enable slimmer bezels, both devices allow for a superb and immersive visual experience.

Both smartphones are shipped with flagship-level charging speeds, with 120W HyperCharge2 on Redmi Note 12 Pro+ 5G and 67W fast charge

on Redmi Note 12 Pro 5G, and a 5,000mAh long-lasting battery for extended daily usage even under heavy content consumption. Smooth and reliable 5G performance is ensured with MediaTek Dimensity 1080 high-performing chipset.

**Smooth impressive performance**  
Every member of the Series ex-

ceeds expectations beyond their price segment.

Redmi Note 12 5G and Redmi Note 12 both offer impressive performance and enhanced entertainment experience. Boasting super-smooth 120Hz AMOLED displays, users are presented with stunning picture quality with accurate colors.

Powered by the latest Snapdragon 4 Gen 1 and Snapdragon 685 Mobile Platform respectively, operations are smooth and seamless, allowing for easy multi-tasking with enhanced power efficiency.

Redmi Note 12 5G is aimed at customers who want to experience all the benefits of a 5G model at an accessible price. Both Redmi Note 12 5G and Redmi Note 12 feature 33W fast charging and a 5,000mAh (typ) long-lasting battery, meaning users can use more apps and take more photos without battery concerns.

Add to that a solid AI triple camera, stunning Night Mode feature as well as a host of useful fun features and filters, both devices are putting the kind of camera power once reserved for flagship phones in more users' hands at budget-friendly prices.

## Mustafa Sultan Electronics, Hommer in strategic tie up

The Sultanate of Oman will once again have access to Hommer air conditioners following the signing of a new agreement between Mustafa Sultan Electronics and Hommer Corporation.

Mustafa Sultan Electronics is one of the prominent leaders when it comes to distributing AC units and other home appliances in the Sultanate of Oman. At the same time, Hommer Corporation is an established global leader in manufacturing and distribution of air conditioners, home appliances, and energy solutions that had a great impact in the Omani market.

A trademark known in over 60 countries with operations in the MENA and European Union, with a history of success throughout the past 27 years.

This strategic alliance makes Mustafa Sultan Electronics the exclusive distributor of Hommer in the Sultanate of Oman. Together, these companies will maintain their years-long tradi-

tion of offering superior products and unmatched support to the market.

Hommer's modern, streamlined designs are renowned for their excellent efficiency, dependability, and cooling capacity. This launch has bolstered Hommer's dedication to supplying the Oman market with cutting-edge innovation with a wide range of quiet and professional ACs to easily control the room's temperature.

It relies on its unique steady-cooling compressor to provide a comfortable environment whilst reducing costs.

"I am excited to announce our partnership with Mustafa Sultan Electronics to continue the Hommer legacy in Oman. Our customer-centric philosophy will allow us to be better positioned, committed, responsive and caring to all our beloved customers," said Abdurrahman Aradi, Global Brand Manager at Hommer Corporation.

"As we continue with our vision to contribute to building the nation through our business solutions, we are glad to announce our partnership with the well known brand; Hommer. This unique product has been launched to meet the growing expectations of consumers in the Oman market at an affordable price point," said Yousef Sultan, Head of Business Development at Mustafa Sultan Enterprises.

Mustafa Sultan Electronics is synonymous with quality products and dependable after-sales service. In keeping with the vision of its parent company, Mustafa Sultan Electronics is committed to attaining and improving the standard of excellence superior to that of its industry rivals in delivering the highest level of satisfaction to its customers and all the stakeholders through the continuous quality improvement of its business processes and efficiency.

## SPAR Oman distributes gold coins to winners of Ramadan promotion

In the spirit of the holy month, SPAR Oman is giving customers the opportunity to win gold coins under its festive promotion that is being run across 25 outlets across Oman.

To be eligible for the promotion which runs until the end of Ramadan, customers have to purchase a minimum value of RO5 at any SPAR outlet.

SPAR Oman has rewarded the first set of winners of the ongoing Ramadan promotion, by presenting them with gold coins on a special event.

The prize distribution ceremony was held at SPAR's Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos (MQ) branch, where 13 lucky winners were presented with a gold coin each, by the supermarket chain's senior management members. The ceremony was attended by shoppers, well-wishers, management and the staff of SPAR Oman.

Congratulating the winners and urging more customers to shop and get a chance to win, Moosapeta Sridhar, CEO of Consumer Products Goods, KR Group mentioned: "SPAR Oman



constantly strives to enhance the customer experience by making the buying process rewarding in more than one respect. The response to this year's promotion is overwhelming, and we hope more customers shop and get a chance to win gold coins this Ramadan."

He added: "SPAR Oman comes up with meaningful deals and discounts to meet consumer needs for every season and oc-

casation. Other promotions, deals, offers and discounts are also being offered alongside the 'Shop and Win a Gold Coin' promotion, to make shopping at SPAR Oman an enjoyable and rewarding experience for our customers this Ramadan."

Standing high on the pillars of freshness, value, service, range and assortment, SPAR Oman's innovative strategies and ideas are tailored to meet and exceed

customer expectation.

The supermarket chain is renowned for offering a wide assortment of fresh produce including fruits and vegetables, meat, fish and bakery range. Customers can buy food and non-food products from different countries with high standards of hygiene, friendly customer-service, alongside a premium, truly international, quality shopping environment.

## Ooredoo, partners spark opportunities in communities across Oman

As part of its 19th Goodwill Journey, one of Ooredoo's most impactful community-based initiatives taking place during Ramadan every year, the company partnered with three major players in Oman to bring the spirit of the Holy month to communities in different regions.

This year, the flagship event was run in cooperation with Shell Oman Marketing Company; Mwasalat, the public transportation provider; the charity organisation Dar Al Atta'a; and Talabat, the regional food and groceries deliveries platform.

As part of the partnerships, Ooredoo signed agreements with Mwasalat to provide services for people with disabilities in the wilayat of Shinas. Meanwhile, Shell Oman Marketing Company provided Shell V-Power, Shell Oman's best performance fuel, for the cars of the volunteers who had to travel



thousands of kilometres to visit different communities across Oman.

Additionally, Ooredoo teamed up with talabat to distribute meals during Ramadan through Dar Al Atta'a.

As every year, a team of volunteers set off on a Journey to regions across Oman to support and benefit communities. As part of this year's activities, Ooredoo launched a new women's incubator to support the professional development of more than 5,000 women in Nakhal in the Al Batinah region. In the same area, a host of fun-filled activities were put on for the occasion of Qaranqasho, a traditional celebration to mark the 14th night of the Holy Month. Additionally, food hampers were distributed to over 500 families in Barka.

In the true spirit of Ramadan, Ooredoo and its team made a visit to Buraimi governorate and

Bukha in Musandam to help families in need. The company also partnered with the Al Buraimi Charitable Team and the Omani Women's Associations in Nakhal in South Batinah and in Bahla in Dakhiliyah, to share iftar meals together at branches of the Omani Association for Elderly Friends.

And once again in collaboration with Al Buraimi Charitable Team, the team distributed iftar sa'am boxes to people in Al Ain.

The annual Goodwill Journey is part of Ooredoo's Corporate Social Responsibility program, which aims to give back to the communities it serves by having a positive impact on people's lives, livelihoods and the economy. Ever since its launch in 2005, volunteers have travelled thousands of kilometres across Oman on behalf of Ooredoo and have created a positive, measurable and sustainable impact on

# Ramadan Souq Al Wathbah witnesses excellent participation from SMEs

The annual Ramadan Souq Al Wathbah, organised by the SMEs Development Authority and Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, witnessed an exceptional participation from entrepreneurs, small enterprises owners as well as visitors.

The Souq, which was held from April 6 to 8, at Bank Muscat head office, Airport Heights, comes as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Bank Muscat with participation of more than 160 entrepreneurs and SMEs.

Over a period of three days, the Souq saw a great turnout from visitors who toured the different pavilions for shopping and purchasing the Omani products encompassing fashion, beauty, health and food as well as services at competitive prices.

Speaking on the occasion, Ibrahim Khamis Salim al Bulushi, Senior Assistant General Manager - SME, at Bank Muscat, expressed his pleasure with the success of Souq Al Wathbah which reflects the bank's strategy to contribute to the development of the business's sector in the Sultanate of Oman as one of the vital sectors.

He stressed on the importance of enhancing partnership between the public and the private sectors to support MSMEs through various programs and initiatives.

Bulushi said, "Souq Al Wathbah constitutes a great importance as it creates an avenue to successfully market these small business' products and is an opportunity to network with successful entrepreneurs and exchange experiences. The bank will continue to provide the best banking services and facilities to meet customers' and these insti-



tutions' expectations".

From his side, Khalfan Said al Khatri, Assistant Director of the Marketing and Events, SMEs Development Authority, extended his appreciation for the successful annual organisation of Souq Al Wathbah which is a great opportunity for SMEs and startups to showcase their products and services.

He said, "A variety of goods and commodities with competitive prices are displayed every year amid wide participation of visitors. Having the event held at Bank Muscat Head Office is a perfect choice as the building is well-equipped with service and facilities. Thanks to Bank Muscat

for its pioneer role in promoting business's owners throughout its various initiatives."

Khalfan al Khatri also noted that the role played by MSMEs is of a great significance to foster economic stability through supporting youth who are an integral part of Oman Vision 2040.

A number of entrepreneurs expressed their happiness to participate in this year's edition of Souq Al Wathbah. Ahmed Khalid al Malki, business owner of Basmat Ragul, said, "I am pleased to participate in Souq Al Wathbah which witnesses excellent participation from the first day. Such initiatives are really important as they provide support

to SMEs. We hope this important initiative will continue to provide support to entrepreneurs."

Dina Issa al Zain, business owner of Tekkeya, said, "Souq Al Wathbah is a very important souq and it witnesses wide participation each year. It provides an opportunity to introduce different home-based projects and showcase their different products to visitors.

"I strongly encourage such initiatives because they serve a lot of people and bring together different businesses and projects under one roof."

Bank Muscat has adopted various other initiatives to bene-

fit entrepreneurs including the Al Wathbah Academy etc. The bank's Al Wathbah SME department offers a comprehensive suite of tailor-made finance solutions and non-financial services targeted at small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Credit facilities, both funded and non-funded in nature, are available to all sectors.

Further support is extended through non-financial services in areas of education, coaching, networking opportunities and workshops. Bank Muscat is continuously partnering with both government agencies and the private sector to promote entrepreneurship in Oman.



## Thawani launches online platform for community focused initiatives

As part of its vision to effectively respond to the financing needs of organisations, Thawani Technologies has recently launched the Athar platform that focuses on community-focused charitable organisations, Masjids, endowments, charitable teams, etc.

By creating a single, smart and secure online platform offering a simplified user experience, it has now become more convenient for people to donate.

Raghad Abdul Rab, Project Manager at Thawani said, "We simplify further payment and related processes by using innovative technologies and one of our aims is to provide a platform that offers many benefits to charities.

"The Athar Platform allows them to raise funds quickly and effectively through which individuals can easily donate to these charitable organisations."

Founded in 2016, Thawani

Technologies is an Omani company specialising in providing smart payment solutions while holding a global certificate in card security.

Licensed by the Central Bank of Oman, the company has been providing innovative payment solutions in financial technology to expedite payments processes, improve user experiences, and make payments safer, faster, and easier. In addition to the basic payments system, Thawani Technologies provides innovative payment solutions to meet the needs and challenges institutions face.

The company also provides services through its platform to pay bills, top-up credit, pay tuition fees, and social insurance. The company recently launched the updated version of its App, offering new products and significant improvements to its portfolio of services.



## ahlibank celebrates Ramadan with employees in grand iftar

To celebrate the holy month of Ramadan, ahlibank held a group iftar for its employees, in the presence of Said Abdullah al Hatmi, CEO of ahlibank, with the aim of enhancing relationships and creating an atmosphere of intimacy and communication between team members outside of the official work environment.

This iftar comes as an affirmation of the importance of strengthening social relations between employees away from the daily work routine, and deepening the ties that bind them to work more efficiently.

Having iftar in the blessed month of Ramadan has become a valuable religious practice that enhances the belonging of individuals and allows them to have a deeper spiritual connection during the holy month.

The iftar included a number of interactive activities that brought joy to the employees present, including some entertainment competitions, in addition to hon-

ouring employees, who have completed ten years of giving at ahlibank.

In light of the iftar, the CEO Said Abdullah al Hatmi, stressed in his speech during the ceremony the importance of Ramadan gatherings, because of their prominent role in strengthening social relations between employees outside the boundaries of the work environment, and their role in easing pressures related to daily tasks.

He emphasised that such events inculcate a family atmosphere that perpetuates the concept of harmony and social cohesion, and expressed his thanks and appreciation to the attendees for accepting the invitation, congratulating them on the holy month, and wishing them continued success in their career.

The CEO further noted the bank's endeavors towards providing a stimulating work environment that supports the

journey of development and growth of employees and inspires them to lead more creativity and innovation.

At ahlibank, we believe that our human cadres are our true capital, and for this reason we constantly seek to enhance ways of engaging with employees in order to get closer to them and build their trust and appreciation for the organisation.

This positively influences their level of performance and, thereby raising productivity and in turn adding value to customers. We will work together to devote our efforts to achieve the bank's vision of being an integrated centre for banking services, and an environment that supports innovation.

We will accomplish milestones by using the ideas and creativity of our human resources, our most important resource, as they are the pillars of our success.

## 'Season of Giving, Just got Better' with JAC cash gift campaign

In celebration of this special time of year, JAC Motors Oman is thrilled to announce its latest campaign - 'Season of Giving, Just Got Better' - with an exciting display of offers and benefits.

The JAC campaign, which started on March 13, will continue till July 12 offering amazing cash gifts on all JAC models, ranging from RO1,400 to RO2,500, a release said.

"This means that you can now save more on your favourite JAC vehicles and get the best value for your money. Whether you're looking for a compact SUV like the JAC S3, a sporty and versatile SUV like the JAC JS4, a sleek and sophisticated sedan like the JAC J7, or a tough and durable pickup truck like the JAC T8, JAC Motors Oman has got you covered," the release from the company stated.

But that's not all! For those who purchase a new JAC vehicle from Towell Auto Centre, you'll also receive three-year AAA roadside assistance package and a JAC IINJAZ service package for 3 years/50,000km (whichever comes first) for an unbeatable price. The service package cost varies depending on the JAC model, starting from RO100 on JAC S3, RO115 on JAC J7, RO120 on JAC JS4, and RO190 on JAC T8 (VAT extra).

With JAC Motors Oman, you can rest assured that you're get-



ting a reliable, high-quality vehicle that is backed by a manufacturer's warranty of six years/200,000km (whichever is earlier) for passenger cars and five years/250,000km (whichever is earlier) for light trucks.

The JAC S3 is a compact SUV that comes equipped with a range of features that make it an excellent choice for drivers who want a practical and fuel-efficient vehicle.

With its spacious and comfortable interior, advanced safety features, and impressive fuel economy, the S3 is a great option for those who value practicality and reliability.

The JAC JS4 is a sporty and versatile SUV that offers excellent performance and handling, making it ideal for drivers who want a vehicle that can handle any terrain. With its powerful engine, responsive handling, and

advanced safety features, the JS4 is perfect for those who want a vehicle that can keep up with their active lifestyle.

The JAC J7 is a sleek and sophisticated sedan that combines luxury and performance, making it an excellent choice for drivers who want a vehicle that is both stylish and practical. With its refined interior, advanced technology, and smooth handling, the J7 is perfect for those who want a vehicle that is as comfortable as it is capable.

The JAC T8 is a tough and durable pickup truck that is designed to handle heavy-duty tasks with ease. With its rugged exterior, powerful engine, and impressive towing capacity, the T8 is the perfect option for those who need a vehicle that can handle anything they throw at it.

Additionally, the T8 comes with a range of advanced safety features, making it a reliable and

safe choice for drivers.

JAC Titan trucks are built with unbeatable durability and designed to handle heavy loads and rough terrain.

These trucks are the perfect choice for businesses in need of reliable transportation. Enjoy the comfortable cabin with a variety of convenience features, while knowing that safety is a top priority with ABS, electronic stability control, and airbags.

As the authorised dealer of JAC Motors in Oman, Towell Auto Centre LLC is committed to providing exceptional customer service and support. With a network of dealerships and service centres across the country, you can easily find the assistance you need to purchase and maintain your JAC vehicle.

To make the most of this incredible opportunity, visit Towell Auto Centre today to take advantage of the 'Season of Giving, Just Got Better' campaign and start your journey with JAC Motors Oman! Stay up-to-date on the latest news, events, and promotions by following JAC Motors Oman on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

With the wide range of JAC models, amazing cash gifts, and unbeatable service package offers, there's no better time to get behind the wheel of a brand new JAC vehicle during the holy month of Ramadan.

# Philippines and the US kick off largest-ever joint military drills

Nearly 18,000 troops are taking part in the annual exercises dubbed as Balikatan

Manila, Philippines - The Philippines and the United States launched their largest-ever joint military exercises on Tuesday, as the longstanding allies seek to counter growing Chinese assertiveness in the region.

Nearly 18,000 troops are taking part in the annual exercises dubbed Balikatan, or 'shoulder to shoulder' in Filipino, which for the first time will include a live-fire drill in the South China Sea, which Beijing claims almost entirely. The drills follow Monday's conclusion of a three-day Chinese military exercise that simulated targeted strikes and a blockade of self-ruled, democratic Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of its territory.

Balikatan will include military helicopters landing on a Philippine island off the northern tip of the main island of Luzon, nearly 300km (180 miles) from Taiwan, and the retaking of another island by amphibious forces.

It will be the first time the exercises have been held under President Ferdinand Marcos, who has sought to strengthen ties with the United States after his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte



Philippine exercise director Major General Marvin Licudine and US exercise director representative Major General Eric Austin link arms during the opening ceremony of the Balikatan in Quezon City on Tuesday (AFP)

*It will be the first time the exercises have been held under President Ferdinand Marcos, who has sought to strengthen ties with the United States after his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte*

trashed the alliance.

"In order for us to protect our sovereign territory, we really have to drill and exercise how we are going to retake an island that's been taken away from us," Philippine exercises spokesman Colonel Michael Logico told reporters after the opening ceremony at a military camp in

Manila.

In recent months, Manila and Washington have agreed to restart joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea and struck a deal to expand the US forces' footprint in the Philippines, which has infuriated China.

US troops will be allowed to use an additional four Philippine

military bases under the pact, including a naval base not far from Taiwan.

The Philippines' proximity to the island could potentially make it a key US partner in the event of a Chinese invasion.

At a joint news conference on Tuesday, both armies did not address questions about the Taiwan tensions and a possible role for the Philippines if China invaded Taiwan.

News of the expanded base access had prompted China to accuse the United States of 'endangering regional peace and stability'.

"Countries in this part of the world must uphold strategic independence and firmly resist the

Cold-War mentality and bloc confrontation," China's ambassador to Manila, Huang Xilian, said last week.

About 12,200 American, 5,400 Filipino and just over 100 Australian soldiers will participate in the two weeks of Balikatan exercises - about twice as many as last year.

About 50 leftwing protesters staged a rally outside the opening ceremony venue, calling on the Philippine government to scrap the exercises.

As part of the exercises, troops will stage an amphibious landing on the western island of Palawan, the closest Philippine landmass to the Spratly Islands, where Beijing and Manila have rival claims.

The Americans will also use their Patriot missiles, considered one of the best air defence systems in the world, and the HIMARS precision rocket system, which has helped Ukrainian forces fighting the Russian invaders.

The two armies originally planned to fire live rounds at sea off the northern province of Ilocos Norte, about 355km from Taiwan's south coast, but later on had to move it further down the South China Sea, Philippine Army Major-General Marvin Licudine said.

The original site was 'not sufficiently prepared' for unloading the needed equipment, he added.

The new venue is less than 300km east of the Chinese-held Scarborough Shoal.

AFP



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends the Central Military Commission meeting in Pyongyang on Monday (AFP)

## North Korean leader Kim calls for more 'practical, offensive' war deterrence

Seoul, South Korea - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for expanding the country's war deterrence capabilities in a 'more practical and offensive' way, state media said on Tuesday, to counter what it called 'frantic' aggression by the United States and South Korea.

Pyongyang has opened the year with a flurry of weapons tests, including what state media has claimed are nuclear-capable underwater drones and the launch of two intercontinental ballistic missiles.

On Monday, Kim attended a meeting of the Central Military Commission to discuss ways to 'cope with the escalating moves of the US imperialists and the south Korean puppet traitors to unleash a war of aggression', Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency said.

Kim ordered that the country's deterrence capabilities be strengthened with 'increasing speed' and in a 'more practical and offensive' manner.

North Korea last year de-

clared itself an 'irreversible' nuclear power, effectively ending the possibility of denuclearisation talks.

Earlier this year, Kim ordered the military to intensify drills to prepare for a 'real war'.

In response, Washington and Seoul have intensified defence cooperation, staging joint military exercises with advanced stealth jets and high-profile US strategic assets.

North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion, and on Tuesday described them as 'frantic' drills 'simulating an all-out war against' Pyongyang.

South Korea on Tuesday also accused North Korea of being 'irresponsible' after Pyongyang cut hotline contact with Seoul last week.

For five days, North Korea has not answered the twice-daily calls made through a military hotline and an inter-Korean liaison channel, South Korean Unification Minister Kwon Young-se told reporters.

AFP

## US: Biden ends COVID health emergency status

Washington, US - President Joe Biden on Monday officially ended the COVID national health emergency that for more than three years underpinned extraordinary efforts to provide care for a country where more than a million people died from the disease.

Biden signed a law passed earlier by Congress 'which terminates the national emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic'. This closes lavish funding streams for COVID tests, free vaccines and other emergency measures thrown together - starting in January

2020 - to try and free the world's biggest economy from the grip of the pandemic.

Less clear is the impact the end of the emergency will have on the already tense southern border with Mexico, where US authorities have long struggled to manage the flow of undocumented immigrants and large numbers of asylum seekers.

A rule known as Title 42 was used during the official health emergency to impose stringent restrictions on acceptance of undocumented arrivals.

AFP

## Five killed, 8 wounded in Kentucky bank shooting

Louisville, US - A 25-year-old bank employee opened fire at his workplace Monday in Louisville, in the US state of Kentucky, killing five people and wounding at least eight others in a livestreamed attack before police shot and killed him.

After an initial death toll of four, Louisville authorities announced in the evening that a fifth victim, a 57-year-old woman, had died of her injuries. Police identified the gunman in the latest US mass killing as a white man named Connor Sturgeon and said he was an employee of Old National Bank, located downtown in Kentucky's largest city.

After receiving reports of gunfire in the bank at 8:38am (1238



The area where a shooting took place in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, on Monday, leaving five dead, including the gunman (AFP)

GMT), police were on the scene within three minutes. The suspect shot at officers, who returned fire and killed him, interim police chief Jacquelyn Gwinn-Villaroel told an afternoon press conference.

"His weapon of choice was a rifle," she said without specifying if it was an assault weapon of the kind often used in the massacres that have become tragically common in the United States.

Gwinn-Villaroel confirmed that the shooter, whose age was at first reported as 23 but later updated by police to 25, had broadcast live video of the attack on Instagram.

A spokesperson for Meta, the social media app's parent company, told AFP that it was 'in touch with law enforcement and quickly removed the livestream of this tragic incident this morning'. There was no immediate word on the suspect's motive, but CNN cited a law enforcement source as saying he had just been informed he was losing his job.

Gwinn-Villaroel said that three people were in critical condition, including a police officer who took a bullet to the head.

One of those victims later succumbed to her injuries, the Louisville Police Department said, adding to another woman and three men killed in the attack - all aged between 40 and 64 years old.

One of the men killed, Tommy Elliott, 63, was a friend of the Louisville mayor and of the Democratic governor of Kentucky. The latter said he once ran a campaign out of the building where the shooting took place.

"Tommy Elliott helped me build my law career. Helped me become governor. Gave me advice on being a good dad," Andy Beshear, the governor, told the news conference, visibly shaken.

AFP

# Germany to switch off last remaining nuclear plants on Saturday

Berlin, Germany - Germany will shut down its three remaining nuclear plants on Saturday, betting that it can fulfil its green ambitions without atomic power despite the energy crisis caused by the Ukraine war.

The cloud of white steam that has risen since 1989 over the river in Neckarwestheim, near Stuttgart, will soon be a distant memory, as will the Isar 2 complex in Bavaria and the Emsland plant in the north.

At a time when many Western countries are ramping up nuclear power in their transition to greener energy sources, Europe's biggest economy is resolutely sticking to its plans - though not everyone is in agreement.

Germany has been looking to phase out nuclear power since 2002, but the decision was accelerated by former chancellor Angela Merkel in 2011 after the Fukushima disaster in Japan.

Fukushima showed that 'even in a high-tech country like Japan, the risks of nuclear energy cannot be safely controlled', Merkel said at the time.

The exit decision was popular in a country with a powerful anti-nuclear movement fuelled by fears of Cold War conflict and disasters such as Chernobyl.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 threatened to upend the plans, putting an end to cheap Russian gas and throwing the country into an unprecedented energy crisis.

**'Turned too far'**

Just a few months before Germany's last three remaining plants were due to be turned off on December 31, 2022, the tide of public opinion began to turn.

"With high energy prices and the hot topic of climate change, there have of course been calls to extend the power plants," said



An aerial view of the nuclear power plant Emsland in Lingen, western Germany (AFP)

Jochen Winkler, the mayor of Neckarwestheim.

The government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which includes the fiercely anti-nuclear Greens, agreed to extend the life of the plants to April 15.

"There might have been a new

discussion if the winter had been more difficult, if there had been power cuts and gas shortages. But we had a winter without too many problems' thanks to accelerated liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, Winkler said.

Neckarwestheim has around

4,000 inhabitants, more than 150 of whom work at the plant - but Winkler is philosophical about the decision.

"The wheel has already been turned too far" and there is no point 'going backwards' and reversing the process, he said.

Sixteen reactors have been closed in Germany since 2003.

The three final plants provided six per cent of Germany's energy last year, compared with 30.8 per cent from all nuclear plants in 1997.

Meanwhile, Germany produced 46 per cent of its energy from renewables in 2022, up from less than 25 per cent a decade ago.

**Ambitious energy targets**

But the current rate of progress on renewables will not be enough for Germany to meet its own targets, much to the ire of environmental campaigners.

These targets 'are already ambitious without the nuclear phase-out - and every time we deprive ourselves of a technological option, we make things more difficult', said Georg Zachmann, an energy specialist at the Brus-

sels-based Bruegel think tank.

The equation is even more complex given the goal of shutting down all coal-fired power plants in the country by 2038, with a first wave of closures in 2030.

Coal still accounts for a third of German electricity production, with an eight per cent increase last year to compensate for the loss of Russian gas after Moscow cut supplies in response to Western sanctions over its Ukraine invasion.

The country would need to install 'four to five wind turbines a day' over the next few years to meet its needs, Scholz has warned - a tall order given that just 551 were installed last year.

Germany also needs to more than double the rate at which it is installing photovoltaic equipment, according to the Agora Energiewende think tank.

AFP

# UN chief appeals for massive aid for Somalia

Guterres was on a visit to Somalia, where five million people are facing high levels of food insecurity

Mogadishu, Somalia - Visiting UN chief Antonio Guterres appealed on Tuesday for 'massive' international support for Somalia as it battles a desperate humanitarian crisis caused by drought and protracted armed conflict.

Guterres said at a joint press conference with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud that he was on a 'visit of solidarity' to the troubled Horn of Africa nation, where five million people are facing high levels of food insecurity.

"I am also here to ring the alarm on the need of massive international support... because of the humanitarian difficulties the country is facing," he said, adding that he wanted to help build Somalia's security capacity and encourage its development.

The United Nations has launched a US\$2.6bn call for humanitarian assistance, but Guterres said the appeal was only 15 per cent funded.

Somalia's worst drought in decades has driven many to the brink of famine, while the government is also engaged in a major offensive to quell a bloody Islamist insurgency.

The authorities earlier imposed a security lockdown in Mogadishu for Guterres' arrival, closing most roads and restricting public transport.

The UN chief, who is making



UN secretary general Antonio Guterres (left) and Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud are seen during a press briefing at the presidential palace, Villa Somalia, in Mogadishu on Tuesday (AFP)

his first visit to the country since March 2017, is also due to tour a camp for internally displaced people before leaving on Wednesday.

### 'Victims of climate change'

Mohamud said the trip was also a gesture of solidarity 'towards the government and the democratic process of Somalia'.

"This visit ensures that the United Nations is fully committed to support our plans for state building and stabilising the country," his office said in a statement.

Five successive failed rainy seasons in parts of Somalia as well as Kenya and Ethiopia have led to the worst drought in four decades, wiping out livestock and crops and forcing at least 1.7mn people from their homes in

search of food and water.

While famine thresholds have not been reached in Somalia, the UN says about half its population will need humanitarian assistance this year, with 8.3mn affected by the drought.

Adding to the woes, seasonal rains in March led to flooding that claimed the lives of 21 people and displaced more than 100,000, according to the UN, which

warned that the rains were unlikely to be enough to improve the food security outlook for many. "Although Somalis make virtually no contribution to climate change... the Somalis are among the greatest victims," Guterres said.

### 'Excess deaths'

Somalia was hit by a famine in 2011 which killed 260,000 peo-

ple, more than half of them children under six, partly because the international community failed to act fast enough, according to the UN.

*I am here to ring the alarm on the need of massive international support... because of humanitarian difficulties the country is facing... to help build Somalia's security capacity, encourage its development*

ANTONIO GUTERRES

A report by the UN and the Somali government released in March said that drought may have led to 43,000 'excess deaths' last year, with children under the age of five accounting for half the victims.

One of the poorest countries on the planet, Somalia has been wracked by decades of civil war, political violence and a bloody insurgency by the Al-Qaeda affili-

ate Al-Shabaab.

Mohamud last year declared 'all-out war' against the militants and sent in troops in September to back an uprising against Al-Shabaab launched by local clan militias in central Somalia.

In recent months, the army and the militias known as 'Macawisley' have retaken swathes of territory in an operation backed by an African Union force known as ATMIS, and by US air strikes.

The government said late last month that more than 3,000 Al-Shabaab fighters had been killed since it launched the offensive.

It also said 70 towns and villages had been 'liberated' from Al-Shabaab, which has been fighting the fragile central government for more than 15 years.

It was not possible to independently verify the claims.

Al-Shabaab has frequently retaliated against the offensive with bloody attacks, undermining its ability to continue to strike civilian, political and military targets despite the government's advances.

In a report to the UN Security Council in February, Guterres said that 2022 was the deadliest year for civilians in Somalia since 2017, largely as a result of Al-Shabaab attacks.

AFP



Israeli security forces deploy during a visit by Jewish settlers and tourists to the tomb of Othniel ben Kenaz in Hebron city on Monday (AFP)

## Israel PM vows to restore security as violence surges

Tel Aviv, Israel - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to restore security 'on all fronts' after surging violence that included rocket fire from Lebanon and Syria and two more deaths on Monday.

Netanyahu also reinstated the defence minister whose firing he announced last month.

Heavy clashes, shootings, rocket strikes and a car-ramming attack have marred a period when the Muslim holy month of Ramadan coincides with the Jewish Passover and Christian Easter.

The latest casualties were a Palestinian teenager and a British-Israeli mother who succumbed on Monday to injuries from a West Bank gun attack that earlier killed her two daughters. The day after Israeli police on Wednesday stormed the prayer hall of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque - Islam's third-holiest site - more than 30 rockets were fired from Lebanese soil into Israel.

The Israeli army said the attack was most likely carried out by the Palestinian armed movement Hamas.

Israel then bombarded the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon, targeting infrastructures it said belonged to Hamas.

"We will not allow Hamas to establish itself in Lebanon", by acting on 'all fronts', Netanyahu said at a news conference on Monday.

Israeli-Palestinian violence

had already intensified since Netanyahu's new government took power in December, a coalition with extreme-right and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties.

The latest surge came late last month after he announced a 'pause' for dialogue on judicial reform legislation, which split the nation and caused divisions in his government.

Among the political casualties was Yoav Gallant, whom the prime minister dismissed on March 26 after he called for a halt to the legislative process, citing national security concerns and threats by reserve military personnel not to report for duty.

Netanyahu is currently battling very low levels of domestic popularity. A recent survey showed him likely to lose if an election were held now.

At his news conference, Netanyahu said he and Gallant had 'difficult disputes' but he had decided to put them in the past.

"Gallant remains in his post and we will continue to work together for the safety of the citizens of Israel," he added.

In Tel Aviv, several hundred protesters took to the streets to denounce the government and condemn the prime minister's speech, according to images broadcast by Israeli television.

Earlier on Monday several government ministers joined a protest march by Jewish settlers, held under tight security in the north of the occupied West Bank.

AFP

## 'Significant' number of leaked US docs are fake, says S Korea

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea on Tuesday said a 'significant portion' of leaked US intelligence documents indicating concerns in Seoul about arms supplies to Ukraine were fake.

The documents are part of a broader leak the Pentagon has described as a 'very serious' national security risk. It has also created a diplomatic headache for Washington as they appear to show US spying on close allies including South Korea and Israel.

Some files reportedly show concern among top South Korean national security officials that arms and ammunition manufactured by their country might end up being used in Ukraine - a violation of Seoul's policy of not selling weapons to nations at war.

In a call on Tuesday, the South Korean defence minister and the US secretary of defense agreed that 'a significant number of the documents in question were fabricated', the presidential office in Seoul said in a statement.

Dozens of photographs of the documents have been circulating on social media platforms and messaging services including Twitter, Telegram and Discord for at least weeks.

The Pentagon has said it is working to determine if the documents are genuine, and that at least one appeared to have been manipulated.

However, US officials reportedly believe many of the documents are real.

The leak has prompted US officials to reassure allies such

as South Korea, which has provided non-lethal and humanitarian aid to Ukraine since Russia invaded last year.

But Seoul has a long-standing policy against providing weapons to countries in active conflict, which it says makes it difficult to supply arms directly to Ukraine.

The revelation of the purported Ukraine discussions among top national security officials has sparked criticism in South Korea about the vulnerability of sensitive sites including the presidential office.

But President Yoon Suk Yeol's office pushed back on Tuesday, saying it had 'iron-clad security' and that allegations of eavesdropping were 'senseless lies'.

AFP

## Mass graves, unclaimed bodies haunt east DR Congo town

Kishishe, DR Congo - Michel hid in the outdoor lavatory of his church in Kishishe, a town in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, praying that M23 rebels wouldn't find him.

That day, November 29, the rebels raided the town of thousands of people and committed their worst-recorded massacre since launching their campaign in late 2021.

Over 170 civilians were killed, according to the United Nations.

"They told them to sit on the edge of a hole, and they started shooting them," said Michel, who witnessed the killings from his hiding place.

M23 rebels had captured Kishishe a week earlier, but they swept back into the town again that morning searching for Mai-Mai militiamen who attacked them and then hid inside houses, according to several residents.

The M23 - which is allegedly backed by neighbouring Rwanda - has captured swathes of territory in eastern Congo's North Kivu province and advanced within several dozen kilometres



Men stand by trenches dug by March 23 Movement (M23) combatants on the top of a hill surrounding Kishishe, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on April 5 (AFP)

of its capital Goma. Over 900,000 people have fled its advance, the International Organization for Migration says.

The Tutsi-led militia has gained strategic footholds across North Kivu, including lucrative border posts and control of most roads leading to Goma.

But its capture of Kishishe was

resonant for another reason: the town had long been a bastion of the FDLR militia - a descendant of the Rwandan Hutu extremist groups that carried out the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda.

The M23 recently withdrew from Kishishe. AFP visited the town on April 5. All names of interviewees have been changed

## Doctors in England start historic 4-day strike over pay

London, UK - Doctors working in England's public health service on Tuesday launched what has been billed as the most disruptive strike in its history, in a dispute over pay and working conditions.

The four-day walkout, which began at 7am (0600 GMT), follows months of strikes by other public and private sector staff as inflation sparks the UK's worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

The action by so-called junior doctors - physicians who are not senior specialists but who may still years of experience - comes after a three-day stoppage last month and several strikes by nurses.

It threatens to be the most serious walkout yet and lead to the

cancellation of hundreds of thousands of appointments.

They are demanding a pay rise of 35 per cent, which they say is needed to help make up for more than a decade of salary cuts in real terms.

They also argue pandemic backlogs coupled with staff shortages are massively increasing workloads, endangering patients.

"We have had a massive (pay) cut and we are filling more gaps because people are leaving," said junior doctor Katrina Forsyth, who added she sometimes wept after shifts.

"It's becoming less safe for patients," she said from a picket line after finishing a night shift at St. Thomas' Hospital in London.

AFP

grave by the church where he had hidden, clasped his hands together as he recounted the attack. Dozens of people had taken refuge in the church, explained Michel, but to no avail.

"They started killing everywhere," the 40-year-old farmer said. "They said every man who was there had to disappear from the Earth."

Standing close by, another resident pointed to the top of a hill, where he said 'there are more bodies'.

Bullet casings littered the ground on the hilltop, which had also had defensive trenches cut into the earth - and a freshly dug grave in a cassava patch. "Four people are buried here," said a farmer, pointing to the grave.

Along a path further on, several corpses were decomposing in the open air.

One man vomited from the overpowering smell. A small group of women and children returning from the fields passed by without looking, seemingly unfazed.

AFP

# UN being forced into ‘appalling choice’ by Taliban ban on women

UN mission in Afghanistan said the ban was unlawful under the UN Charter which cannot be complied with

Kabul, Afghanistan - The United Nations is being forced to make an ‘appalling choice’ over whether to continue operations in Afghanistan while the Taliban government bans women from working for the organisation, the world body said on Tuesday.

Under their austere interpretation of Islam, Taliban authorities have imposed a slew of restrictions on Afghan women since seizing power in 2021, including banning them from higher education and many government jobs.

In December, they banned Afghan women from working for domestic and foreign non-governmental organisations, and on April 4 extended that to UN offices across the country.

In a statement on Tuesday, the UN mission in Afghanistan said the ban was ‘unlawful under international law, including the UN Charter, and for that reason the United Nations cannot comply’.

“Through this ban, the Tal-



An Afghan daily worker sleeps on his wheelbarrow while women walk past at a market in Fayzabad district of Badakhshan province on Monday (AFP)

*It is absolutely clear that no authority can give instructions to the United Nations... on who should be employed. We are not going to make an exception*

RAMIZ ALAKBAROV

iban de facto authorities seek to force the United Nations into having to make an appalling choice between staying and delivering in support of the Afghan

people and standing by the norms and principles we are duty-bound to uphold,” it said.

The increasing curbs are reminiscent of the Taliban’s first

government between 1996 and 2001, when the UN said they were responsible for repeated human rights violations - particularly against girls and women.

UN mission head Roza Otunbayeva has initiated an ‘operational review’ to decide next steps, the statement said.

“It should be clear that any negative consequences of this crisis for the Afghan people will be the responsibility of the de facto authorities,” it said.

The world body employs

around 400 Afghan women in the country.

UN humanitarian coordinator in Afghanistan Ramiz Alakbarov told AFP soon after the ban that the decree violated the world body’s charter.

“It is absolutely clear that no authority can give instructions to the United Nations... on who should be employed,” he told AFP. “We are not going to make an exception.”

Since the ban was announced, the UN has ordered all

its Afghan staff, men and women, not to report to the offices until further notice.

The ban triggered international outrage, with the Taliban authorities coming under severe criticism.

They have so far not issued any clarification or reason for the UN ban.

Local employees make up the bulk of the 600 women working for the UN in the country. In total, there are about 3,300 Afghans in the country’s 3,900-strong UN workforce.

Many NGOs suspended all operations in the country in protest after the ban on women staff was announced in December, piling further misery on Afghanistan’s citizens, half of whom face hunger, according to aid agencies.

It was agreed after days of discussion that women working in the health sector would be exempt from the decree, although the UN also enjoyed a general exemption.

Aid workers say women employees are crucial in delivering help to other women.

The restriction will also hamper donation-raising efforts by the UN at a time when Afghanistan is enduring one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, UN officials say.

The UN airlifted US\$1.8bn into Afghanistan between December 2021 and January 2023, funding an aid lifeline for the nation’s 38mn citizens and shoring up the domestic economy.

AFP

## Air strikes kill dozens in central Myanmar

Bangkok, Thailand - Dozens of people in coup-hit Myanmar’s central region were killed in air strikes on Tuesday, according to local media reports and a witness contacted by AFP.

The country has been in chaos and its economy in tatters since the military seized power in February 2021.

The death toll from the early Tuesday morning strike on the remote Kantbalu township in Sagaing region is unclear.

At least 50 fatalities and dozens wounded were reported by BBC Burmese, The Irrawaddy and Radio Free Asia.

Sagaing region - near the second-largest city Mandalay - has put up some of the fiercest resistance to the military’s rule, with intense fighting raging there for months.

Graphic video clips circulating on social media - that AFP has been unable to verify - show bodies scattered among the ruins of homes.

“We are going to rescue you if we hear you screaming,” one person could be heard saying in the video. “Please scream!”

A rescuer - connected to an anti-coup People’s Defence Force group - told AFP that women and children were among the dead.

AFP

## Sri Lanka delays local polls, defying court order

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka again postponed local polls on Tuesday in defiance of a court order, delaying a de facto referendum on President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s efforts to restore the bankrupt island nation’s finances.

The elections were originally slated for last month but Wickremesinghe’s administration refused to finance them, saying the money was needed to pay for salaries and pensions.

His government was rebuked by the Supreme Court and ordered to release the funds for a rescheduled vote on April 25, but so far that has not happened. The delayed polls are to pick local councillors but would be the first electoral test for Wickremesinghe since he took office.

“A new date will be announced if a firm date is given by the government to release the

necessary funds or there is another decision of the Supreme Court,” the election commission said in a brief statement.

Sri Lanka suffered acute shortages of food, fuel and pharmaceuticals along with lengthy blackouts last year as a result of the worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1948. Months of protests and political upheaval culminated last July in the ouster of Wickremesinghe’s predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa after an angry crowd stormed his compound.

The polls are widely seen as a referendum on unpopular austerity measures implemented to satisfy the terms of an International Monetary Fund bailout, including a doubling of income taxes and a sharp rise in energy tariffs.

AFP

## India to introduce new Data Protection Bill

New Delhi, India - The Centre on Tuesday informed the Supreme Court that the government will table the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill in the upcoming Monsoon Session of Parliament in July.

A five-judge Constitution bench of Justices KM Joseph, Ajay Rastogi, Aniruddha Bose, Hrishikesh Roy and CT Ravikumar fixed the matter for hearing in August. Attorney General R Venkatramani, appearing for the Centre, said: “The Bill is ready, it just has to be introduced in parliament in the monsoon session at the end of June, July.”

“We take note of the submission of the AG that a Bill which would cover many aspects of the... addresses all concerns will be tabled in the Monsoon Session in July 2023. Considering the circumstances, the matter is to be placed before the Chief



Justice of India for a bench to be constituted preferably in the first week of August,” the bench stated in its order.

Counsels appearing for the petitioners requested that the top court list the case earlier as

Bill has not been introduced in the Parliament for so long.

“Consultation is a long process... We want a good law to come,” the Attorney General replied.

The bench was hearing pleas

filed by two students challenging WhatsApp’s 2021 Privacy Policy to share users’ data with parent company Facebook and others as a violation of their privacy and free speech.

Last year, the apex court had

asked the government either place before the Parliament, the Bill, which addresses the privacy concerns of users and standards to be followed by WhatsApp or it will begin the final hearing in the case.

Earlier, the Centre had said Indian users cannot be discriminated against by other users of WhatsApp and informed the apex court that the government has already withdrawn the old Data Protection Bill and a new Bill will be introduced in the Parliament. Senior advocate Shyam Divan, appearing for the petitioners, had told the bench that Indian users are deprived of their fundamental rights and the same platform operating in other countries, especially in the European Union, has higher standards of privacy and those standards are not prevalent in India.

ANI

## Muezzins of mega-mosque in Islamabad summon the faithful

Islamabad, Pakistan - Moments before dawn, Noor ul Islam ascends the steps of one of the world’s biggest mosques, enters its cavernous hall and says a private prayer before a faintly buzzing microphone.

Then, the 32-year-old gulps down a deep breath and makes the morning’s call to worship - a forceful yet lilting chant amplified across Islamabad, Pakistan’s capital, marking the start of daylight fasting during Ramadan. “The voice is a gift from God,” Islam told AFP at Faisal Mosque, a towering marble monument to the nation’s devotion to faith.

“If your intentions are genuine, your voice will have the power to touch people’s hearts,”

he said.

All across the Muslim world, men like Islam, known as muezzins, broadcast the ‘adhan’ call to prayer, five times a day.

In the month of Ramadan, where prayers mark the start and finish of 14 hours of fasting in Pakistan, the faithful are particularly attuned.

The script and rhythm are the same everywhere.

Intoned in Arabic over minaret loudspeakers, it reminds Muslims: ‘God is the greatest’ and they should ‘hasten to prayers’.

But there is a quiet hierarchy among muezzins.

A particularly melodic caller can increase the standing of a mosque. House hunters might



A general view of the grand Faisal Mosque pictured during the holy fasting month of Ramadan in Islamabad (AFP)

judge the neighbourhood adhan before making an offer. And at prestigious mosques, the job is highly coveted.

The three muezzin roles at Faisal Mosque - a national emblem opened in 1986 with a fabled capacity of 300,000

worshippers - are among the most prized outside the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.

### Holy calling

As a teenager visiting Pakistan’s capital from his hometown 105km (65 miles) away, Islam was captivated by the soulful call from Faisal Mosque’s four spiked towers.

“Every Muslim yearns to say the adhan, lead prayers or give a sermon at a well-known mosque,” he said. “Every pious Muslim has this dream.”

His chance came in 2018, when a single slot opened and he beat 400 other candidates to the post.

When he steps up to the microphone, Islam plugs his ears

with his fingers in order to block all sounds apart from his voice.

“The adhan, delivered with a beautiful and precise pronunciation, resonates with people,” said 57-year-old businessman Aziz Ahmed in front of the mosque.

Some of Islam’s fellow muezzins coddle their vocal cords like rock stars and theatre performers, drinking honey-laced beverages, and avoiding cold breezes and oil-drenched Pakistani cuisine.

“I am a careless person when it comes to this,” chuckles Islam. “I can’t resist.”

Nonetheless, he treats his vocation with humble reverence. “The fundamental purpose of the adhan is to invite people to-

wards God. You can only accomplish this effectively when you possess a pure heart,” he said.

“Any delay or lack of sincerity in performing the adhan could potentially erode our faith.”

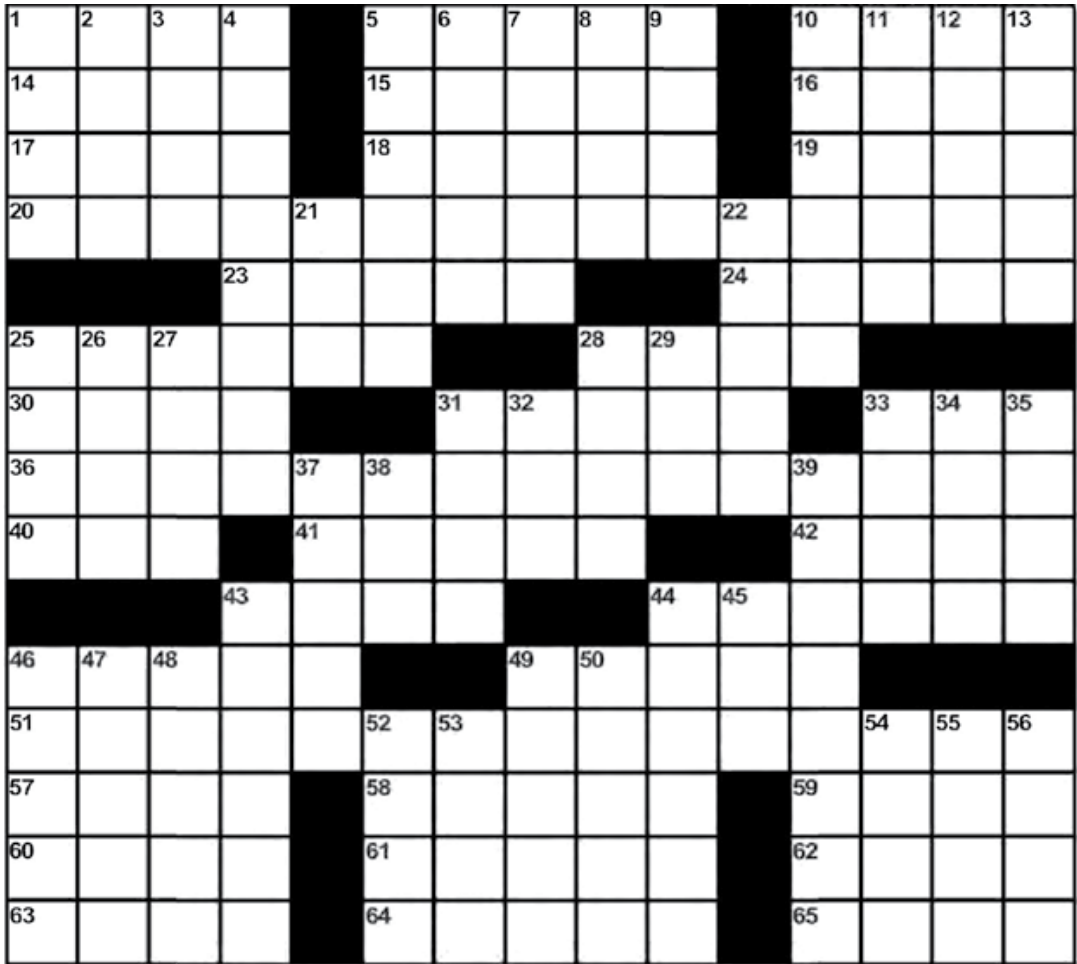
A sub-par adhan is treated as a ‘formality’ by muezzins who create ‘fake voices’.

A good recital can ‘strike me straight in the heart’, Islam said. But the position does come with a hint of celebrity.

Devotees travel for miles to hear the call at Faisal Mosque, peer through the windows to watch Islam at work and ask for selfies afterwards. Back home in the town of Swabi, he is considered a local hero.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Battle memento
  - 5) They may be fine-toothed
  - 10) Provide provender for
  - 14) Ear part
  - 15) Reproductive organ
  - 16) Turnpike toll unit
  - 17) Type of code
  - 18) Plastic wrap brand
  - 19) Start of a south-of-the-border cheer
  - 20) Water x 3
  - 23) Yard or garage events
  - 24) Media component
  - 25) Evolution, for one
  - 28) Anonymous people
  - 30) Ethiopian coin
  - 31) Robin Hood's Tuck
  - 33) \_ out a living (scrape by)
  - 36) Water x 3
  - 40) Stock holder
  - 41) Temperamental
  - 42) In midvoyage
  - 43) Used a bell
  - 44) "Animal Farm" author
  - 46) Map within a map
  - 49) Single piece of information
  - 51) Water x 3
  - 57) Limerick's land
  - 58) Kayak's relative
  - 59) Put down for the count
  - 60) Three oceans touch it
  - 61) Love, in Lourdes
  - 62) Corp. bigwig
  - 63) Pork, for one
  - 64) Studious stereotypes
  - 65) Game based on world conquest
- DOWN**
- 1) Rib order
  - 2) Seed site, sometimes
  - 3) Emulating a sleepyhead
  - 4) Suck up again
  - 5) Expensive
  - 6) Irregularly round
  - 7) Crumbly earth deposits
  - 8) Dundee hill
  - 9) Lip-\_ (mouth the words)
  - 10) Party handouts
  - 11) Fate of a certain shah
  - 12) Keebler's crew
  - 13) Darlings
  - 21) Lifeboat item
  - 22) Puccini genre
  - 25) Cookbook amt.
  - 26) Long walk
  - 27) Ireland nickname
  - 28) Like auto shop floors
  - 29) Slap cuffs on
  - 31) Former prince?
  - 32) Obviously chafed
  - 33) Last word in a threat
  - 34) Stabilizing part
  - 35) List-lengthening abbr.
  - 37) Fine fiddle
  - 38) He played Opie
  - 39) Congressman, for one
  - 43) Do again
  - 44) Alternatives
  - 45) Bitterly regret
  - 46) Certain construction girder
  - 47) "Let's make some \_!"
  - 48) Neighbor of Israel
  - 49) Fund contributor
  - 50) Not silently
  - 52) Observatory function
  - 53) Hardly heart-pounding
  - 54) Prepare to take off
  - 55) Watchful pair
  - 56) Plymouth landmark

**NOTE PAD**

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

**ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19  
Someone you admire a lot but don't know very well could move into your orbit today. This is your chance to learn more about them. While you shouldn't rush right up and barrage them with questions, you should make it known that you're a big fan of theirs. Besides feeding their ego, it will help them remember who you are and could even help put you higher up their priority list. Have your questions prepared in advance and be respectful of their time.

**LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22  
Your eye for detail is bringing the little things into sharp focus today, so use that eye to find mistakes before they get too far along. When you review your budget, you'll immediately notice an issue with the numbers that can still be easily fixed. And if you're shopping, double-check the receipt. There could be an error that needs to be addressed. There is always a benefit to looking at things in a deeper way. Breezing along and being shallow only leads to an empty and unrewarding life.

**SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21  
A coworker is experiencing some relationship problems and they are bringing them with them to work. Now, instead of talking about projects or customers, the conversation is dominated by their tale of woe. If you don't want to get involved in any difficult situations with authority figures, then you'd better distance yourself from this person as much as you can. Let them suffer the consequences of their distraction. You need to stay focused on the work in front of you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

**TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20  
Spend time someplace where you can enjoy beauty today, whether it's a garden, art museum, flower market, or maybe just an electronics store full of the gadgets you covet most. It's important to appreciate aesthetically pleasing things, especially now when your creativity could use some inspiration. Life is a balance between ugly and pretty, soft and hard, sweet and sour. And right now you need to tilt things toward the more attractive end of the spectrum.

**VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22  
When a surge of positive thinking hits you early today, you should use it to help others. A blue friend could use a few words of encouragement, and few people deliver them with as much compassion and kindness as you. Even if you just send a silly "cheer up" message, your thoughtful efforts will go a very long way toward making them feel better. Giving to the people you love enables you to make stronger connections to them.

**CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19  
If you fear your energy burst is going bust today, don't look on it as a negative thing. Ratcheting down can be a very positive thing! By slowing down you can get a lot more grounded with friends and family members. It's time for some downtime anyway, so take things down a notch today even if you feel like doing more. Hold yourself back and don't try to do so much. This is a time when you should be listening more closely to yourself and doing what's right for your health.

1. The Dutch-based Stellantis N.V., formed in 2021, is a 50:50 merger between two internationally recognised manufacturing conglomerates from which countries and in what field?
- A. Italy and France, automobiles
  - B. UK and Germany, medicine
  - C. Hungary and Nigeria, fashion
  - D. USA and Russia, energy

**GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21  
Your obsession with fairness is going to cause you more stress than it will generate benefits right now, so don't spend so much time trying to calculate whether or not everything is completely equal. It probably isn't going to be, and that's okay. Sure, gross inequities should be dealt with, but if someone is getting a little bit more time or money than someone else, it isn't the end of the world. Focus on more productive, positive things today.

**LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22  
Someone is going to try to get what they want from you by appealing to your analytical side, but you may find yourself emotionally buying into their argument as well. Today is the beginning of a shift in your perception. You are much more willing to see the other side of an argument and let people slide on the silly stuff. You're mellowing out, and the people around you are feeling more comfortable presenting new ideas and getting you involved in adventurous stuff.

**AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18  
There's an invisible barrier between you and someone else right now, walls you can't see or touch but that are holding you back just as if they were eight feet tall and made of brick. If you really want to break through to this person, you have to do it with charm and patience, not a wrecking ball! Take care when dealing with others and they'll take care when dealing with you. Wait for them to open a door and you'll be invited in.

2. What is a medical term referring to the presence of pathogenic organisms in the bloodstream, leading to blood poisoning?
- A. Tetanus
  - B. Septicemia
  - C. Hypertension
  - D. Bursitis

**CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22  
You are the glue in your social circle right now, so it's time to make plans to make sure they happen! It's a good day to get the group together and get everyone focused on one of its favorite events. Whether it's a gourmet dinner party, pickup basketball game, long hike, or bar-hopping adventure, it doesn't matter as long as it's something that everyone wants to do. When you're the one putting it all together, there's sure to be a great turnout!

**SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21  
This is the start of a repositioning period with the people in your social circle. Folks are shifting alliances and old friendship ties are breaking, but just temporarily. It's perfectly natural for people to want to mix up who they spend their time with, so don't worry that this is the end of something. The strong bonds that hold you all together are still there. They just might be arranged a little differently for the next few weeks.

**PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20  
Receiving credit is sometimes overrated. Besides, renown shouldn't be the reason for doing what you do. If someone tries to take credit for your project's success, don't let it get to you. Those in authority really know you were behind it, and they know that this person isn't to be believed. You'll get a chance later in the day to have a more private conversation with the boss, and that's the perfect time to remind them that you were the idea generator.

3. What is Hilary Clinton's maiden name?
- A. Rodham
  - B. Bouvier
  - C. Roosevelt
  - D. Kennedy

Answers: 1. A 2. B 3. A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | P | O | R |
| H | L | R | S |
| E | O | A | D |
| R | E | Y | L |

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.

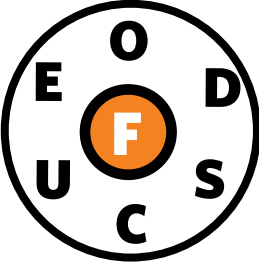
**Solution** 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

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

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

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

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



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring against Barcelona in their Copa del Rey semi-final second leg match at the Camp Nou stadium last week (AFP)

**Madrid, Spain** - When Karim Benzema struck a magnificent hat-trick against Barcelona last week in the Copa del Rey, it served a dual purpose.

The striker knocked Real Madrid's bitter rivals out of the Spanish Cup at Camp Nou, and, with the world watching on, issued a powerful statement of intent as the season reaches its business end.

Los Blancos welcome Chelsea on Wednesday to the Santiago

Bernabeu in a first leg Champions League quarter-final clash, and the Blues will be on red alert trying to stop the irrepressible Benzema. Madrid, aiming to win the trophy for the sixth time in 10 seasons, have burst into life in recent matches, scoring 12 goals in their last three games, including the 4-0 romp against Barcelona.

They suffered a 3-2 defeat on Saturday in La Liga against Villarreal, but coach Carlo Ancelotti made six changes from the side

*Working in the international break has helped him, he's in good shape to make the difference. When the team is close to a title, the temperature of the boiler goes up*

CARLO ANCELOTTI

that beat Barcelona to keep the likes of Toni Kroos and Luka Modric fresh to face Chelsea.

Benzema netted consecutive hat-tricks against Real Valladolid

and Barcelona before that, like Madrid he is finding his best form at the crunch moments.

"He's hit the switch," said Ancelotti after the Clasico triumph.

"Working in the international break has helped him, he's in good shape to make the difference."

The Italian likened his team to a boiler, hitting the right temperature at the right time.

"When the team is close to a title, the temperature of the boiler goes up," Ancelotti warned at the start of March.

**Temperature rising**

After the 4-0 win at Camp Nou which saw Madrid reach the

Copa del Rey final for the first time since 2014, Ancelotti brought up the boiler again.

"The boiler has returned to the right temperature at the most important moment of the season," he said.

Benzema's own temperature has fluctuated this season, from moments of high quality to weeks sidelined with injury problems. The 35-year-old Frenchman spent much of October and November on the sidelines and

he missed the World Cup after sustaining a thigh problem.

Benzema failed to score a goal in the Champions League group stages but hit three against Liverpool across both legs of the last 16 clash. Chelsea are familiar with the damage that the striker can do, with the striker netting a hat-trick last season at Stamford Bridge against the Blues in the quarter-finals in a 3-1 first leg win.

AFP

## Lampard urges Chelsea to emulate 2012 shock run to Euro glory

**London, United Kingdom** - Frank Lampard has urged Chelsea to ignore the turmoil enveloping his struggling side as he invoked the memory of the Blues' incredible run to Champions League glory in 2012.

Lampard is back in charge of Chelsea until the end of the season after replacing the sacked Graham Potter last week.

After watching Chelsea crash to a lacklustre 1-0 defeat at Wolves in his first game in charge on Saturday, Lampard takes them to Real Madrid for a daunting Champions League quarter-final first leg on Wednesday.

Chelsea are languishing in 11th place in the Premier League after a dismal campaign that included Thomas Tuchel being sacked in September and Potter lasting only seven months before his dismissal.

The west Londoners have managed to progress to the last eight in Europe despite their wretched domestic form.

Knocking out holders Real would be a major upset, but Lam-



Frank Lampard

pard knows all about defying the odds in the Champions League.

Lampard captained Chelsea in their unexpected run to Champions League triumph 11 years ago.

The Blues finished sixth during an underwhelming top-flight season, with Roberto Di Matteo re-

placing the axed Andre Villas-Boas in March.

But in the Champions League they overturned a 3-1 first leg deficit to beat Napoli in the last 16, then recovered from 2-1 down on aggregate in the semi-final second leg to eliminate Lionel

Messi's Barcelona despite a red card for John Terry on a memorable night in the Camp Nou.

In the final against Bayern Munich, they needed a last-gasp equaliser from Didier Drogba to set up a penalty shoot-out victory over the Germans in their own Allianz Arena stadium.

Repeating that fairytale success seems beyond Chelsea as they board their flight to Madrid, but Lampard insists anything can happen if his players show enough desire.

"There's a lot to it. Part of that was we parked the bus at the Nou Camp and managed to hang on for our dear lives! There are so many things, fate in different moments," he said.

"But we did have a huge desire and a big character and a level of talent in the group that have been striving for years to win a Champions League, so that one you remember."

"A team and a group will always go through tough moments to get to great ones."

AFP

## Napoli pray Osimhen returns for European date with Milan

**Milan, Italy** - Napoli are sweating on the return of Victor Osimhen for the first leg of their all-Italian Champions League quarter-final as they head towards possibly the biggest two matches in the club's history in unconvincing form.

Southern Italy's biggest club need just four more wins from nine matches to secure their first league title since 1990 after a 2-1 win at Lecce - though they lacked a cutting edge which Luciano Spalletti's side will need in Wednesday's first leg at AC Milan.

Friday's win only came about thanks to a bizarre own goal, and before Antonino Gallo's unwitting backpass slipped through his surprised goalkeeper's fingers Napoli were put on the back foot by lowly Lecce.

And while the three points take Napoli one step closer to the league crown as a performance it wasn't much of an improvement from the previous weekend's 4-0 home hammering at the hands of Milan.

Napoli have never before been in the last eight of the Champions League.

The way they have progressed through the competition, and being placed on the other side of the draw from European football's contemporary powerhouses, has made them dark horses.

However as the season has progressed Napoli have become increasingly dependent on the dynamism of Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, and a thigh injury for Serie A's leading scorer has highlighted his importance to his team's overall play in their last two matches.

"It does become difficult without him, because he has this way of running into space and a physical presence, he can draw everyone to him and then create



Victor Osimhen

space," said Spalletti after the Lecce win.

Spalletti will be hoping the Nigerian international returns on Wednesday also because he will probably be without the 24-year-old's main replacement Giovanni Simeone, who suffered a thigh injury of his own after coming on as a substitute on Friday.

**'It's hunger'**

Osimhen has stayed - compared to previous seasons at least - relatively injury free this season and the impact that has had on Napoli is very easy to see.

Regardless of the 25 goals he

has scored in all competitions, Osimhen provides Napoli the perfect outlet for his team when things aren't going according to plan. He works incredibly hard to chase down and hold onto long balls sent forward from under-pressure teammates, allowing midfielders to break through opposition pressing and latch on to his lay-offs.

"When I say that I always put the team first, those aren't just words. You can see that in how I play, right?" said Osimhen in an interview with France Football published on Saturday.

AFP

## Leicester City appoint Dean Smith as manager

**London, United Kingdom** - Dean Smith insisted that Leicester can avoid relegation after the Premier League strugglers hired him as their manager until the end of the season on Monday.

Former Aston Villa and Norwich boss Smith replaces Brendan Rodgers, who was sacked on April 2 after his side's slump into relegation trouble.

Smith will take charge for Leicester's last eight games of the campaign as they battle to avoid dropping into the Cham-



Dean Smith

pionship for the first time since 2014. The Foxes sit second bottom of the table and are two

points from safety after Saturday's damaging 1-0 home defeat against fellow strugglers Bournemouth.

"I'm really happy to have the opportunity to lead the team during these final weeks of the season," Smith said.

"The challenge in front of us is clear, but it's one myself and my coaching team have experienced before and, with the quality in this squad and the number of games remaining, it's very much achievable."

"Our first job is to rebuild

confidence and instil belief in the team and I'm looking forward to getting to work with the players this week."

Leicester have lost both matches since Rodgers was sacked, with first-team coaches Adam Sadler and Mike Stowell taking charge on an interim basis prior to Smith's appointment. Smith's backroom staff will include former Chelsea and England captain John Terry, who previously worked for him as an assistant coach at Villa.

AFP

# Al Harthy aiming to convert performance into podium in Portugal



Ahmad al Harthy in action

Muscat - Oman Racing's Ahmad Al Harthy makes a welcome return to race action in Europe later this week as the FIA World Endurance Championship arrives in Portugal, for the hotly anticipated second round of the 2023 season - the 6 Hours of Portimao.

Aston Martin Vantage racer Al Harthy, along with teammates Michael Dinan and Charlie Eastwood, heads to the Algarve region in justifiably optimistic mood after a very com-

petitive showing during the championship curtain-raiser in Sebring, USA, last month.

Marking the Omani's maiden outing in FIA WEC, and his first ever visit to the very unique Florida track, Al Harthy starred and delivered from the outset in the GTE Am class - first producing an excellent top three showing in qualifying, before racing impressively during the eight-hour contest.

Ninth place at the finish

though wasn't remotely indicative of the pace and performance shown by the Oman Racing with TF Sport trio, as the squad had to battle back from a costly puncture early in hour two - while Dinan was running in the podium battle. Losing a huge amount of time, the points for ninth position were the best which could be achieved.

All things being equal at the weekend, Al Harthy is aiming for a big haul of points with the focus

on mounting a challenge for a maiden FIA WEC podium finish in only his second weekend in the globe's biggest endurance racing championship.

It's worth remembering too, Portimao's Autodrome Internacional do Algarve provided one of last year's true highlights for the Omani with a fantastic second place finish in the LMGTE class during the final race of the 2022 European Le Mans Series. Notably, it was Al Harthy's debut

at the track.

As always, the Aston Martin brand ambassador will go into the Portuguese round with key backing and support from the Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS.

"Portimao obviously holds very happy memories for me from last season in the ELMS, and it would be fantastic to be challenging for the podium this weekend."

# SPIRITLESS AT CAMP NOU

Barca fail to capitalise on Madrid stumble

Barcelona, Spain - Title-chasing Barcelona were held to a 0-0 draw by Girona at Camp Nou on Monday, extending their lead on Real Madrid at the top of La Liga by one point, now sitting 13 clear with 10 games remaining.

Still smarting from their Clásico humiliation by Madrid last week in the Copa del Rey, Barcelona were far from their best in a Catalan derby clash, despite the motivation of seeing the champions lose on Saturday against Villarreal.

Girona, mid-table, were solid and forced Xavi Hernandez's side to drop points at home in La Liga for only the third time this season.

Barcelona secured their 21st clean sheet in the top flight but were not able to fully capitalise on Real Madrid's stumble, as they bid to win La Liga for the first time since 2019.

"As the minutes passed, they started to gain confidence in defence, and we were struggling to make the final pass or take our chances," Barca captain Sergio Busquets told DAZN.

"Our objective remains the same, to win La Liga, and to try to win it as soon as possible. We're 13 points clear, but our objective remains the same."

Xavi, still without several key players including Pedri and Ous-



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski (C) and Franck Kessie (2R) react to a missed chance during their Spanish league match against Girona on Monday

*Our objective remains the same, to win La Liga, and to try to win it as soon as possible. We're 13 points clear, but our objective remains the same*

SERGIO BUSQUETS

mane Dembele, lined up with Ansu Fati and Raphinha alongside La Liga's top scorer Robert Lewandowski up front. The Polish forward came close to opening the scoring on four minutes after being teed up by Fati, whipping

an effort onto the roof of the net. Barcelona supporters chanted Lionel Messi's name again after 10 minutes, representing the World Cup winner's former Barca shirt number, amid hopes he could return to his former club

after his Paris Saint-Germain contract expires.

"Leo generates excitement, they have chanted his name in two games now, we'll see what happens," Xavi told reporters.

"We are focused on this, we have to win La Liga."

Barcelona came close again when Girona defender Santi Bueno almost put through his own net but goalkeeper Paulo Gazzaniga reacted well to slide in and divert the ball to safety.

The former Tottenham goalkeeper saved well from Raphinha

at his near post and then clawed away a Ronald Araujo effort from the resulting corner.

Barcelona appealed that the ball had gone in but with the help of VAR - La Liga does not use goal-line technology - officials decided the ball did not cross the line. Eric Garcia headed over from a corner early in the second half as Barcelona kept looking for the opener. However the best chance of the game fell to the visitors, with Taty Castellanos spurning the opportunity by firing wide when through on goal.



Alex Baena

## 'Some lies hurt more than punches' - Villarreal's Baena after Valverde incident

Vila-Real, Spain - Villarreal's Alex Baena is hurt by accusations he wished "harm" on the family of Real Madrid's Fede Valverde to provoke being punched, he said in a statement on Monday.

Baena reported being attacked to Spanish police on Sunday, with Spanish media stating he was hit in the face by Valverde after the teams' La Liga match at the Santiago Bernabeu.

It was reported that Baena had taunted Valverde during a Copa del Rey game in January over complications regarding his partner's pregnancy, which the Villarreal winger strongly denies.

"Last Saturday I was assaulted by a colleague from this profession after the game against Real Madrid ended," said Baena in a statement, not mentioning Valverde by name.

"After it happened, some comments came to light, pre-

sumably made by his entourage, which said that I had wished harm on his family.

"Since then, and it couldn't be otherwise, no evidence has been published that proves the deeds attributed to me."

Baena said that his family had received insults and even death threats after the reports emerged.

Valverde's partner Mina Bonino revealed in February the couple thought they had lost their baby, but the pregnancy was later found to be healthy.

Some Spanish reports say Baena again referred to Valverde's child during Villarreal's 3-2 win on Saturday, provoking the confrontation.

"They took advantage of a misfortune to justify the attack, and there are lies that hurt more than punches," added Baena, 21, in his statement.

## Hollywood actors celebrate as Wrexham close in on promotion fom National League

London, United Kingdom - Hollywood actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney celebrated in the stands as Wrexham moved closer to promotion from the National League in dramatic fashion on Saturday.

The Welsh club have shot to international fame through the reality television series 'Welcome to Wrexham', which charts the fortunes of the team since their 2020 sale to Reynolds and McElhenney.

Wrexham have played in the fifth-tier National League for the last 15 years, but, revitalised by their celebrity owners, they are on the verge of a return to the professional ranks in League Two.

Reynolds and McElhenney were in attendance to witness a potentially decisive 3-2 win over promotion rivals Notts County at the Racecourse Ground on Saturday.

And fittingly there was a plot twist ripped straight from a feel-



Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds cheer for their team

good Hollywood movie as former England goalkeeper Ben Foster saved a stoppage-time penalty to preserve Wrexham's vital victory.

After receiving the freedom of the borough at a civic ceremony earlier in the day, Reynolds and

McElhenney watched John Bostock's stunning free-kick put Notts County ahead late in the first half. Paul Mullin and Jacob Mendy struck to give Wrexham a 2-1 lead before Kyle Cameron equalised 15 minutes from time.

But Elliot Lee quickly restored Wrexham's advantage and the 40-year-old Foster, who came out of retirement last month after regular 'keeper Rob Lainton was injured, saved Cedwyn Scott's last-gasp penalty.

## Stan Wawrinka, Thiem off the mark in Monte Carlo

Monte Carlo, Principality Of Monaco - The 2014 Monte Carlo Masters winner Stan Wawrinka was full of relief Monday to get past the first round as Russian qualifier Ivan Gakhov secured a date with world number one Novak Djokovic.

Three-time Grand Slam champion Wawrinka has slipped to 90th in the ATP rankings but secured his second-round ticket with a 5-7, 6-3, 6-4 defeat of Tallon Griekspoor. Also past the first hurdle in this warm-up for the French Open were 2021 Wimbledon finalist Matteo Berrettini and Dominic Thiem.

But Andy Murray's participation in the Principality ended prematurely with the Scottish wild card despatched 6-1, 6-3 by Australian 14th seed Alex de Minaur.

Gakhov's reward for edging past American Mackenzie McDonald 7-6 (8/6), 2-6, 6-3 was a Tuesday second-round date



Dominic Thiem plays a forehand return to Richard Gasquet (AFP)

with Djokovic, a David and Goliath clash with almost 200 rungs in the rankings between the pair.

The Serb has not hit a shot in anger since losing his semi-final in Dubai at the start of March to Daniil Medvedev.

Forced to miss the American swing in Indian Well and Miami due to his anti-Covid vaccination stance Djokovic said on Sunday he was "motivated" to hit the clay-court season running as he targets a 23rd Grand Slam.



SHARMA FINDS FORM AS MUMBAI BEAT DELHI IN LAST BALL THRILLER

MATCH 16



Rohit Sharma of Mumbai Indians plays a shot en route to his half-century against Delhi Capitals on Tuesday. Sharma played a captain's knock and scored a composed 65 off 45 balls which included four sixes as Mumbai won the last-ball thriller by six wickets. Earlier, Piyush Chawla and Jason Behrendorff took three wickets each to restrict Delhi to 172.

TODAYS MATCH

MATCH 17

6 PM



CHENNAI SUPER KINGS



RAJASTHAN ROYALS

Slowdown against spin proves costly for Royal Challengers

Bangalore, India - Seldom does a team conceding 212 in a T20 game go into the break between innings thinking they have done all right. However, on Monday night at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium, where 200-plus totals have been scored 24 times in the IPL, the feeling was that Royal Challengers Bangalore had left a few runs out in the middle.

The feeling became even stronger when Marcus Stoinis, first, and Nicholas Pooran took down the Royal Challengers bowlers, despite Lucknow Super Giants having started poorly in their big chase.

When Stoinis walked out, Super Giants were 23 for 3 after four overs. At the same stage in their innings, Royal Challengers were 33 for no loss, with Virat Kohli scoring quickly, though Faf du Plessis was struggling.

The foundation was set, but Royal Challengers managed only

61 runs in their next eight overs after the powerplay, with Kohli and du Plessis slowing down against spinners Krunal Pandya, Ravi Bishnoi, and Amit Mishra.

In contrast, Super Giants hit 117 in the same phase - the second-highest in the league's history. During that phase in the chase, Stoinis bludgeoned a 30-ball 65, and when Pooran arrived at the crease in the 11th over, Super Giants were ahead of where Royal Challengers were at the stage, despite losing four extra wickets. His 19-ball 62 didn't quite finish the game, but it was 24 needed in three overs with four wickets in hand then.

It generally comes down to small margins in T20 cricket. Where Royal Challengers slowed down against spin, Super Giants took Karn Sharma and Shahbaz Ahmed for 63 runs in four overs, a strike rate of 262.50.

ESPNcricinfo

'PHENOMENAL' VICTORY

Lucknow captain KL Rahul credits Nicholas Pooran, Marcus Stoinis and Ayush Badoni for thrilling win

Bangalore, India - After a see-sawing contest, Lucknow Super Giants beat Royal Challengers Bangalore amid high drama, and KL Rahul credited their lower-middle order of Nicholas Pooran, Marcus Stoinis and Ayush Badoni for the two points they earned in their first win away from home in IPL 2023.

The Royal Challengers bowlers had reduced Super Giants to 23 for 3 in four overs, but Stoinis' 30-ball 65 gave them a platform, from which Pooran's 19-ball 62 and Badoni's 24-ball 30 took them to the doorstep of victory.

"In T20s, I think that's the most important batting position



Lucknow Super Giants' Nicholas Pooran plays a shot during their match against Royal Challengers Bangalore at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru on Monday (AFP)

- Nos. 5, 6 and 7," Rahul told the broadcaster after the one-wicket win. "That's where the crunch games are won. Yes, your top order will do the bulk of the scoring in a big tournament like this but it is those boys who win you

big games. "That is why we have invested in the power of Pooran, Stoinis and Ayush. Ayush is a youngster who is learning the art of finishing games and being there at the end. He has done it a couple of

times last season and this season too. He is growing into that role and I'm excited in him becoming better in that position. That will give our team extra power with that skill as well."

But the game was not decided

till the final delivery of the match.

Badoni fell in the 19th over, followed by Mark Wood and Jaydev Unadkat being dismissed in the final over, which started with Super Giants needing five to win with three wickets in hand.

Then with scores tied, and one ball to go and Super Giants nine down, there was drama of unparalleled proportions. Harshal Patel ran in and tried to run out non-striker Ravi Bishnoi, who had taken off in a bid to steal the all-important single, but he missed dislodging the stumps, and even though he did throw down at his crease. The umpire Anil Chaudhary, though, called it not out since the ball had gone dead when Harshal had ran a few yards down the pitch before turning and aiming for the stumps.

When Harshal finally bowled the last ball, No. 11 Avesh Khan missed and the batters scampered. But wicketkeeper Dinesh Karthik fumbled twice and then missed in his shy at the stumps (on both ends).

ESPNcricinfo

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CAREER DURING  
THE PERIOD OF  
ARTISTIC VITALITY

**L**uz Maria Collazo was Cuba's first black model, a virtuoso of modern dance and star of the film *Soy Cuba* (I am Cuba) - a flop in its time now considered a classic.

Sixty years after it was filmed, Collazo looks back with mixed feelings on a career of ups and downs marked by racism, revolution and resilience.

Aged 79, Collazo claims to have a 'very bad memory', which she seeks to refresh with the help of envelopes bulging with photos, publicity posters and magazine covers she pulls from drawers in her small Havana apartment.

They are mementos of a career launched during an artistic explosion that followed the 1959 revolution, in a period of relative liberal expression after decades of a repressive dictatorship.

"I was lucky enough to be there during this period of artistic vitality," the elegant septuagenarian told AFP.

Born in Santiago de Cuba in 1943 but raised in Havana, Collazo was 15 when Fidel Castro's revolution changed the island forever.

Three years later, the daughter of a driver and a housewife decided she wanted to study drama.

"I saw an ad in the newspaper" to study at the National Theater, she recalled. Modern dance was also on offer, and she passed the entry exam for both

# I AM CUBA

disciplines.

When it came to the final choice: "I wanted to be an actress but finally it was dance that seduced me," said Collazo, who went on to have a long career as a dancer and teacher with several companies.

Then, in 1963, her life changed in a chance encounter with the wife of Soviet

cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky on the streets of Havana.

"I used to go every week to get my hair done and as I was in the coffee shop a lady came up and said to me: 'Do you want to make a film?' and I said: 'Oh yes, of course'."

Urusevsky was in Cuba with director Mikhail Kalatozov, recipient of the Palme

**I am very nostalgic looking at these pictures. I think I've been lucky, to have been here and there, to have been a model as well as a dancer**

LUZ MARIA COLLAZO



d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1958. The pair had been entrusted with a joint project of Cuba's ICAIC film institute and Soviet studios to honour the friendship between the communist allies.

**Too 'poetic'**

*Soy Cuba*, which recounts the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista by Castro and his revolutionaries, was filmed in black and white over several months.

Collazo, who said she had been refused many other jobs due to systemic racism in Cuba, played the part of a poor young woman forced to work as a prostitute in casinos.

The movie today is hailed for innovative filming techniques. But when it was released in 1964, it had a cold reception in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis.

Ties between the nations were frosty after Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev withdrew nuclear missiles from the island in a deal with US President John F

Kennedy, without consulting Castro.

In Havana, the film was viewed as too 'poetic', an unrealistic portrayal of the Caribbean island, Collazo recalled.

It was shown for a short period before being withdrawn.

The film also proved unpopular in the USSR, and in the United States it was banned because of its communist origins.

"I was disappointed," said Collazo.

Decades later, the film received a new lease on life after being shown at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado in 1992 in an homage to Kalatozov.

It was discovered by directors Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, who actively promoted it.

A restored version of the film won a prize at Cannes in 2004, and today it is studied as a masterpiece of cinematography at film schools in Europe and the United States.

**Exceptional at the time**

The film's initial box office failure did not deter Collazo from pursuing her destiny.

Years later, she was again stopped on the street: this time by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda - creator of the legendary portrait of Che Guevara.

Korda asked her to pose for him.

"It was exceptional at the time to choose a black woman," said Collazo, who went on to have a successful modeling career that included having her face on ads for Cuban rum.

Today, she is filled with 'sadness' for the passing years and her precarious situation in a Cuba fraught with economic hardship.

"I am very nostalgic looking at these pictures," sighed Collazo.

"I think I've been lucky, to have been here and there, to have been a model as well as a dancer."

AFP

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