

Oman reaffirms legitimacy of Palestinian cause in Egypt

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate affirmed its position in support of the Palestinian cause at a conference that was held by the League of Arab States to support the city of Jerusalem, in Egypt on Sunday.

The conference, which comes in implementation of the recommendations of the recent Algiers Summit, aimed to support the people of Jerusalem and highlight the issue of Palestinians on the world stage.

In a speech, H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, affirmed that the principle of 'land for peace' is adopted by the Arab Peace Initiative to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflict in a permanent and just way.

H E Sayyid Badr stressed on the importance of continuing to



support sustainable development projects in Jerusalem, and emphasised the legitimacy of its people and their right to inhabit the city which are consistent with the rules of international law, and the principles of justice, right and fairness.

At the end of the speech, he said, "I convey a message to the whole world that we are an Arab nation that continues to extend the hand of peace and seek to consolidate it by establishing an independent and fully sovereign Palestinian state

with East Jerusalem as its capital, so that the peoples of the entire region can live in safety, reassurance, stability and prosperity."

The conference was attended by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, King Abdullah

We are an Arab nation that continues to extend the hand of peace and seek to consolidate it by establishing an independent and fully sovereign Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital

H E SAYYID BADR

II bin al Hussein of Jordan, as well as Secretary General of the Arab League and Co-Chair of the conference Ahmed Aboul Gheit and a number of high-level officials from member states.

See also [Page 09](#)



SAYYID SHIHAB RECEIVES TANZANIAN DEFENCE CHIEF

H H Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Al Murtafaa Garrison Gen Jacob Mkunda, Chief of Defence Forces of the United Republic of Tanzania, and his accompanying delegation, on Sunday (ONA)

Al Isra'a Wal Miraj holiday on Feb 19

Muscat - The Ministry of Labour announced that Sunday, Rajab 28, 1444, corresponding to February 19 will be an official holiday for employees of units of the State's

Administrative Apparatus and other legal entities, as well as establishments of the private sector on the occasion of the blessed anniversary of Al Isra'a Wal Miraj.

Oman praised for its handling of COVID-19

Our Correspondent
Muscat

One of the top United Nations experts has praised the efforts of the sultanate in controlling the spread of COVID-19 as well as its ability to recover from the pandemic.

Ted Chaiban, UN Global Lead Coordinator for COVID Vaccine Country Readiness and Delivery, conveyed the eagerness of the international community to co-operate with Oman in its efforts exerted to curb the pandemic and limit its effects.

Chaiban shared his view during a meeting with H E Dr Mohammed bin Awad al Hassan, Permanent Representative of Oman to UN, in New York.

During the meeting, the two reviewed developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chaiban said that the international community has learnt a lot from the pandemic, and has



Ted Chaiban

become more prepared to deal with it and any other in the future.

He also stressed the importance of cooperation between countries, and the need to provide assistance to the least developed and most affected countries, especially those currently undergoing challenges, including Yemen.

RO500 fine for unauthorised use of 'Made in Oman' logo

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Qais al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued a Ministerial Decision (No 62/2023) on national product identity licensing regulations.

The decision seeks to establish a unified national framework for Omani products. Besides unifying the products' marketing identity, the decision is aimed at augmenting competitiveness, enhancing in-country value (ICV) of national products, and raising local and international consumers' awareness on Omani products.

Article 2 of the decision states that all establishments and companies must harmonise their status accordingly within 180 days of the decision coming into effect. It requires all companies to obtain a licence from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and



Investment Promotion to use the national product logo.

According to the decision, the ministry must approve a licence application within 15 days of documents being filed. The licence is valid for three years and renewable.

The decision stated that violators will be subject to a fine of not less than RO500 and/or suspension or cancellation of their commercial licence for a year.

The decision was issued on February 9 and came into effect a day following its publication in the Official Gazette.

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Winter attractions - Camps, festivals and more

Winter in Oman is an exciting time. This winter, festivals have been held in various governorates, including Muscat Nights and Sohar Festival, which in their first editions witnessed diverse activities and thousands of visitors. A five-day off-road multi-sport event concluded in Musandam in November, with thousands participating in adventure sports and enjoying the magnificent mountains and serene sea in the governorate. The second edition of the Empty Quarter Festival of Dhofar was held from January 25 to February 3, while the Buraimi Carnival was held from February 9 to 12.

North Sharqiyah is perfect for outdoor activities during this season. Popular for its golden sand dunes, the governorate hosts a variety of desert camps, which receive tourists from around the world. This year, the Desert Adventure Festival was held in Bidiyah from January 29 to February 3. Winter festivals are good both for the local economy as well as promotion of the country internationally.

Do you think these festivals have helped boost tourism? What else can be done to develop tourism in the governorates? Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers said on the subject -



Rafeeqe Ahmed
Sales executive

Tourism festivals in Oman are not up to the mark. One of the main reasons for this is lack of marketing. Many residents in Oman themselves are not aware about the festivals. The solution is to promote these festivals among residents first, at malls, in newspapers and social media. The place we can promote these festivals most among tourists is at airports and via

tour operators, car rental companies and hotels.

Rashid Khan
Private sector employee

We can include sports in winter tourism festivals. Sports attract people and are good for both the economy and health and fitness of people. There are many sports events taking place in the country, but these are for pros. Sports events must

be held for common people too.

Haitham al Kindi
Businessman

Winter tourism is an excellent idea to promote the country in the international market. However, hotels are too expensive and very few budget alternatives are available. Before attracting tourists, we need to develop motels and accommodation for backpackers.

Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

Yes, it's the beginning of a new trend of attracting tourists to Oman to learn about its rich heritage and culture. Youngsters and students should meet tourists and share their insights on the sultanate. And tourists should be given the opportunity to explore remote areas in the company of senior citizens who will be able to introduce Omani traditions better.

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

Winter festivals will definitely help domestic tourism. Authorities should give more attention to conducting children friendly activities and cultural programmes.

Kiran Choudhury
Homemaker

Tourism festivals in governorates have helped but for more success in each governorate, reasonably priced hotels and villas should be made available. Tourist guides should acquire in-depth knowledge of the region, and traditional culture and food shows should be organised.

NEXT ON YOUR SAY

What has Oman learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic and what can be done to avoid health crises in the future?

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

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

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

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Tender Announcement

Duqm Quarries SAOC is pleased to announce the following tender:

Tender No	Tender Name	Last date for Collecting Documents	Last Date for Submission of Tender	Tender Document Price
DQ/01/2023	Supply and Lease Heavy Machinery Equipment to Al Duqm (Freezone)	16/02/2023	21/02/2023	100 OMR

Tender Conditions:

- Obtaining tender documents from the Department of Administrative Affairs at the company's headquarters located in Airport Heights - DHL Building, Fifth Floor - from 9:00 AM in the morning until 01:00 PM afternoon during official working days.
- Offers shall be submitted in envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to the Honorable Audit Committee Chairman at Duqm Quarries Company. The number and name of the tender shall be written on the outside, provided that the name of the bidder or what he refers to is not written on the envelope.
- A bank guarantee or certified cheque from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate shall be attached to the bid, at a value of 1% of the value of the bid, and it shall be valid for 90 days. Bids that do not meet the guarantee will not be considered.
- The company is not obligated to accept the lowest or any other bid. The company has the right to accept or reject any bid without stating the reason.
- Contact: tenders@duqmquarries.om

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Muscat	25	17
Abu Dhabi	32	17
Doha	29	15
Kuwait City	17	11
Manama	23	16
Riyadh	25	09

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Revenues of star hotels increase 82% to RO185.7mn



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Revenues of 3- to 5-star hotels increased 82.7 per cent to RO185.772mn until the end of December of 2022, compared to the same period of 2021.

According to the latest figures of the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the number of hotel guests in star hotels recorded an increase of 33.6 per cent in 2022, while occupancy rate was 45 per cent, compared to 38.3 per cent in 2021.

GCC citizens were among the top nationalities that visited the sultanate until the end of Decem-

ber 2022, followed by European guests.

The data shows that the number of visitors from the Gulf countries last year witnessed a significant growth of 304 per cent to 39,689 in 2022 from 16,340 in 2021, followed by European guests whose number grew by 241.4 per cent to 36,039.

The data also revealed that the number of Omani guests decreased 14.1 per cent from 814,518 in 2021 to 699,937 in 2022.

The number of American guests was 60,148, registering an increase of 165.4 per cent compared to 2021.

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Two missing fishermen found after 2 days at sea in South Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Two Omani fishermen, who went missing from Al Ashkhara, South Sharqiyah, were found by an Omani fishing boat 180km from the coast on Friday morning.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Ahmed Abdullah al Balushi, Vice-President of Omani Fishermen Association, said, "The two - Rashid Salim Ali al Mardi, 57, and Rashid Salim Rashid al Mardi, 34, set out on a fishing trip from Al Ashkhara on February 8. Unfortunately, their engine failed. Without



any satellite device to contact home, they rowed aimlessly for almost two days without fuel."

He informed that an Omani fishing boat passing by rescued them and alerted the authorities and the fishermen's relatives.

"More than 21 boats participated in a search operation for two days."

According to Balushi, fishermen should follow the marine safety instructions before setting sail. "They should study the area and have safety equipment, first aid kit, life jackets, a paddle in the event of an engine failure, fire-proof blankets, and navigation devices."

Balushi thanked all concerned civil and military authorities and members of the association for their efforts in searching for the missing.

He added that the association and the Ministry of Agriculture,

Fisheries and Water Resources calls on fishermen to instal tracking devices in their boats, urging them to use Thuraya phones that connect to satellites, and to adhere to marine safety instructions to avoid any unfortunate accidents.

Talking about the Omani Fishermen Association's efforts to ensure safety, Balushi said, "The association's specialists hold workshops throughout the year to raise awareness on the importance of following safety instructions and conduct training programmes to help ensure fish quality by proper storage of catch."

Pact signed to develop 150-room hotel in Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and Eagle Hills - an Abu Dhabi-based real estate investment and development company - signed an agreement on Sunday to develop the Mandarin Oriental Muscat in Shatti al Qurum.

The five-star property, with 150 rooms and 156 high-end full-service residences, is a model integrated tourism complex featuring facilities both for recreation and business. The hotel is expected to open in the third quarter of 2024.

The agreement was signed

Mandarin Oriental Muscat in Shatti al Qurum is expected to open in Q3 2024

by H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, and Mohammed Abdul Hameed al Busaidi and Sheikh Mubarak bin Ali al Khalifa, members of the Board of Directors of Eagles Hills Muscat, a partnership between Eagle Hills Abu Dhabi and Oman's Izz International.

TURKISH EMBASSY PRESSES AHEAD WITH COLLECTING DONATIONS

The Turkish Embassy in Muscat is continuing in earnest its campaign of collecting donations for quake victims in Turkey. The number of people killed has risen to more than 28,000 in Turkey and Syria. In a statement, the Turkish embassy said that it needs volunteers to help pack the donated food items, while appealing for donations of winter tents, generators, gas heaters, sleeping bags and blankets (VK Shafeer)



RO41mn water project opened in Jabal Akhdar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (OWWSC) celebrated the opening of a RO41mn water supply project in Jabal Akhdar recently.

The event, which was held in Jabal Akhdar, was presided over by H E Khalfan bin Saeed al Shuaili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, in the presence of a number of senior officials, dignitaries and invitees.

On the occasion, Ahmed bin Nasser al Abri, Acting General Manager for Plants and Transmissions Project at OWWSC, stated, "The project will provide 1.760mn gallons of water per day to the wilayat. The company has completed all works, including pumping stations, main lines and supply pipelines."

The project is considered one of the most important undertaken by the company as it crosses rugged terrain and steep slopes.

It consists of six pumping sta-



tions and four main water reservoirs of capacity ranging from 1,800m³ to 5,000m³. Additionally, it includes 23 sites for pressure equalisation devices to ensure stability of operational pressure of its water distribution network around the clock.

The project consists of 36km

of main water transmission pipelines, in addition to 248km of water supply networks, to serve all villages and communities in the wilayat. The project also includes an integrated administrative building and advanced systems for water sterilisation and quality control.

MoL launches training for 156 jobseekers in N Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) began a training programme called 'Tamkeen Sahim' in North Batinah on Sunday.

The five-day programme is the third in the governorate and targets 156 youth, who will be appointed in various jobs following the training period.

The programme seeks to hone the skills of trainees in areas such as defining personal goals, career planning, communications, mastering functional skills and 4IR skills, developing positive behaviour, and improving productivity and leadership skills.

Tamkeen Sahim is an empowerment programme that stems from Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq to consolidate decentralisation, develop governorates, encourage the utilisation of expertise and open up new vistas for investment.

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Companies specialized in the field and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	No E-Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/22/069	2022/MM/QS-44 Re-Call-1	Site preparation for street vendors in Wilayat AL Amarat (Almahajj) (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	First
PRE/22/094	2022/MM/QS-58 Re-Call-1	Supply of Equipments and hearse (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	20/02/2023	28/02/2023	Specialist
PRE/22/121	2022/MM/HQ-14 Re-Call-2	Design & Construction of Storm Water Drainage in Wilayat Boshier (Re-Tender)	Rail 47	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	First
PRE/22/130	2022/MM/QS-75 Re-Call-2	Design & Construction of Car Parking at Bousher HTS, Lump Sum Contract (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	First
PRE/22/152	2022/MM/QS-82 Re-Call-2	Construction of Proposed Solution to Resolve storm Water in Hail North Wilayat AL Seeb (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	First
PRE/22/165	2022/MM/QS-88 Re-Call-1	Rehabilitation Works at Mutairah Roundabout in Mutrah (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	First
PRE/23/009	2023/MM/QS-10	Supply of and Installation of LED Street Light at Boshier	Rail 25	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	Specialist
PRE/23/021	2023/MM/QS-11	Supply and Installation of LED Street Light and Cloud based at Al Amerat	Rail 25	06/03/2023	27/03/2023	Specialist

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mteit.gov.om) or call (+96824402200).
- For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+96824402200/24402330).



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Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Moody's cuts Ukraine debt rating but outlook 'stable'

Moody's said it has downgraded Ukraine's debt rating over a protracted war with Russia, but shifted its outlook from negative to stable.

The ratings agency cut the grade a notch to 'Ca' from 'Caa3', a rating that suggests a near-default state - close to a year since Russia's invasion.

The downgrade is "driven by the effects of the war with Russia that are likely to pose long-lasting challenges to Ukraine's economy and public finances," said Moody's Investors Service in a statement.

"These challenges increase risks to government debt sustainability, making a debt restructuring with significant losses for private-sector creditors very likely," it added.

Dhofar International eyes merger with OIFC

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dhofar International Development & Investment Holding Company (DIDIC) has shown its intention to explore the possibility of a merger with Oman Investment & Finance Company (OIFC).

'The board of directors of Dhofar International Development & Investment Holding Company in its meeting held on February 11, 2023 resolved to send a letter of intent to the board of directors of OIFC to explore the possibility of a merger between the two entities,' DIDIC said in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange on Sunday.

The possible merger could be 'in a deal which would involve OIFC shareholders being offered shares in DIDIC,' the company said.

The proposed merger is subject to obtaining final approvals from the respective boards of directors, relevant regulators and shareholders, DIDIC noted.

In a separate disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange, OIFC confirmed that it received a letter on Sunday from DIDIC expressing its desire to merger with OIFC by the way of incorporation.

'The board of directors of the



DIDIC and OIFC both are listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange

company [OIFC] will study the offer and obtain the necessary information in connection with the proposed merger,' OIFC said in its disclosure to the local bourse.

'If the parties agree to proceed with the merger, it will be subject to various conditions, including without limitation, approval of the relevant regulatory authorities and of the shareholders of both companies,' OIFC said.

The company added that further announcement on any material developments will be made in due course.

DIDIC is one of the largest in-

Fitch affirms Omantel at 'BB', keeps outlook stable

Fitch Ratings has affirmed Oman Telecommunications Company's (Omantel) long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating (IDR) at 'BB' with a stable outlook.

Omantel's rating remains constrained by Oman's sovereign rating as a government-related entity (GRE). 'This reflects that 51 per cent of the company is directly or indirectly owned by the Omani government, which consequently exerts strong control over it,' Fitch said.

The rating agency said Omantel's 'bbb-' standalone credit profile (SCP) is higher than its IDR. 'This reflects a balance of its leading market share in its domestic market, low leverage and the elevated competitive risks in a mature market following the entrance of Vodafone Oman in 2022,' Fitch said.

Fitch said that its assessment of Omantel's overall government linkage is strong under its GRE methodology.

'We view the status, ownership and control factors as well as the financial implications of default as strong. The state appoints the majority of the board of directors and has a direct influence on the company's strategic direction. The track record of support is also strong, evidenced by Omantel's regional expansion,' the rating agency said.

It said, 'We assess the socio-



political implications of default as moderate, in line with regional peers. We assess Omantel's SCP at 'bbb-', anchored by a strong domestic competitive position, good liquidity position in an increasingly competitive market.'

Fitch noted that the sale and leaseback of Omantel's head-office and 2,519 of its mobile towers in 2022 will lead to significant deleveraging as proceeds will be used to repay debt.

'We view passive mobile towers as non-core assets, similar to office buildings. The sale of towers to Helios Towers does not change our view of Omantel's operating risk profile but improves financial flexibility. Helios will fund the capex for

IEA calls special meeting as gas crisis 'not over'

Paris, France – The International Energy Agency convoked a special meeting of energy ministers for urgent consultations on natural gas supplies.

The meeting, to be held on Wednesday by video conference, is the first such special IEA ministerial meeting recent history.

The IEA provides policy advice to energy consuming nations but also helps coordinate the use of the emergency oil stocks held by its 31 member nations. IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said the measures taken following Russia's invasion of Ukraine helped European nations whether Russia cutting off most of its gas supplies.



Fatih Birol

"But the crisis is not over and more needs to be done, particularly to get ready for next winter," he said.

"We are convening this ministerial because there is a continued need for our members and

other partners to show solidarity with one another and to take concrete steps to ensure security of supply," he added.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent reduction of gas supplies as Western nations imposed sanctions caused energy prices to spike.

As European nations turned to liquefied natural gas shipments, prices paid by nations across the world jumped.

Prices have subsequently dropped from peaks set last year as relatively warm weather helped European nations make it through the winter without feared shortages or cuts in service.

AFP

Oil prices rise as Russia cuts output

London, UK – Oil contracts rebounded after Russia announced it would slash its crude output in response to a Western price cap that was imposed on exports after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Brent, the international benchmark, and its US counterpart WTI, which had been down earlier in the day, jumped more than two per cent on Friday after Russian deputy prime minister Alexander Novak said production would be cut by 500,000 barrels per day, or five per cent of output, in March.

"Crude prices reacted positively to the news, considering that so far Russian oil production has been relatively resilient," said UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo.

"The move... aims to improve



oil revenues by narrowing the discount of Russian oil to Brent."

Global benchmark Brent crude rose 2.2 per cent at US\$86.39 per barrel, while

West Texas Intermediate gained 2.1 per cent at US\$79.72 per barrel.

An EU-wide ban on Russian oil products – like diesel, gasoline

and jet fuel – came into effect Sunday alongside a Group of Seven (G7) price cap on the same items.

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

Oil, already bolstered by the reopening of top consumer China after lengthy pandemic restrictions, rebounded further on the news from Novak, who in charge of Moscow's energy policy.

Russia is part of a 23-nation alliance with the OPEC crude cartel that already agreed in October to reduce output by two million barrels per day until the end of this year.

AFP

AI chatbots supercharge battle of web search titans

Paris, France – A new generation of AI chatbots has unleashed a titanic battle between Microsoft and Google for the eyeballs of billions of web users, and the dollars they bring.

Microsoft has gone all-in with a multibillion-dollar investment in OpenAI, the firm behind the world's most buzzy bot ChatGPT, hoping to revolutionise its unloved Bing search engine.

Google has owned the search market for two decades and is not ceding any ground - it hit back this week with an in-house bot of its own, called Bard.

And the AI gold rush is not limited to Silicon Valley search giants, Chinese firm Baidu announcing its own bot this week.

But what exactly is the fight about?

Big tech firms have spent years ripping unimaginable

amounts of data from the internet and churning it into so-called large language models that they use to train algorithms.

This is how voice recognition tools like Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri or Google Assistant work.

Google and Facebook owner Meta have poured their efforts into tools that can translate hundreds of languages, screen for harmful content, or target users with personalised ads.

Yet the fundamentals of search have remained largely unchanged.

You punch a few words into Google and it spits back a mix of useful links and often less useful ads.

But if AI has its way, these familiar pages of blue links could soon be just another dusty corner of internet history.

Microsoft hopes that beef-



Yusuf Mehdi, Microsoft corporate vice president speaks during a keynote address announcing ChatGPT integration for Bing at Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, on February 7 (AFP)

ing up Bing with ChatGPT-like qualities will radically update online search by providing ready-made answers using multiple sources instead of the familiar list of links to outside websites.

In its new format, Bing would review results from across the web and summarize

them instead of merely presenting a list of links that the user must click and choose from.

"We applied the AI model to our core search ranking engine, and we saw the largest jump in relevance in two decades," said Yusuf Mehdi, a Microsoft vice president.

'Relegated to history'

"A tool like ChatGPT can create search engines that give a structured answer to questions instead of simply a list of documents like Google does at the moment," said Thierry Poibeau of French research institute CNRS.

What that means in practice is that future search engines will not produce lists of links - instead they will give the user coherent and full answers using multiple sources.

Neeva, a search engine that markets itself as privacy friendly, is already pushing this kind of experience.

Neeva founder Sridhar Ramaswamy, a former Google executive, told AFP that smaller companies were much better placed to innovate.

"We use large language models to look at all of the pages that are going to result for a query and show you a summary, and then show you a very rich visual experience," he said.

Like many analysts, Ramaswamy was highly critical of his former firm's obsession with ads, which he claimed was ruining the experience of users.

Industry analyst Rob Enderle

said Google's search business risked being torpedoed by innovations in AI.

"Google still largely lives off the fact their search engine is the most widely used," he said.

But these changes could "relegate them to history".

However, there is still a long way to go before AI chatbots successfully wed themselves to search engines. "Tools like ChatGPT provide the illusion of an all-knowing being answering your questions, but that's not true," said Claude de Loupy of French AI text firm Syllabs.

Social media is overflowing with comical examples of ChatGPT's failings, not least its lack of ability in basic maths.

It has also been accused of bias after it refused to generate a poem praising Donald Trump but was more than happy to pen a paean to his successor as US president, Joe Biden.

AFP

UK avoids recession but 'not out of woods' over inflation

London, UK – Britain's economy has narrowly avoided recession, official data showed, but finance minister Jeremy Hunt warned it was "not out of the woods yet" over surging inflation.

Gross domestic product registered zero growth in the final quarter of last year, in line with expectations after shrinking 0.3 per cent in the previous three months, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said.

Britain's flat growth in the fourth quarter contrasted with Europe's biggest economy Germany, whose GDP shrank 0.2 per cent in the same period on fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Overall, the UK economy expanded 4.1 per cent last year after growth of 7.4 per cent in 2021, the ONS added in a statement.

Sky-high consumer prices have sparked a cost-of-living crisis in Britain – and mass strikes.

Transport walkouts weighed on December's output, the data showed.

"We are not out of the woods yet, particularly when it comes to inflation," Hunt said, but he noted that "our economy is more resilient than many feared".

'No celebrating in street'

The technical definition of a recession is two straight quarters



People look at Canary Wharf financial district, from Greenwich Park, south east London, on Friday (AFP)

of negative growth.

"While we can't slap the badge of recession on the economy, it's clear the UK is struggling and everyone is feeling the effect of the malaise in the country's economy," said AJ Bell analyst Laura Suter.

"This economic no-man's land of no contraction or no growth won't have people celebrating in the street."

Bank of England (BoE) governor Andrew Bailey on Friday expressed concern over persistently high inflation even if the rate of price increases shows signs of cooling.

His remarks to a cross-party committee of MPs raised expectations of more hikes to British interest rates, analysts said.

At its most recent regular monetary policy meeting last week, the BoE hiked its interest rate for a 10th time in a row as global authorities race to combat runaway inflation.

The bank lifted UK borrowing costs by a half-point to four per cent, the highest level since late 2008 during the global financial crisis.

That ramped up mortgage and other loan repayments, weighing heavily on economic

activity and worsening the cost-of-living crisis.

Those who have spare cash to save, however, are gaining from rate rises.

Soaring inflation

UK inflation slowed to 10.5 per cent in December – still around 40-year highs and more than five times the BoE's official target-level of two percent.

Central banks the world over are seeking to cool high energy and food prices, fuelled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine one year ago, by hiking interest rates.

Conservative Prime Minister

Rishi Sunak, whose government is partially subsidising energy bills for businesses and households, has vowed to halve UK inflation this year – although much is down to central bank policy and market forces.

Sunak is seeking to turn around his government's currently dismal fortunes before a general election expected next year.

The Conservatives – in power since 2010 – are trailing the main opposition Labour party by wide margins, polls show.

Recession still looms – the BoE last week said the UK economy would shrink in every quarter of 2023.

"We suspect the drags from high inflation and high interest rates will trigger a recession this year," Capital Economics analyst Paul Dales said Friday.

The International Monetary Fund delivered another blow to Sunak when it predicted the UK would be the only country in the group of seven rich nations with negative growth in 2023.

The UK in 2020 suffered the biggest contraction among the G7 owing to Covid fallout. The nation is also the only G7 member that has not yet returned to its pre-pandemic level of output.

British economic activity is 0.8 percent below its 2019 level, the ONS confirmed Friday.

AFP



US trade deficit widens in 2022 to record on imports

Washington, US – The US trade gap widened to a record in 2022, though expanding less than expected in December, government data said, capping off the year on robust imports and strong spending.

The overall trade gap grew US\$103.0bn from 2021 to US\$948.1bn last year, according to Commerce Department data, on a surge in goods imports ranging from crude oil to consumer items like pharmaceuticals and household products.

This marks the biggest deficit in government data dating back to 1960.

Analysts note that trade has been a swing factor in GDP growth over the last year, bogging it down in the early months of 2022 but providing a boost later on.

In December, the trade deficit expanded US\$6.4bn to US\$67.4bn, said the Commerce Department.

US imports rose US\$4.2bn from November to December, hitting US\$317.6bn on greater spending on consumer goods such as cell phones and other household goods as well as automotive vehicles.

Exports slipped US\$2.2bn to US\$250.2bn in December, dragged by a fall in goods exports such as industrial supplies and materials.

The latest figures come as households shift more spending to services instead of goods, with consumers grappling with persistently high inflation.

For all of 2022, the deficit with China widened by US\$29.4bn to US\$382.9bn in 2022, on higher imports.

"Net trade has been a significant swing factor in headline GDP growth over the past year," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist of Pantheon Macroeconomics in a recent note.

AFP

TotalEnergies posts record \$20.5bn profit in 2022

Paris, France – France's TotalEnergies said that high oil and gas prices bolstered its net profit to a record US\$20.5bn in 2022 and announced higher dividend payments for shareholders.

The 28 per cent gain would have been much higher save for the nearly US\$15bn in charges linked to its leaving the Russian market, with adjusted profits excluding such exceptional items rising to US\$36.2bn.

Nevertheless, the surge in oil and natural gas prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Western sanctions was a major boost for TotalEnergies, as it was for its



rivals.

The massive profits have sparked renewed debate about taxing windfall earnings to help fund measures to protect consumers from rampant inflation, including soaring energy prices.

TotalEnergies' strong presence in the liquefied natural gas market also helped as European nations sought supplies from further afield after Russia

cut supplies by pipeline.

"The company took full advantage of its global LNG portfolio," chief executive Patrick Pouyanne said in a statement.

TotalEnergies reported a 22 per cent jump in LNG sales in the final three months of last year compared to the same period in 2021. That helped drive an 11 per cent gain in overall adjusted profits for the quarter to US\$7.6bn, though Russia-related charges reduced that to US\$3.3bn on a net basis.

The company increased final dividend payments for 2022, and said it could boost returns to shareholders even further this year.

AFP

Nissan keeps annual profits forecasts

Tokyo, Japan – Nissan has maintained its full-year profit forecasts, saying chip shortages and other Covid disruptions would hit sales volumes but that it would fight back through "strict financial discipline".

The Japanese auto giant, which this week signed a landmark deal rebalancing its fraught alliance with Renault, predicted more production setbacks due to the shortage of semiconductors plaguing the industry.

The carmaker trimmed its annual unit sales target by eight percent to 3.4mn vehicles, with chief operating officer Ashwani Gupta telling reporters the declines would be felt mainly in China and North America.

He struck an optimistic tone, however, saying that "I think the US is absolutely okay, and China, we will recover".

"Definitely what we are seeing



This picture taken on February 4, 2023 shows signage of Nissan Motor at the company's head office in Yokohama, Japan (AFP)

today, in the month of February, (is) that markets are coming back," he said.

Nissan said it still expects a net profit of 155bn yen (US\$1.2bn) in the 2022-23 financial year, and also left its operating income outlook unchanged on Thursday. "Strong currency fluctuations and increases in raw material prices" as well as the spread of Covid-19 infections in China are among the headwinds

the company faces, it said.

But in the January-March quarter, Nissan "expects to offset the negative impact of volume decline by continued improvement in performance with strict financial discipline".

Net profit in the nine-month period to December tumbled 43 per cent year-on-year to 115bn yen, despite the positive impact of a weaker yen, which inflates profits for exporters.

But in the third quarter, net profit jumped 55 per cent compared to the same period the previous year.

Despite the "very challenging business environment" in the third quarter, "the new models we introduced in each market have been very well received by customers, and we are feeling a strong response for the future", CEO Makoto Uchida said in a statement.

The results come hot on the heels of a landmark deal rebalancing Nissan's fraught alliance with its French partner Renault.

The revamped partnership, signed earlier this week, will end Renault's decades-long dominance over Nissan that has often been dubbed the "unequal treaty", slashing its share in the Japanese company to 15 per cent from 43.4 per cent.

AFP

Europe looks to geothermal energy as natural gas alternative

Munich, Germany – The heating plant in Munich's southern Sendling neighbourhood has been run for more than a century on gas, often imported from far away.

But increasingly, it is the hot waters from deep underground the station that provide the energy.

Tacked on to the side of the original 19th-century red-brick plant is a boxy new geothermal unit surrounded by a tangle of pipes.

Work on the new installation started in 2016 and it opened in 2021, before Russia launched its assault on Ukraine and shut the pipelines to Europe.

But the timely opening of the modern unit -- one of the largest of its kind in Europe -- is a happy coincidence for the city, which like the rest of the country is facing the challenge of making up for lost Russian gas supplies.

'Perfect location'

Munich is pouring in one billion euros (US\$1.1bn) through 2035 to develop the geothermal energy and make the city's heating carbon neutral.

"We're sitting on a gold mine," says Christian Peltl, director of geothermal energy at SWR, the operator of the plant in Sendling.

"Munich has the perfect geological location" in a region known for its thermal baths, Peltl says.

Everywhere in Europe, interest in geothermal projects has grown in recent years as officials search for ways to decarbonise their energy systems.

The conflict in Ukraine has reinforced the trend. Moscow's invasion last year brought Russian gas deliveries to Europe to a shuddering halt and triggered an alarming spike in energy costs across Europe.

After a heady peak, prices on



Germany has announced plan to increase production of geothermal energy tenfold by 2030 to 10 terawatt hours

the spot market have fallen in recent weeks. But the crisis has underscored the vulnerabilities of the continent in the area of energy.

Reliable and sustainable geothermal energy seems like the perfect alternative to gas.

Piping hot thermal waters are

pumped up from three kilometres (1.9 miles) below the surface. The heat is transferred into the local network, which connects nearby homes to the plant, while the cooled thermal waters are sent back underground.

"There was really a boom in orders since the beginning of the

(energy) crisis," says Peltl.

At the end of 2022, the German government published a plan to increase the production of geothermal energy tenfold by 2030 to 10 terawatt hours (Twh).

To reach the ambitious target, Germany, which uses gas for 50

per cent of its heating, wants to start "at least 100 new geothermal projects".

Across the border in France, the government published a plan Thursday to increase the number of deep geothermal energy schemes by 40 per cent by 2030.

In Hungary, the government issued a decree in October to expand use of the energy source.

The Italian government is also gearing up to support expansion, while in Denmark, the largest plant in the country is set to open in Aarhus in 2030, supplying 20 per cent of the city's heating.

'Boom'

Once fully operational, the new plant in Munich will be able to supply up to 80,000 local homes with warmth via a sprawling network of pipes.

The station is largely automated, with its operation controlled from a room in the older part of the edifice.

While geothermal energy is a boon to those who can access it, "it is only part of the solution", says Thomas Gilg, head of the Munich plant.

Not everywhere is suited to geothermal energy. Above all else, the energy drawn from below the surface has to be used locally.

"We must not fool ourselves. With this plant we cannot supply the whole of Munich," says Gilg.

Excavation works to install a plant in Strasbourg, France, were blamed for two minor earthquakes felt in the area at the end of 2020.

Nonetheless, the Sendling plant operators see the potential as "massive", according to Peltl.

According to the European Commission, geothermal energy could provide carbon-free heating for "up to 25 per cent" of residents in the EU.

AFP

Domestic cricket gets a boost

Oman Cricket (OC) has been keen to rope in corporate support for the development of the game in the Sultanate of Oman.

The untiring efforts of OC has met with success and the latest partnership agreement between the cricket governing body of Oman and Credit Oman will give further boost to the domestic league, a press release said.

OC recently unveiled Credit Oman as the sponsors of the C, D and E Division leagues for the 2022-23 season. Credit Oman is a Muscat-based three-decade old company and over the years has shaped domestic trade and catalysed exports from Oman to regional and international markets as a leading credit insurer, fully owned by the government.

Welcoming on board Credit Oman, Alkesh Joshi, OC's treasurer, said, "We are delighted to have Credit Oman join the Oman Cricket family as our title sponsors for the C, D E divisions. These divisions serve as a refinery to produce the talent pool of cricketers in Oman. I am looking forward to the talented players to represent the country. We certainly feel overwhelmed when corporates like Credit Oman come on board to develop the game as part of their Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) programme."

Duleep Mendis, OC's chief development officer, added, "I



would like to extend my thanks to Credit Oman in supporting domestic cricket in the Sultanate of Oman. This backing will enable us to facilitate and enhance the quality of cricket at the grassroots level. We are looking forward to fructify this association in its best way in the future."

Mohammed Hilal al Jabri, Credit Oman director of sales, said, "We are delighted to be associated with the second most popular sport across the globe through Oman Cricket. The partnership serves as our means to contribute towards sports and youth in Oman. We are basically

trying to focus at the grassroots level in the domestic cricket. We are grateful to Oman Cricket for giving us an opportunity to be part of cricket fraternity in the Sultanate of Oman. The sponsorship will also allow Credit Oman to extend their CSR programme by investing in sports and youth

in Oman."

The official signing ceremony was held recently at the Oman Cricket Academy with Joshi, representing Oman Cricket, and Jabri, representing Credit Oman, inking the agreement in the presence of Mendis, Vaishali Jesrani, advisor to OC, and other officials.

Sayyid Khalid to preside over KO seminar

Knowledge Oman is all set to organise its up-coming public seminar on 'The impact of Social Media on the Omani community' at Muscat University in Al Ghubra on February 15. The public free event will be presided over by Sayyid Khalid bin Hamad bin Hamood al Busaidi.

"We have received lots of positive responses from the society on our last seminar that revolved around Women contribution in society. This time, our public seminar will focus on the impact of social media in the Omani community, and we are proud to host Sayyid Khalid as the guest of honour for this event" said Balqeas al Hassani, Knowledge Oman president.

The 'Impact on Social Media in Omani Community' seminar will include a diverse panel of thought leaders, IT experts, sport professionals and educators, to address topics such as social media trends, the impact of technology on changing business and so-



Sayyid Khalid al Busaidi

cial networking, the use of social media within sports and how it has changed the face of media.

The event aims to equip the public with an understanding of different social media tools and platforms and their impact on society, business and the economy - recognising that the interconnected nature of social media and online communities benefits the fields of marketing, finance and IT, and forms the foundation of the digital economy.

M E drifter creates OI DC history

A total of 44 drivers competed in the qualifiers on February 9, with a selection of the top 32 taking part in finals the next day at the Muscat Drift Arena.

First place winner in the International and MENA category, Ali Makhseed said, "I feel great. I feel relieved. Like a huge weight has been lifted off of my shoulders."

The winners for Round 3 of the Oman International Drift Championship (OIDC) are as follows:

International: Ali Makhseed (1st), Nasser al Harbaly (2nd), Ahmed Al Amri (3rd)

MENA: Ali Makseed (1st), Ahmed al Amri (2nd), Ahmed Daham (3rd)

National: Ahmed al Amri (1st), Refaat al Yahhaie (2nd), Tariq al Shaihani (3rd)

Ali Makhseed said, "OIDC is always a struggle with the competition being really high and the tracks always technical, so it's just not easy to get the top spot here. For me to be in this position is a great achievement and we made history today as I'm the first middle-eastern participant to get first place in the international category in the OIDC.

"That's always been a target and we finally achieved that goal and it puts us in a really good spot in the overall championship fight. Hopefully, in next round we can seal the deal and win the championship."

"The track is the most technical layout ever designed in OIDC, which was really fun for us drivers and the teams as well, to adapt to and get the right driving style. So the best team, the best driver and the best car won today and I'm thankful for that," he said.



Celebrate Valentine's Day at W Muscat on February 14

For couples whose love language is food, music and a spa treat, W Muscat is where you should head on February 14.

To make your February feel extra special this year, W Muscat is offering a WET DECK Valentine offer through the month. The RO10 day pass will

include credit for food and beverage as well, a press release said. For the same amount every Friday, guests can also attend the SUN CHASER (event) where they can experience great music sessions by DJ Arun and Jennifer Dons.

'Celebrate love at Siddharta

Lounge by Buddha Bar and relish a musically enriched romantic dinner for RO60 from 6 PM to 12 AM. Here you can indulge in our curated set menu, sip on signature cocktails, and let our DJ and saxophonist set the mood with their smooth beats,' the release added.

Starcare to provide 'Health Tickets'



Starcare Hospitals and Salam Air have come together to serve patients in Muscat, from different countries and different parts of Oman, with a 'Starcare Health Ticket' programme.

'Starcare Health Ticket' programme offers various surgery packages to people who want to come to Oman for their medical treatment. The surgery package will also cover two way air-ticket free of cost to the patient, a press

release said.

Starcare Health Ticket services covers high-end surgeries like bariatric surgery, head and neck surgery, laser treatments, and laparoscopic surgeries.

Currently this service will be launched in Salalah.

(People who want to travel to Muscat for high-end and advanced treatments can contact Starcare Hospitals Al Seeb +968 98088705)



Celebrate Valentine's at Radisson Hotel

Radisson Hotel Group, Oman, is the perfect setting for you to celebrate the day of love. From Muscat to Duqm, Radisson Hotels invite guests to enjoy the most romantic day of the year with exclusive dining offers.

'A spectacular multi-course meal is the perfect backdrop to spark conversation, enjoy the warmth of romance and create memorable moments to cherish for years to come. Plan an indulgent culinary surprise for your loved one at one of Radisson's properties across Oman; an endless variety of amazing Valentine's dinner offerings await you,' a press release said.

ISWK bids farewell to Class 12 of 2022-23 on Feb 2

Indian School al Wadi al Kabir (ISWK) bid a fond farewell to the students of class 12 of the outgoing batch of 2022-23, at the senior school campus on February 2.

Praveen Kumar, chief finance officer, OHI Group of Companies, was the chief guest for the evening's programme. Other dignitaries present at the ceremony were Anil Khimji, chief patron, Kiran Asher, group managing director at Al Ansari Group of Companies, Rajendra Ved, executive director of ISWK and ISWK International school management committees, and Alkesh Joshi, hon president of the school management committee of ISWK.

The highlight of the graduation ceremony was an announcement about the initiation of the Kanaksi Khimji Merit Scholarship to recognise students for excellence in Academics, Sports and Co-curricular activities respectively. Recipients of the scholarship from class XII



this year were Ashly Skariah, Kris Thomas, Drisya Manoj, Bri-jesh Kara S, Pranav Jois and

Shaan Shetal Vora (Academics), Lael Alva, Khushi Dilipkumar Deraí and Pavan Sundar (Co-

scholastic), and Dhruvi and Purva Dilip Somvanshi (Games and Sports). A total of 42 stu-

dents have been identified as winners of the prestigious scholarships across classes VI to XII.

Oman backs WHO report on trans-fat elimination

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Department of Nutrition in the Ministry of Health, participated in the launching of the World Health Organization (WHO) 2022 report on trans-fat elimination, which was held virtually under the chair Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus - director general of WHO.

The meeting began with a speech by the WHO director of Nutrition and Food Safety, followed by an address by Dr Ghebreyesus, who emphasised that there is no health benefit from the industrially produced trans-fatty acids (TFA). They thanked all countries that responded to this global goal and encouraged other countries to eliminate trans-fat.

Many countries of the world have taken additional measures to eliminate industrially produced TFA, including India, which introduced, in January 2022, a number of policies and practices to eliminate trans-fat, as well as Uruguay in May 2022, and the Sultanate of Oman in July 2022, besides several other countries.

Mazda 6 provides 'ultimate driving'

Mazda has long been known for producing cars that deliver a thrilling driving experience, and the Mazda 6 is no exception. With its elegant design, advanced technology, and powerful performance, this car is packed with features and performance capabilities that make it a true standout in its class.

The Mazda 6 is the perfect choice for premium car enthusiasts in Oman who want a car that not only looks great but also drives great, a press release said.

From the moment you first lay your eyes on the Mazda 6, you'll know that this is a car that's been designed with style and elegance in mind. The sleek, aerodynamic Mazda 6 exterior is sure to turn heads, while the spacious and well-appointed interior provides the perfect blend of comfort and luxury. The Mazda 6 technology features are also top-notch, every aspect of the Mazda 6 has been designed to deliver a driving experience that's second to none.

The Mazda 6 exterior design is simply stunning. With a sleek and streamlined body, an eye-catching front grille, and distinctive LED headlights, this car is sure to turn heads wherever it



goes. The Mazda 6 interior is equally impressive, with spacious and upscale cabin, high-quality materials and finishes, advanced technology and information features that make every journey a pleasure.

The infotainment system in the Mazda 6 is one of its most impressive features. The system

is designed to be user-friendly and intuitive, making it easy for drivers / passengers to access all the information and entertainment they need while driving on

the road. It features a large touchscreen display that is easy to read and navigate.

You can access a range of features, including navigation, music

streaming, phone connectivity, and climate control, with just a few taps. With built-in voice control, you can keep your eyes on the road and hands on the wheel.



IOC Events, Bhavalaya to host two events

International Organisation Creative Events (IOC Events) and Bhavalaya Art and Culture Foundation have joined hands to promote various art events, educational programmes, human resources development, various

entertainment and creative activities in Oman.

The major two events planned this year include an 'HR confluence' in June, aimed at orienting and developing Human Resources to improve their efficiency and effectiveness, and a drama titled *Ithihasam* - a journey into the life and works of legendary dramatist William Shakespeare.

The drama will be directed by Rajesh Balakrishnan, and assisted by Amrithpal and Rajesh Kayamkulam while Sujathan will do the stage craft.

The lead role will be played by Biju Vargees and the drama will have more than 40 actors and crew.

The book released last week by H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India, deals with stories shared by people from Canada, the USA to Europe, and from the Middle East, India, to Oceania about the different ways in which COVID-19 and the Lockdown

ISG teacher launches book on 'lockdown experiences'

When you are locked inside a room with the key in the hands of destiny, then how do you feel? Overwhelmed? Optimistic? Hopeful? Frightened? Panicked? Or just leave it to the Almighty and fight back to open that door again?

If you really wish to know what children and adults across the world went through during the COVID-19 pandemic, an experience of a century, then the book 'Locked in But Not Down' by Samita Chakraborty provides interesting insights into real-life experiences of students and young adults from around the world.

The book released last week by H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India, deals with stories shared by people from Canada, the USA to Europe, and from the Middle East, India, to Oceania about the different ways in which COVID-19 and the Lockdown



impacted those regions and their lives.

The book is not just a treasure trove of unheard stories but will remain as a document for youngsters and their resilience and thoughts in the face of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Such events come once in a century, COVID-19 rocked the very root of human existence, yet we won in the end

and life limps back to normal, as we step into the new year. But this book is a must-read for years to come, for future generations, to be preserved in schools and libraries as a motivation for the future generation, the author says.

The book is available on Amazon and Flipkart, Kobo books, Booktopia, Barner and Nobles, besides the Kindle version.

Italian Chef Emiliano back at Tomato

Hotel InterContinental Muscat is pleased to announce the appointment of renowned Italian chef, Emiliano Di Stefano as Executive Sous Chef and culinary leader of Tomato Italian restaurant.

Chef Emiliano's career exposed him over the past 22 years to many different countries and regions, like England, France, Maldives, China and India, which expanded his culinary creativity and knowledge and generated fascinating stories around his



signature dishes. He is no stranger to Oman as this is his second assignment at the hotel.

"I am super excited to be back and working with such friendly people and the most talented team in this most beautiful country," he says.

Besides keeping traditional Italian dishes truly authentic, he shows a strong commitment to sustainability and locally sourced ingredients and he will be working closely with local farmers and suppliers to ensure that the restaurant produces dishes from only the freshest and most responsibly-sourced ingredients.

Austrian embassy presents 'Growth'

The Austrian embassy in Oman, in collaboration with Stal Gallery and Studio, presents a cross-cultural initiative, stimulating a dialogue between both countries, through an interactive art programme at Stal Gallery to mark 50 years of diplomatic relations.

'Growth' is a cross-cultural programme to be inaugurated on February 14 at 7pm and followed by an Art Talk on February 15 at 6 pm, a press release said.

The opening ceremony will be held under the auspices of H E Christian Brunmayr, Ambassador of Austria, in the presence of H E Sayyid Saeed bin Sultan al Busaidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, who will be the guest of honour.

The programme is curated by Austrian artist Marjan Habibian, and features artworks of Austrian artists Elisabeth Gschiel, Marlene Gollner, Walter Kratner and Marjan Habibian.

OGA receives financial boost

In conjunction with the start of the 2023 International Series season in Oman, the elevated series has announced its intent on developing golf in the sultanate with a US\$25,000 donation.

As part of the Asian Tour's commitment through the series, it has pledged to support the Oman Golf Association (OGA) development programmes with its donation.

Taking place at the award winning Al Mouj Golf, local children and women were invited to help promote the initiatives that aim to contribute and drive participation in the region, whilst also focusing further on Oman's 2040 Vision.

Having been introduced to Oman in the 1970's, golf is still a very young sport to Omanis, and through events such as the International Series it's already having a significant impact on tourism, investment, and youth development in the country.

Chairman of OGA, Mundhir al Barwani said, "The Oman Golf Association has set out to grow participation and already has a series of events in place throughout the year for junior golfers, as well as an introductory programme for Omani women disabled children.

This wonderful contribution from the International Series will allow us to reach a greater audience and offer the opportunity for more people to experience golf, who may not have the chance otherwise."

SeaPearls offers 'You n Me' collection for Valentine's Day

It's time to express yourself! Choose from SeaPearls Gold and Diamond's unique 'You n Me' collection and make a unique love statement this Valentine's Day.

Find the perfect gift from SeaPearls 'You and Me' range which offers an exquisite range of gold and diamonds jewellery. The collection best echoes the sentiments of the heart this special season, a press release said.

'You and Me' range, crafted mostly in 18 carat gold and diamonds, includes rings, bangles pendants, bracelets and sets that leave a lasting impression. Whether you want a life-long gift that is stunning or something with a personal touch, SeaPearls has the jewellery for you.

While prices for the collection starts from as low as RO75, SeaPearls is offering free gold coins for everyone making a diamond purchase worth RO75 as part of the Valentine's Day offer. The offer is valid

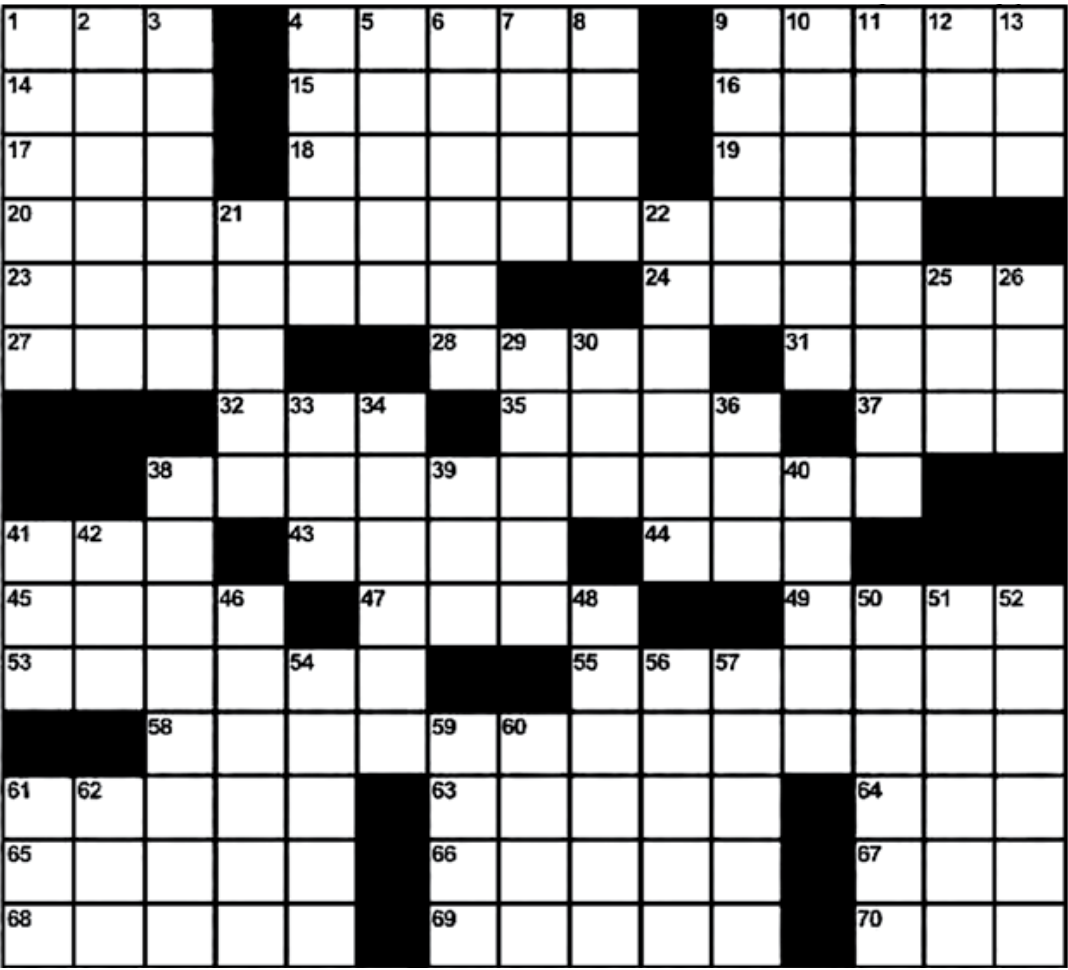


from February 11 to 14.

Riyas P A, general manager, SeaPearls says, "Our brand stands for timeless wealth. Value of wealth from ornaments never diminishes. It only grows over a period of time just like the spirit of Valentine's

Day. Come to think, you do not buy ornaments. You only pass it on to the next generation. The essence of Valentine's Day is to appreciate and cherish the presence of your loved one, and gifting jewellery is one way to please them forever."

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) And so forth
4) Blue-ribbon position
9) Flat-topped flower cluster
14) "Bingo!"
15) Chilling
16) Ankle bones
17) Drilling apparatus
18) Open to bribery
19) About to explode
20) Novel delays?
23) Stress, in a way
24) Took five
27) Greek sandwich
28) Discontinue
31) Unit of loudness
32) Kind of meeting, briefly
35) Archer on Olympus
37) Santa
38) Classroom favorite
41) "Hold _ second ..."
43) Decorated, as a cake
44) Ring bearer, maybe
45) Auto parts giant
47) About
49) Warning in the jungle

53) Certain Greek letters
55) Give less than one's all
58) "Get plenty of bed rest," e.g.
61) Seal-skin wearer, maybe
63) Petrol unit
64) Auction offering
65) Odd-numbered page
66) Foe
67) "Dear" one
68) " _ Care of Business" (BTO hit)
69) Gumbo vegetables
70) In-flight info, for short

DOWN

1) Strawberry-patch bane
2) "End of story," to a journalist
3) More crafty
4) Best vision spot
5) Dead to the world
6) Washed soap off
7) Coagulated wound
8) Be a snitch
9) Carthage neighbor
10) What's added to cost

11) High-ranking military officer, slangily
12) "To the max" indicator
13) Deception
21) Figure of speech
22) Counter
25) Forever and a day
26) Some forensic evidence
29) Marsh growths
30) "Ni m's Island" author Wendy
33) _ chi chu'an
34) Approach angrily
36) Mudbath locale
38) Eight-track player
39) Self starter?
40) Blew it
41) Lennon's bride
42) '60s war spot, briefly
46) Rabbitlike rodent
48) The heave-ho
50) End of a threat
51) Canny
52) Platforms
54) Respond to, as an opportunity
56) Desmond in "Sunset Boulevard"
57) Squirrels' nests
59) Blue Bonnet, e.g.
60) Rollerskating area
61) Gallery display
62) Grassland

NOTE PAD

F	A	I	R		A	L	I	S		S	E	G	N	O
R	O	T	A		S	I	M	I		A	P	O	E	M
E	R	S	T		H	E	A	T		R	I	O	D	E
S	T	A	R	T	B	U	C	H		W	A	L	D	E
H	A	T	A	R	I					A	L	O	N	E
					C	O	N	V	I	N	C	E	G	I
C	O	P	E	D		A	R	O	S	E		G	L	O
O	N	E	S		N	A	N			A	H	E	M	
M	T	A		B	E	E	B	E		I	N	T	R	A
P	A	R	D	O	N	S	U	T	T	O	N			
P	L	E	A	T						S	T	A	P	L
					B	E	T	R	A	Y	C	H	A	R
C	R	U	D	E		L	E	O	I		B	A	T	T
D	I	C	E	R		L	A	H	R		O	N	M	E
S	A	K	E	S		S	H	O	T		R	A	Y	E

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The heat is getting turned up a lot higher in one of your personal relationships, but unfortunately, it might not be in a good way. Look for little annoyances to suddenly turn into full-fledged fights. To counter this, you should avoid those people who often push your buttons. Also, if you were thinking about visiting a friend who's been away for a while, keep in mind that they will probably monopolize the conversation. You'll do a lot of listening and not a lot of talking.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Sure, it takes a little bit of confidence to get out and meet people. But meeting the right people also takes luck. You need to be in the right place at the right time. You've got both luck and confidence today! You'll find yourself face-to-face with someone whose opinions mean an awful lot to you. Don't chicken out and not ask them a question or two! The worst thing that can happen is that they don't respond. But chances are you'll be able to engage in a very mutually interesting conversation.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Right now, risk is something that you should embrace with all of your heart, not run away from! The exciting opportunity that arrives today might intimidate or even frighten you a little bit, but if you focus on the potential rewards it could bring you, you'll find yourself more and more willing to take the chance. Go for it! A new beginning is coming, and it will give you the confidence to move in a new direction in your life. The future looks good!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Try to keep matters of the heart on the up-and-up right now. Being brutally honest is tough sometimes, but it is much more valuable than softening the truth with little white lies. Too often those little white lies will backfire on you. The more honest you can be, the more you can expect others to be straight with you, so get ready to hear the truth yourself and be tolerant of people who tell it like it is. There is something new that you don't know about yet. It could be revealed today.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

When a goal is too easy to attain, it isn't as fulfilling as a hard-won victory can be. So take the more difficult route today, and don't be too rigid about what you are or are not willing to do. The biggest challenges come when you open up your mind and tell the Universe that you're up for anything! Look for something that puts you outside of your comfort zone and intimidates you just a bit. This task will reward you with great pride that will feed your ego in a powerful way.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're in a real fix-it mood! Today, you'll want to put things right, make people smile, and solve any and all problems that come your way. But you should hold off on playing the hero too soon in the day. Take your time and proceed with caution, especially in your approach to any business problems. They're more complicated than they seem at first. A solution requires more heads than just yours (as sharp though it is). Business issues benefit from many different points of view.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You have an important choice to make. You can either expend all your energy trying to avoid any and all conflict, or you can have fun debating people whose thoughts and feelings differ from yours. Choose the latter and you'll feel empowered. Why fear hearing something you don't agree with? Instead, step up and listen to what naysayers actually have to say. Listen to their reasoning. You will either be convinced or you will have a blast pointing out the gaping holes in their logic.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The situation with another person is getting interesting, but it's also getting a lot more complicated. You'll have to do some creative problem solving to keep them at arm's length until you can figure out for sure exactly how you want them to fit into your life. Remember to keep the horse before the cart on this particular issue. If you let them push you into doing or saying something before you're ready, things won't grow as they're supposed to.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

The extraordinary efforts of someone in your crew (social circle, office clique, team, whatever) are creating some incredible opportunities for you right now, and today is the day to take advantage of them! Put aside the routine matters of the day and put your name on the list of volunteers for a brave new experiment. You have to show that you're eager to get involved in order for anyone to involve you. Be sure to show gratitude to the person who enabled all of this to happen.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Staying conservative and cautious might be the right strategy when it comes to investing money, but when it comes to sharing your emotions, the more extravagant you are the better! Spread your joy all around today even if you don't feel like you have a lot of it. You'll soon notice that once you start expressing joy to others, more happiness appears in your heart. Feel happy about where you are and what you're doing and you will find even more to be happy about.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today, you might get so wrapped up in overcoming a challenge that you lose track of time. One minute you're yawning into the morning daylight, and the next the sun is setting! Once time passes, it's gone forever. So step back from the projects you're working on for a few moments at a time. Try to experience every aspect of the day as much as you can. Take notice of the people and events around you and you'll be privy to some useful insights. Don't take anything for granted in life.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

This is a good day for you to work on your self-esteem and communication skills. The day isn't going to be too hectic, so you should have all the time you need to get introspective and check in with yourself. Be brutally honest. Step out of the fantasy life you've been living lately and give yourself a fresh reality check. Some facts about your life won't exactly make you deliriously happy, but acknowledging them is all that matters right now.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which country lies between the countries of Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone?

A. Togo
B. Morocco
C. Guinea
D. Mozambique

02. In 2019-2021 the inaugural world championship for men's cricket was held for which format?

A. Test
B. One Day
C. Twenty20
D. List A

03. Which of these people was associated with the band "Boy-zone"?

A. Malcolm McLaren
B. Robbie Williams
C. Rod Stewart
D. Stephen Gately

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

C	R	E	G
A	I	L	O
C	U	E	A
H	A	T	R

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (AFP)

Abbas urges support for Palestinians

Cairo, Egypt - Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas on Sunday accused Israel of having ‘crossed all red lines’ in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem, and urged world leaders to put an end to its actions.

The international community must ‘protect’ the Palestinian people and ‘put a stop to Israeli aggression... (and) unilateral actions’, the head of the Palestinian Authority told an Arab League meeting in Cairo.

“Israeli intransigence and practices have crossed all red lines,” he said at the gathering attended by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Jordan’s King Abdullah II.

Last year was the deadliest year in the West Bank since the United Nations started tracking casualties in the territory in 2005.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seen at least 43 Palestinians killed this year, according to AFP figures.

In a video address, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres affirmed the international body’s ‘clear position against unilateral actions’, citing ‘illegal settlements in east Jerusalem’ in particular.

AFP

UN warns of aid failure for Syria

UN also said the death toll from earthquake that also devastated Turkey could double

Kahramanmaras, Turkey - The UN denounced on Sunday a failure to get desperately needed aid to war-torn regions of Syria, while warning that the death toll of over 33,000 from an earthquake that also devastated Turkey could double.

A UN convoy with supplies for northwest Syria arrived via Turkey, but the agency’s relief chief Martin Griffiths said much more was needed for millions whose homes were destroyed.

“We have so far failed the people in northwest Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn’t arrived,” Griffiths said on Twitter.

Supplies have been slow to arrive in Syria, where years of conflict have ravaged the healthcare system, and parts of the country remain under the control of rebels battling the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which is under Western sanctions.

The UN convoy of ten trucks crossed into northwest Syria via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, according to an AFP correspondent, carrying shelter kits including plastic sheeting, ropes and screws and nails, as well as blankets, mattresses and carpets.

Bab al-Hawa is the only point for aid to reach people in rebel-held areas of Syria after nearly 12 years of civil war, after other crossings were closed under pressure from China and Russia.

Assad on Sunday thanked the United Arab Emirates for providing ‘huge relief and humanitarian aid’ with pledges of tens of millions of dollars in aid as well.

But security concerns prompted the suspension of some rescue operations, and dozens of people have been arrested for looting or trying to defraud victims in the aftermath of the quake in Turkey, according to state media.



A Turkish soldier walks among destroyed buildings in Hatay, on Sunday (AFP)

We have so far failed the people in northwest Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for help that hasn’t arrived

MARTIN GRIFFITHS

rested for looting or trying to defraud victims in the aftermath of the quake in Turkey, according to state media.

An Israeli emergency relief organisation said on Sunday it had

suspended its earthquake rescue operation in Turkey and returned home because of a ‘significant’ security threat to its staff.

Miraculous tales of survival still emerged, though experts

caution that hopes for finding people alive in the devastation dim with each passing day.

A seven-month-old baby named Hamza was rescued on Sunday in southern Hatay province more than 140 hours after the quake, while Esma Sultan, 13, was also saved in Gaziantep, state media reported.

The United Nations has warned that at least 870,000 people urgently need hot meals across Turkey and Syria. In Syria

alone, up to 5.3mn people may have been made homeless.

Almost 26mn people have been affected by the earthquake, the World Health Organization (WHO) said as it appealed on Saturday for US\$42.8mn to cope with immediate health needs after dozens of hospitals were damaged. Turkey’s disaster agency said more than 32,000 people from Turkish organisations are working on search-and-rescue efforts, along with 8,294

international rescuers.

But, in many areas, rescue teams said they lacked sensors and other advanced search equipment, meaning they were often reduced to carefully digging through destroyed buildings with shovels or only their hands.

“If we had this kind of equipment, we would have saved hundreds of lives, if not more,” said Alaa Moubarak, head of civil defence in Jableh, northwest Syria.

AFP

Greece, Turkey urge better relations after earthquake

Antakya, Turkey - Greece’s foreign minister visited Turkey on Sunday in a show of support after the country was hit by a devastating earthquake last Monday, despite a longstanding rivalry between the two NATO countries.

Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias was met with a warm embrace by his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, according to footage on state-run ERT TV, before they boarded helicopters to quake-hit regions.

His arrival marks the first visit by a European minister to Turkey since the earthquake.

“I would like to convey to the Turkish leadership and the Turkish people the warmest condolences of the Mitsotakis



Greece’s Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias (left) and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu talking to journalists in Adana on Sunday (AFP)

government and the entire Greek people for the losses after the two devastating earthquakes”, Dendias said during a press conference with Cavusoglu in Antakya, referring to Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

“This is showing the solidarity of Greek people with Turkey and the Turkish population. Greece was one of the first countries to call and propose help to Turkey after the earthquake,” Cavusoglu added.

‘Dialogue’

Greece and Turkey have a history of rivalry going back centuries, but it has been exacerbated by territorial and energy disputes - and more recently by Turkish President

Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s bombastic threats of invasion.

But the two neighbours, which lie on seismic fault lines, also have a tradition of helping each other in natural disasters.

Cavusoglu recalled mutual aid when quakes struck Turkey and Greece in 1999, when he said at the time that ‘we don’t have to wait for another earthquake for developing our relations’.

“I said this as a simple citizen back then, but I think the same today as Turkey’s foreign minister,” he said. “I hope we will make efforts for finding a solution to our disagreements with dialogue in a sincere way.”

Dendias also said that ‘we do not need to wait for natural disasters to improve our relations’,

while adding that Greece’s effort to help Turkey would continue.

The Greek government has so far sent 80 tonnes of medical and first aid equipment as well as rescuers who along with other European rescuers have saved 205 people, Dendias said.

“Greece will do everything it can to support Turkey at this difficult time, either bilaterally or within the EU,” he said.

The Greek rescue mission will be departing from Turkey and returning to Greece on Sunday, the Athens News Agency reported, as the search-and-rescue operations enter the fifth and final stage, in which digging machines start to take over and rescuers gradually depart.

AFP

Iran’s Ebrahim Raisi to visit China: State media

Tehran, Iran - Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi will head to China within days for a three-day visit aimed at strengthening economic co-operation, state media reported on Sunday.

Raisi will set out for Beijing on Monday evening in response to an official invitation by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Iran’s state news agency IRNA said.

Both presidents met for the first time last September in Uzbekistan at a summit for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where the Iranian president called for expanded ties.

On his upcoming trip, Raisi is expected to hold private talks with Xi, and delegations

from both countries are due to sign ‘cooperation documents’, according to IRNA.

The agency added that Raisi will also take part in meetings with Chinese businessmen and Iranians living in the country.

Iran and China have strong economic ties, especially in various fields including energy, transit, agriculture, trade and investment.

Both countries signed in 2021 a 25-year ‘strategic co-operation pact’ said to include ‘political, strategic and economic’ components.

China is Iran’s largest trade partner, IRNA said, citing the 10-month statistics of Iranian customs authorities.

AFP

Legal reforms: Thousands of Israelis rally for sixth week

Tel Aviv, Israel - Tens of thousands of Israelis rallied in central Tel Aviv on Saturday for a sixth straight week against controversial legal reforms being pushed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government.

“Democracy!” protesters chanted to the beat of drums in the coastal city, with many in the vast crowd waving blue and white Israeli flags, and others carrying rainbow LGBTQ or Palestinian banners.

“We’re not going to give up,” some shouted.

Netanyahu returned to power following elections in November, at the head of a coalition with extreme-right and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties.

The proposed judicial reforms would allow Israel’s parliament to overrule any Supreme Court decision with a simple majority

of 61 lawmakers in the 120-seat body, as well as boost political control over the system through which judges are appointed.

A first reading of the bill is slated for Monday.

Leaders of the protest movement opposing the reforms have called for a strike on the same day. The protests have become a weekly fixture on Saturday evenings since Netanyahu’s new government - dubbed the most right-wing in Israeli history - took office in late December.

Defying predictions that Monday’s planned strike would result in fewer protesters taking to the streets, this week’s crowds appeared to be larger than in previous weeks.

While there were no official figures on turnout, Israeli media reported around 50,000 demonstrators, with the liberal daily Haaretz reporting up to 75,000.



Israeli police block the road in front of protesters during a rally in central Tel Aviv, on Saturday (AFP)

Rallies were also held in other large cities, including outside the prime minister’s residence in Jerusalem and in the northern port city of Haifa, Israeli media reported.

In 2019, Netanyahu refused to step down when he became the first sitting Israeli prime minister

to be indicted while in office.

Protesters called for Netanyahu, who is fighting corruption charges in court, to resign.

He denies the charges against him of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. “Netanyahu’s trial is the reason for everything,” said medical worker Neta Keren-Tal. “He

is trying in every way to weaken the judiciary to escape his trial.”

For the first time since the start of the protests in early January, several dozen demonstrators also gathered in Efrat, an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank.

In Tel Aviv, a minute’s silence was held for the three victims - including eight and six-year-old brothers - killed in a car ramming attack on Friday in Ramot, a Jewish settlement neighbourhood of Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem.

On Saturday, a Palestinian was shot dead during a clash with Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, south of the northern city of Nablus.

The deaths add to spiralling violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this year that has triggered mounting international concern.

AFP

US jet shoots down new 'object' over Canada

Ottawa, Canada - A US fighter jet shot down an unidentified object over Canada on Saturday, the second such incident in North American skies since the dramatic downing of a suspected Chinese spy balloon a week ago.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said a joint US-Canadian military operation led to the takedown of the object, the latest in a series of mysterious air intrusions.

"Canadian and US aircraft were scrambled, and a US F-22 successfully fired at the object," Trudeau tweeted on Saturday.

Shortly after the 3:41pm (2041 GMT) downing of the object, aviation authorities shut down part of the airspace over the northwest US state of Montana after detecting what they called a 'radar anomaly', the US Northern Command said.

In a sign of jitters over possible intrusions, Northern Command said US fighter jets took to the skies but 'did not identify any object to correlate to the radar hits'. Skies were then reopened to commercial air traffic.

The object shot down in the Yukon was 'small, cylindrical' in shape, said Canada's defense minister, Anita Anand.

"The object was flying at an altitude of approximately 40,000 feet, had unlawfully entered Canadian airspace, and posed a reasonable threat to the safety of civilian flight," Anand told reporters. Trudeau said Canadian forces in the Yukon 'will now recover and analyze the wreckage of the object'.

He said he spoke with US President Joe Biden over the lat-



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (AFP)

The object was flying at an altitude of approximately 40,000 feet, had unlawfully entered Canadian airspace, and posed a reasonable threat to the safety of civilian flight

ANITA ANAND

est incursion, while Anand also said she spoke with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The new incursions into Alaska and the Yukon came after the United States said on Wednesday that suspected Chinese spy balloons like the one it

shot down February 4 were part of a 'fleet' that has spanned five continents. NATO also voiced concern. Anand, however, said 'it would not be prudent for me to speculate on the origins of the object at this time'.

US and Canadian planes flew

together to take on the object on Saturday, the US Department of Defense and Anand said.

"President Biden authorised US fighter aircraft assigned to NORAD to work with Canada to take down a high-altitude airborne object over northern Canada today," Pentagon Spokesman Pat Ryder said in a statement, referring to the North American Aerospace Defense Command.

An F-22 fighter jet fired an AIM 9X missile that brought it down, he said.

The White House said Biden

and Trudeau spoke on Saturday, and 'commended NORAD's and US Northern Command's strong and effective partnership and agreed to continue their close coordination to detect, track, and defend our airspace'.

The object taken out over the Yukon, which borders Alaska, came after fighter jets downed another object on Friday off the US state's north coast near the village of Deadhorse.

Search and recovery operations for the remains of that object continued on Saturday.

AFP



New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins (AFP)

New Zealand readies for impact of Cyclone Gabrielle

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand's prime minister on Sunday warned residents to hunker down and prepare an evacuation plan as a cyclone began pummeling the northern tip of the country.

Cyclone Gabrielle is forecast to envelop the upper half of the North Island over a 48-hour period from Sunday evening, two weeks after parts of the same region experienced devastating flooding. Auckland remains under a state of emergency after flash floods swamped the city on January 27, resulting in four deaths and forcing thousands from their homes.

Debris from that deluge remains on the streets of the country's biggest city, which now faces another bout of heavy rainfall and severe winds. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said everyone should be ready to face the threats posed by flooding, huge ocean swells and strong winds.

"Our main message to people across the country is to please take the severe weather warning seriously and to make sure

you're prepared," he told journalists. "Make sure you've got your grab-and-go kits, make sure you know where you need to go in the event you need to evacuate your homes."

The MetService weather bureau measured wind gusts of up to 140km per hour (86 miles per hour) in northern New Zealand on Sunday morning.

"This system poses a very high risk of extreme, impactful, and unprecedented weather over many regions of the North Island from Sunday to Tuesday," the MetService said. The cyclone is forecast to weaken slightly as it moves slowly south on Monday and Tuesday.

Strong winds forced the closure of Auckland's Harbour Bridge on Sunday, while most flights into and out of Auckland Airport on Monday have already been cancelled.

Gabrielle was downgraded from a tropical cyclone as it approached New Zealand, meaning wind speeds and rainfall would be slightly less intense.

AFP



Teachers demonstrate for better wages at Comercio square in Lisbon on Saturday (AFP)

Thousands join latest round of Portuguese teachers' protests

Lisbon, Portugal - Thousands of teachers from across Portugal marched through the streets of Lisbon on Saturday in the latest round of protests demanding higher pay and better working conditions.

More than 150,000 people took part in the rally, according to the National Federation of Teachers (FENPROF), the profession's main union.

"This is probably the biggest demonstration of teachers" in Portugal, said FENPROF secretary general Mario Nogueira.

"We are outraged," Augusto Figueiredo, a technology teacher from Rio Maior, about 100km (62 miles) north of Lisbon, told AFP.

"Miserable salaries, discriminatory appraisals, inhuman schedules... this is the reality of our profession today," added the 64-year-old.

"We're really tired, no one is listening to us, this government

needs to listen to us," Joao Tristao, a sports teacher, told AFP.

Teachers are calling for an improvement in the terms of tenure and career progression, and salaries to keep pace with

This is probably the biggest demonstration of teachers here. We are outraged. Miserable salaries, discriminatory appraisals, inhuman schedules... this is the reality of our profession today

MARIO NOGUEIRA

inflation. They also want their real working hours to be taken into account.

"This working time must be recognised," said Maria da Luz Ribeiro, an English teacher who worries about 'the future of teachers and schools in Portugal'.

"I was forced to work longer to

try to improve my pension," said the 68-year-old, who stopped working last year.

Saturday's national demonstration comes after a series of protests and rotating strikes by region, which have led to school

closures. The ministry of education insists the teachers' strike movement has run out of steam since the end of January. The ministry is set to meet unions for a new round of talks next week.

AFP

Seven cops killed in ambush in Peru

Lima, Peru - Seven police died on Saturday in an ambush while traveling in a coca-growing valley in southern Peru, the national police said.

The attack took place in La Convencion province in the Cusco region, in a wide valley known as VRAEM (Valley of the Rivers Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro). The armed forces there have been fighting drug gangs and the remnants of the Shining Path leftist group for decades.

"We regret the loss of our police brothers, who were ambushed when they were traveling in a police vehicle in the town center of Natividad in #Vraem, where 7 police officers have died and one police officer has survived," the national police said on Twitter. In August 2022, the Peruvian Army claimed to have seriously injured Shining Path leader Victor Quispe Palomino, or 'Comrade Jose', in an operation against 'terrorist camps'. A year and a half earlier, in January 2021, the Peruvian military dealt a severe blow to the guerrillas - known in Spanish as the Sendero Luminoso - by killing in the VRAEM the group's number two, a man known as 'Comrade Raul', one of the most wanted men in Peru and a brother of Comrade Jose.

AFP



Nikos Christodoulides greets supporters after casting his ballot in the western Paphos district, on Sunday (AFP)

Cyprus votes for new president in tight fought run-off election

Nicosia, Cyprus - Cyprus went to the polls on Sunday for a tightly fought presidential runoff between two career diplomats seeking the top post in the south of the divided Mediterranean island.

Polling stations close at 6pm (1600 GMT) in the race to succeed two-term conservative President Nicos Anastasiades as head of state and government of the small EU member country.

Former foreign minister Nikos Christodoulides, 49, faces 66-year-old fellow diplomat Andreas Mavroyiannis after last Sunday's inconclusive first round.

Christodoulides, who defected from the conservative ruling DISY party to run as an independent, scored 32.04 per cent a week ago, against 29.59 per cent for Mavroyiannis, who is backed by the communist AKEL party. Top concerns for many voters are the cost of living crisis, irregular immigration and

the island's almost half-century of division between the Greek-speaking south and a Turkish-occupied statelet in the north recognised only by Ankara.

But many disaffected voters will simply opt for 'the least worse candidate' - a characteristic in most elections, but more so in this one', said Andreas Theophanous of think tank the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs.

The winner needs 50 per cent plus one vote to succeed Anastasiades as the republic's eighth president.

The outgoing president urged Cypriots to come out 'en masse to participate in this electoral process', adding that 'this is our duty. The people decide, the majority decides and the minority respects'.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkish forces occupied its northern third in response to a Greek-sponsored

coup, but voters appeared split over whether the division was a priority in the election.

Retiree Dora Petsa, 75, said she expects the new president 'to settle the Cypriot question'.

But Louis Loizides, 51, said the country has 'too many internal problems', ranging from the economy to immigration, having taken in large numbers of asylum seekers, including many who cross the UN-patrolled Green Line.

The ruling DISY has been knocked out of the presidential race for the first time in its history, and the conservative party's decision to back neither candidate has thrown the run-off wide open. Pre-poll favourite Christodoulides last week unexpectedly squeezed out DISY leader Averof Neofytou, 61, who came third with 26.11 per cent, despite the incumbent's endorsement.

AFP

India opens first stage of its longest route

The country's longest expressway links New Delhi and Mumbai and cuts travel time by half

New Delhi, India - India on Sunday inaugurated the first stage of its longest expressway, a route linking New Delhi and Mumbai, as it makes a concerted infrastructure push to catch up with geopolitical rival China.

The ambitious US\$13bn project will eventually cut the road travel time between the country's two biggest cities in half, to 12 hours. India is the world's fastest-growing major economy and will soon be recognised as its most populous country, but its infrastructure remains decades behind that of its northern neighbour.

A sign over one of the new four-lane carriageways proclaimed 'Welcome to Delhi-Vadodara-Mumbai Expressway' - a route that spans a total of 1,386km (861 miles).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened the 246km first stage on Sunday, linking the capital with the tourist city of Jaipur



Prime Minister Narendra Modi dedicates to the nation the Delhi-Dausa-Lalsot section of Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, in Dausa on Sunday (ANI)

in Rajasthan. It was a 'sign of developing India', he said, adding that 'such investments in railways, highways, subway lines and airports

are a key to pushing the country's growth rate, attracting more investments and creating fresh jobs'. Asia's third-largest economy has made a renewed push

to decouple itself from an increasingly assertive China's supply chains and build up its own economic capacity since a deadly military clash on their

Ladakh frontier in 2020. A wary New Delhi has expedited many key projects, and Modi's government this month announced an unprecedented 33

per cent increase in infrastructure spending. The Indian premier is expected to open at least a dozen major railways, highways, ex-

pressways and port projects in the next few months.

'Geopolitical sweet spot'

India has one of the world's largest rail networks - employing 1.3mn people - but it is badly outdated and needs huge investments in both track and rolling stock, with authorities seeking to tap private capital to do so.

For its part, Beijing has poured hundreds of billions of dollars into infrastructure over many years and China now boasts an extensive motorway system, gleaming airports and by far the world's largest high-speed rail network. India's first high-speed rail line, a US\$13bn Japanese-funded project linking Mumbai and Ahmedabad, remains under construction and has been hit by land acquisition and other bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Harsh V. Pant, a professor with King's College London, told AFP that with China 'losing some of its lustre', Indian policymakers 'feel that it is in a geopolitical and geoeconomic sweet spot which needs to be leveraged with higher infrastructure investments to make it an even more lucrative and attractive economy'. He added: "China's economic growth and infrastructure development started a few decades before (India's) so there is still a lot that it needs to do in terms of matching up to China."

AFP



Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (AFP)

Bolsonaro says he plans to return to Brazil

Washington, US - Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro said late on Saturday that he plans to return to Brazil 'in the coming weeks' after arriving in the United States in December.

"I too want to return to Brazil. I intend to return to Brazil in the coming weeks," the right-wing ex-leader said during a meeting with Brazilian supporters in Boca Raton, Florida, according to a video broadcast by CNN Brasil.

Bolsonaro traveled to the United States in late December, several days before supporters stormed government buildings in Brasilia in an attempt to overturn the election victory of his rival, leftist Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. Bolsonaro has repeatedly cast doubt on Lula's narrow win.

"We had governance without corruption. We worked with heart, with honesty. No retaliation, or persecution, is justified," he said on Saturday.

Bolsonaro, 67, is under investigation in Brazil over an alleged role in the January 8 assault on national institutions. Six hours after mobs stormed Brazil's presidential palace, Congress and supreme court, Bolsonaro de-

nied any responsibility.

Lula said on February 2 that he was 'certain' the former president had 'prepared the coup'.

The incident in Brasilia has been compared to the January 6, 2021 assault on the US Capitol by supporters of former US president Donald Trump.

On Saturday, Bolsonaro told his supporters in Florida they 'must face the problems'.

"Sometimes we have to take risks, it is worth it. You can be sure that the majority of the Brazilian people are with us," he said. The former army captain arrived in the United States on December 30, just before Lula's inauguration on January 1.

AFP

Sometimes we have to take risks, it is worth it. You can be sure that majority of the Brazilian people are with us

JAIR BOLSONARO

Fresh protests against pension reform hit France

Paris, France - Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in France on Saturday in a fourth day of action against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform, with unions warning they would ramp up strikes if the plan is not dropped.

Unlike on the three previous protest days there was no call for a day of nationwide strikes, although air traffic controllers at Paris' second airport staged a surprise walkout that left half of flights cancelled.

Macron and his government face a double battle to raise the pension age from 62 to 64, overcoming resistance on the streets as well as pushing the legislation through parliament.

The CGT union said 500,000 people protested in Paris alone, and over 2.5mn nationwide.

The interior ministry, which generally gives much lower numbers, said there were 963,000 protesters nationwide and



Protesters take part in a demonstration on the fourth day of nationwide rallies in Nantes on Saturday (AFP)

93,000 in Paris. The figures were somewhat higher than on the last day of action on February 7 but possibly

also short of the mammoth weekend turnout some had hoped for. There were protests in other French cities up and down

the country, with images on television showing police using water cannons in the western city of Rennes.

Protesters in the French capital took the traditional protest route from Republique Square to Nation Square, behind a banner saying: 'No to working longer!'

There were tensions when a car and a bin were overturned and set on fire, prompting shield-wielding police and the fire brigade to intervene.

The march was led by the leaders of France's eight main unions, keeping up a tight unity that the government has so far been unable to break.

The unions said in a joint statement that they would call for a national strike that would 'bring France to a standstill' on March 7 if the government 'remained deaf to the popular mobilisation'. Another day of protests and strikes is planned on February 16. The date of March 7 marks when the text of the bill is due in France's upper house, the Senate.

AFP

15 arrested after clashes outside UK migrant hotel

London, UK - UK police said on Saturday they have arrested 15 people including one child after fireworks were thrown and a police car set on fire at an anti-immigration demonstration outside a hotel housing asylum seekers near Liverpool.

Merseyside Police said that '15 people have so far been arrested following violent disorder' in the Knowsley area in north-western England, after initially reporting three arrests.

Police said 'missiles including lit fireworks were thrown at officers and one of our police vans was attacked by offenders, using hammers before setting it on fire' during clashes outside The Suites Hotel.

One officer and two members of the public received slight injuries, police said.

The protest came amid heightened tensions as record numbers of migrants are crossing the Channel in small boats, prompting the Conservative government to come up with a con-



A police van is seen outside the Suites Hotel in Knowsley, near Liverpool in north-west England on Saturday (AFP)

troversial plan to send such asylum seekers to Rwanda.

Interior minister Suella Braverman condemned the 'appalling disorder' in a tweet, adding that the 'alleged behaviour of some asylum seekers is never an excuse for violence and intimidation'.

Police said those arrested ranged in age from 13 to 54 years, and included two women. They said they were examining

footage to identify others. Asylum seeker advocacy groups said the protesters were affiliated to far-right groups, while it was unclear who was behind the violence.

Police said that a group of troublemakers invaded a planned protest by another group in order to 'carry out violent and despicable behaviour'.

The Home Office has been using the hotel to temporarily

house asylum seekers since last year, according to local media.

The violence broke out as anti-immigration protesters crashed a demonstration outside the hotel by activists voicing solidarity with asylum seekers.

The anti-migrant protesters shouted slogans such as 'Get them out', said the Merseyside Pensioners Association, whose activists were holding placards saying 'Refugees welcome'.

Claire Mosely, founder of refugee charity Care4Calais, who was also at the scene, told Sky News that protesters 'got to the police van and they set it on fire and it actually broke into a really big fire and exploded'.

"Then they broke through again and they started fighting with the police," Mosely said. "I was really shocked... how quickly it got worse."

The protest was fuelled by 'rumours and misinformation' in social media following an incident last week, police said.

AFP

Suspected militants kill ten Niger soldiers

Niamey, Niger - At least ten soldiers died in an ambush by a group of 'armed terrorists' in southwestern Niger, close to the Mali border, the defence ministry said on Saturday.

The toll from Friday's attack could rise as 16 people are still missing and 13 soldiers were wounded, a ministry statement said.

The troops were on patrol in the north of Banibangu department when they 'came under a complex ambush by a group of armed terrorists' it said, referring to militant groups.

The statement also said several attackers were killed during the fighting, but did not specify how many.

AFP

'EMBARRASSMENT'

Australian cricketers blasted over 'humiliation' by India in the first Test at Nagpur

Sydney, Australia - Australia's rout by India in the first Test at Nagpur was slammed as a "humiliation" and an "embarrassment" Sunday, with calls for changes ahead of the second Test.

The world number one side were crushed by an innings and 132 runs inside three days on a bone-dry pitch on Saturday, out-classed by spin twins Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja.

Australia's second innings' 91 was its lowest-ever total in India.

"Pat Cummins' side has been humiliated in the first Nagpur Test match," The Australian broadsheet wrote.

"There's no blaming the wicket when the opposition post 400, but there's potential to blame the state of mind the Australians approached the game in."

It said questions must be asked about the decision to drop Travis Head, one of their stand-out players during the home summer, and over how much longer veteran opener David Warner can remain in Test cricket after failing again.

The Sydney Morning Herald said Australia had been dealt "a brutal reality check in their quest for world domination by India's spin masters", while Sydney's Daily Telegraph urged change.



Australia's Scott Boland (L) and team-mate Steve Smith walks off the ground after losing to India in the first Test at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur on Saturday (AFP)

There have been too many bruises from this game to move forward (with the current side). If Cameron Green is fit, he has to come in and Head has to come back in

MARK WAUGH

"The axing of Travis Head looked silly on day one and positively stupid on day three after Australia's dreadful performance," said the Telegraph.

"He must return. But Travis Head alone would not have raised the Titanic." Former captain Allan Border said the team should be "embar-

assed" and would be left with "so many scars".

"I hope our players are embarrassed by that performance. It's just poor all around. It's hard to believe it's happened so quickly," he told Fox Sports.

"It seems like we overthought this particular tour and who should be there, who shouldn't be there. We've started as badly as we possibly could. Hopefully that's rock bottom."

Mark Waugh, a selector during Australia's 2017 campaign in

India, also said Head and all-rounder Cameron Green, if fit, should be recalled for the second Test in Delhi.

"There have been too many bruises from this game to move forward (with the current side)," he said. "If Cameron Green is fit, he has to come in and Head has to come back in."

That would likely see Matt Renshaw dropped, with Scott Boland also at risk if Green were to return.

AFP



Matthew Kuhnemann

Australia call up Kuhnemann for India's 'extreme spin' challenge

Nagpur, India - Australia called up left-arm spinner Matthew Kuhnemann to bolster the squad ahead of its second match against India, with coach Andrew McDonald saying Sunday he had a "live chance" of making his Test debut in Delhi.

The tourists suffered an innings and 132-run hammering inside three days of the opener in Nagpur on Saturday to trail the four-match series 1-0.

Kuhnemann, a 26-year-old bowler who played four one-day internationals last year, would strengthen Australia's spin resources, with his Queensland teammate Mitchell Swepson due to return home for the birth of his first child.

"He's a live chance to play in the next Test match," McDonald told reporters on what would have been the fourth

day of the opener.

"If we play three spinners then we clearly want back-up here and available in the squad if that's the way we want to go. That's why we've got four spinners in the squad."

World number one Australia were outplayed by India in Nagpur, and McDonald said it would be a challenge to tackle "extreme spin" in all four matches.

"The first Test match of any series sets the scene to potentially the surfaces you are going to encounter," said McDonald.

"It will be a different challenge (in Delhi), but we feel as though it will be extreme spin... throughout the series."

The visitors fell for 177 in the first innings and 91 in the second on a turning Nagpur pitch, where the hosts made 400.

Broad hails McCullum's England impact ahead of first New Zealand Test

Wellington, New Zealand - Veteran England seamer Stuart Broad says coach Brendon McCullum's focus on fun has not just revitalised the team's Test fortunes but could grow global interest in the game.

Broad is set to return for the two-Test series against New Zealand starting in Mount Maunganui on Thursday, having missed the 3-0 series win in Pakistan in December following the birth of his daughter.

The 36-year-old said returning to the England set-up under

former Black Caps captain McCullum had been a pleasure.

Riding high on the back of nine wins from 10 Tests overseen by the attack-minded coach, England's players have spent much of their two weeks of preparation focusing on team bonding, including countless rounds of golf.

"It's been one of the best, most enjoyable starts to a tour that I've ever had in my time," Broad told journalists.

"I think Baz (McCullum) has got a great mentality for the



Brendon McCullum

group, and life really.

"In this environment, I don't think I've ever heard stats or numbers mentioned once. It's all about going with the feel of the game and taking the positive option at all times."

Broad said McCullum's approach contrasted with the successful regime under Andy Flower, when England climbed to the top of the world Test rankings after winning the 2010-11 Ashes series in Australia.

"We got to number one through discipline, through or-

ganisation and knowing exactly what our roles were," Broad said. "Andrew Strauss was captain, he wanted everyone to go at under three (runs) an over and bat a long time. All our batters averaged over 40."

"So different styles do work ... but there's no doubt this has been the most fun environment that I've been a part of and I think it's because that is almost Baz's number one priority."

Broad believed other nations will seriously consider copying England's buccaneering ap-

proach, which he said would be great for the game at a time when Twenty20 leagues threaten to steal players and eyeballs away from Test cricket.

"Baz knows that Test cricket and the world game is under a bit of pressure. It's much easier to go and play for a T20 franchise, where there's no pressure on you to play particularly."

"But if you can create an environment that's hugely rewarding, then it really does make Test cricket the pinnacle."

AFP

Rodrigues, Ghosh lead India to T20 World Cup win over Pakistan

Cape Town, South Africa - Jemimah Rodrigues and teenager Richa Ghosh took India to a seven-wicket win over Pakistan in their Women's T20 World Cup match at Newlands in Cape Town on Sunday.

What had been a tense run chase turned into a comfortable win with an over to spare as Rodrigues and Ghosh put on an unbeaten 58 off 33 balls.

Rodrigues batted with calm skill to make 53 not out off 38 balls while Ghosh, 19, hit powerfully to score 31 not out off 20 balls.

Pakistan posted 149 for four after deciding to bat on a dry pitch.

It was a total which looked unlikely when they were labouring at 68 for four in the 13th over.

But captain Bismah Maroof (68 not out) and Ayesha Naseem (43 not out) trans-



India's Jemimah Rodrigues (L) celebrates with Richa Ghosh after their victory against Pakistan in the Women's T20 World Cup on Sunday

formed the innings in an unbeaten partnership of 81 off 47 balls.

The left-handed Maroof faced 55 balls and hit seven fours while the 18-year-old Naseem hammered her runs off 25 balls, hitting two fours and two sixes.

Naseem almost immediately went on the attack with some

powerful hitting, including a six beyond long-off in an over from the medium-paced Renuka Singh which cost 18 runs.

The Indian innings followed a similar pattern with Pakistan left-arm spinner Nashra Sadhu bowling superbly to take two for 15 in her four overs.

AFP

Australia, England in cruise control at Women's T20 World Cup

Paarl, South Africa - Australia and England made emphatic statements with convincing wins in a double-header at Boland Park in Paarl on the second day of the Women's T20 World Cup on Saturday.

Defending champions Australia crushed New Zealand by 97 runs, while England made light of a challenging target as they raced to a seven-wicket win over the West Indies with 5.3 overs to spare.

England's bowling and fielding was some way below perfection in 38-degree heat as West Indies scored 135 for seven.

But their batters attacked the West Indian bowlers with a formidable display of power and aggression.

Opener Sophia Dunkley pounded 34 off 18 balls before Nat Sciver-Brunt (40 not out)



Australia's Megan Schutt (2nd R) celebrates after the dismissal of New Zealand's Suzie Bates (AFP)

and skipper Heather Knight (32 not out) completed the win with an unbeaten fourth-wicket partnership of 67 off 43 balls.

"That's exactly what we want to do," said Knight.

"We want to be fearless and take the game on - and entertain

as well. We want to try to go hard up front and today was a big step to do that in a big tournament."

AFP

'CHAMPIONS OF THE WORLD'

Vinicius Junior, Fede Valverde score two goals each as Real Madrid beat Al Hilal to win fifth Club World Cup

Rabat, Morocco - Real Madrid lifted the Club World Cup for a record fifth time with a pulsating 5-3 win over Al Hilal on Saturday in Morocco.

Vinicius Junior and Fede Valverde struck twice each, while Karim Benzema also scored on his return from injury in Madrid's spectacular victory over their Saudi Arabian opponents.

Carlo Ancelotti's side, who qualified as Champions League winners last season, had far too much attacking quality for their opponents to handle.

Madrid's emphatic triumph at Rabat's Prince Moulay Abdellah stadium secured their second piece of silverware of the season, after winning the European Super Cup in August.

It also provided welcome respite from their La Liga campaign, where they sit eight points behind rivals Barcelona, who also beat them in the Spanish Super Cup final in January.

Madrid also won three Inter-continental Cups in 1960, 1998 and 2002 - a match between European and South American champions, which merged with the Club World Cup in 2005.

"We are very happy, for the eighth time Madrid are champions of the world, it was what we had to do," Ancelotti told Telecinco.

"We're happy, it was a good game. I think we were good up front, with Vinicius, Karim, Valverde, who got two, and up top the team had mobility and quality."

Ancelotti brought Benzema back into the starting line-up after



Real Madrid players celebrate with the FIFA Club World Cup trophy after defeating Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in the final in Rabat on Saturday (AFP)

he had missed the semi-final win over Al Ahly with a thigh injury, with Rodrygo dropping to the bench.

The 35-year-old striker created the opening goal for Vinicius with a short pass to send the Brazilian winger through on goal.

After a frustrating spell in Spain because of racist abuse from the stands and opponents targeting him on the pitch, Vinicius was able to enjoy himself in Morocco, netting in both of Madrid's matches and crowned player of the tournament.

I think we were good up front, with Vinicius, Karim, Valverde, who got two, and up top the team had mobility and quality

CARLO ANCELOTTI

"We are delighted with him because he keeps improving, he's much more effective," Ancelotti told reporters.

"He scores in almost all the games and makes the difference in all of them."

The same went for the team

as a whole, glad to take a short break from their domestic battle with Xavi Hernandez's Barcelona to earn the title of world champions.

"We are improving," added Ancelotti. "We have to consider there were mistakes at the back,

the team is coming back, like Karim, (Eder) Militao, (Thibaut) Courtois.

"This trophy will give us a boost for the rest of the season."

Valverde rifled the second goal home through defender Ali Albulayhi's legs, leaving goalkeeper Abdullah Al-Mayoof unsighted.

Former Porto striker Moussa Marega pulled one back for the 2021 Asian Champions League winners, sliding a shot past Andriy Lunin, who should have done more to keep it out.



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema (L) celebrates his goal with Vinicius Junior

The Ukrainian goalkeeper, standing in for the injured Courtois, was celebrating his birthday but despite the win he had a game to forget.

For a short period it seemed the Saudi Arabian side were going to truly test their more illustrious rivals, but Madrid stepped up a gear in the second half and secured an entertaining victory.

Vinicius set up Benzema early in the second half with a stunning cross using the outside of his boot and the French forward

made no mistake from close range. Uruguayan midfielder Valverde netted his second goal after a slick combination with defender Dani Carvajal, finding his form and goals again after a dip in form.

Al Hilal pulled another goal back through ex-Atletico Madrid striker Luciano Vietto, who dinked an effort past Lunin.

Vinicius quickly hit back with a clinical strike but Vietto pounced with a clever turn and finish to cut the distance to two goals again. AFP

Injury and illness-hit PSG beaten by Monaco ahead of Champions League clash with Bayern

Paris, France - A Paris Saint-Germain side missing the injured Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe and hit by a stomach bug warmed up for their Champions League showdown against Bayern Munich by falling to a 3-1 defeat at Monaco in Ligue 1 on Saturday.

All the goals came in the first half at the Stade Louis II, with Aleksandr Golovin putting Monaco ahead inside four minutes and Wissam Ben Yedder doubling the home side's lead.

The 16-year-old Warren Zaire-Emery pulled one back for PSG but Ben Yedder scored his second of the game, and 19th goal this season, to make it 3-1 in first-half stoppage time.

PSG remain top of the table, although their lead has been reduced to five points over Marseille, who won 2-0 at Clermont.

Monaco are now up to third, seven points behind the leaders, but seeing the gap to their rivals reduced is the least of PSG's worries right now, after they went down to their second defeat in four days.



Paris Saint-Germain's Neymar tries to dribble his way through Monaco defence during their Ligue 1 match (AFP)

Also beaten by Marseille in the last 16 of the French Cup in midweek, Christophe Galtier's team have now lost three times in seven league outings in 2023.

PSG will be without Mbappe, their top scorer, due to a thigh injury for the Champions League last-16 first leg with Bayern at the

Parc des Princes on Tuesday.

Galtier must also hope that Messi recovers in time from the hamstring complaint that prevented him from travelling to the principality. PSG were also without playmaker Marco Verratti, fellow midfielder Renato Sanches and defender Nordi Mukiele due

to injury before it emerged that several members of the squad were laid low by a stomach bug on the morning of the game.

"We are having to do what we can with the players we have available just now. It is bizarre to say that when you're PSG but that is the situation," said Galtier.

Experienced players such as Sergio Ramos and Achraf Hakimi only appeared in the second half before Presnel Kimpembe made his first appearance since prior to the World Cup following injury.

PSG were already 3-1 down by the time any of them came on and would have suffered a heavier defeat had goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma not been in inspired form.

After the game Kimpembe used a megaphone to apologise to PSG's travelling supporters.

"If I were not worried just now there would be something seriously wrong," Galtier added.

"We have a packed schedule and a weakened squad but we are worried."

"I understand the fans' anger. It is warranted, but we need to all stick together in these difficult moments."

Already beaten by Lens and Rennes in Ligue 1 since the turn of the year, the capital side fell behind when Ben Yedder helped set up Russian international Golovin to score from close range.

AFP



Sevilla's Youssef En-Nesyri (C) celebrates with Bryan Gil (L) after scoring against Real Mallorca in their La Liga match on Saturday

Sevilla continue Liga revival, Valencia lose amid protest

Barcelona, Spain - Youssef En-Nesyri and Bryan Gil helped Sevilla to a 2-0 win over Real Mallorca on Saturday in La Liga to record a fourth consecutive home victory.

Elsewhere Valencia fell to a disappointing 2-1 home defeat by Athletic Bilbao amid a large fan protest against Peter Lim's ownership of the club.

Jorge Sampaoli's Sevilla rose provisionally to 12th, four points clear of the relegation zone, bouncing back strongly after their thrashing by Barcelona last Sunday.

Mallorca, who beat champions Real Madrid the same day, were far tamer at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan. Morocco striker En-Nesyri sent the hosts ahead with a simple finish after running on to a long ball, with Mallorca's defence asleep.

It was his third goal in three league games, having failed to score in his first 14 top-flight ap-

pearances this season.

Gil, on loan back at his former side from Tottenham, doubled the lead from point blank range after 40 minutes when Jesus Navas's cross slid all the way through to him.

Sevilla could not extend their lead after the break but the fans were content with the victory which continued their revival after a terrible start to the season.

"Today the team was far superior to a side that is very difficult," said Sampaoli.

"They had just come from beating Real Madrid and have a lot of defensive strength, and we had a first half where we could have scored many more goals."

"This superiority is exciting going forward for the future."

Valencia's defeat by Athletic Bilbao at Mestalla left the east coast side 18th, in the relegation zone.

AFP

Atalanta go third with win against Lazio as Roma stumble

Milan, Italy - Atalanta climbed into the Serie A Champions League places with a 2-0 win at rivals Lazio on Saturday as fellow top-four hopefuls Roma stumbled to a 1-1 draw against lowly Lecce.

Goals from Davide Zappacosta and Rasmus Hojlund saw the Bergamo club jump from sixth to third, leapfrogging Lazio, reigning champions AC Milan and Roma in the fierce battle to

qualify for Europe's top club competition.

Maurizio Sarri's Lazio, who could have overtaken city rivals Roma with a win at the Stadio Olimpico, dropped to sixth and lie two points off the top four.

Atalanta, Roma and fifth-placed Milan are level on 41 points but remain some 15 points behind runaway leaders Napoli.

Atalanta made the breakthrough in a breathless en-

counter in the Italian capital when Zappacosta unleashed a sweet strike into the top corner in the 23rd minute.

Young Danish striker Hojlund doubled the advantage for Gian Piero Gasperini's men in the 65th minute, converting Ademola Lookman's cross.

Jose Mourinho's Roma occupy the final Champions League spot after dropping two points at 14th-placed Lecce.



Lazio's Nicolo Casale (L) and Atalanta's Rasmus Hojlund go for a header during their Italian Serie A match in Rome on Saturday (AFP)

KANAYA CHAMPION



Takumi Kanaya of Japan celebrates with the trophy after winning the International Series Oman on Sunday

First overseas win for Japanese player at International Series Oman

Muscat - Japan's Takumi Kanaya secured a convincing victory in the US\$2 million International Series Oman today to record his first professional victory outside of Japan and suggest that the gifted young golfer is coming of age.

The 24-year-old from Hiroshima shot a final round one-under-par 71 to finish on 10 under and beat American Berry Henson (70) and Thailand's Sadom Kaewkanjana (72) by four strokes.

England's Steve Lewton (71) finished fourth, one shot further

what is also his first win since April of 2021 when he won the Token Homemate Cup, on the Japan Tour. "It has been a difficult two years but I am so happy to finally win again."

After taking the lead on day two he was never caught and began today's round with a one-shot advantage from compatriot Ryo Hisatsune. At the turn, thanks to a fine outward nine bogey free three-under-par 33, he had opened up a five-shot gap from Hisatsune and appeared to be coasting before he missed short putts on 12 and 13 to see his

It is an honour to win the event, an International Series tournament. It has been a difficult two years but I am so happy to finally win again

TAKUMI KANAYA

back, while Spain's Sergio Garcia and Joaquin Niemann from Chile, both in with 74s, tied for fifth another two strokes behind.

The stunning scenic coastline of Al Mouj Golf provided the perfect background for some brilliant front running golf by Kanaya, already a three-time winner on home soil who has been striving to make his mark on the international stage.

He finally achieved that today with an eye-catching performance in what is the second event of the season on the Asian Tour and first of the year's International Series tournaments.

"It is an honour to win the event, an International Series tournament," said Kanaya, after

lead cut to three from playing-partner Sadom.

Despite the wind starting to strengthen and threatening to play havoc with his push for victory, Kanaya then moved four ahead again when he birdied the 15th, but dropped a stroke on the next to return to three in front.

The contest was soon virtually settled when he made a birdie on the 16th before Sadom dropped a shot on 17 to give his Japanese opponent a five-shot lead playing 18. Kanaya could afford the luxury of missing a 10-foot par putt on the last.

"Sadom got close, but I played within myself and was able to see it through," said Kanaya.



Spanish rider Jesus Herrada of Cofidis celebrates after winning the second stage of the Tour of Oman on Sunday (AFP)

Herrada leads Tour of Oman after second-stage win

Muscat, Oman - Spain's Jesus Herrada prevailed in a sprint finish to Sunday's second stage to take the lead in the Tour of Oman.

This was the Cofidis rider's 19th career win, a haul that includes two stage successes on the Vuelta a Espana.

He proved strongest in the 2.5 kilometre uphill finish to Quarayyat, making his move around 300m from the line to beat Belgian Maxim Van Gils and Italy's Diego Lissi.

In the general classification Herrada holds a 4sec cushion over Van Gils going into Monday's 152km ride from Al Kho-

bar to Jabal Haat.

The 174 km second stage across the beautiful roads of Oman started at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat and finished in Qurayyat.

As a group of around 50 riders reached the final kilometre together Alexey Lutsenko surged first.

However, Herrada was stronger and powered past him and opened a winning gap. Van Gils and Ulissi tried their best but there was no stopping Herrada who threw his arms in the air and celebrated.

Premier League leaders Arsenal held, Spurs thrashed

London, United Kingdom - Arsenal stumbled again as the Premier League leaders were held to a 1-1 draw by Brentford, while Tottenham's top four hopes were dented by an embarrassing 4-1 defeat at Leicester on Saturday.

Mikel Arteta's side could have moved eight points clear of second-placed Manchester City with a victory at the Emirates Stadium.

But Arsenal could not hold on to the lead given to them by Leandro Trossard's first goal for the

club in his fifth appearance since his January move from Brighton.

Ivan Toney scored Brentford's equaliser to leave Arsenal without a win in their last three games in all competitions following defeats at Manchester City in the FA Cup and Everton in the league.

The Gunners still control their destiny as they chase a first Premier League title since 2004, but champions City can move to within three points if they beat Aston Villa on Sunday.

Arsenal host City on Wednesday in a clash that will go a long way to deciding the title race.

Belgium forward Trossard came off the bench to make the breakthrough for Arsenal in the 66th minute.

Bukayo Saka floated his cross to the far post and Trossard was on hand to net with a clinical finish, his first goal for Arsenal.

But Brentford drew level eight minutes later when Toney headed into an empty net, leaving

Arteta fuming that VAR failed to disallow the goal for offside against Ethan Pinnock.

"I just looked back and it is offside, yes," Arteta said. "It's too late, the goal was allowed and we dropped two points."

Tottenham boss Antonio Conte was back at the helm after missing last weekend's 1-0 win against Manchester City following gallbladder surgery, but his fifth-placed side were humiliated at the King Power Stadium.



Arsenal's Leandro Trossard celebrates after scoring against Brentford in their English Premier League match in London on Saturday (AFP)

Brentford equaliser at Arsenal not properly checked by VAR officials

London, United Kingdom - The body responsible for refereeing in the Premier League admitted on Sunday that Brentford's equalising goal in a 1-1 draw at Premier League leaders Arsenal was not properly checked for offside by the VAR officials.

The Gunners dropped what could be two huge points in the title race when Ivan Toney headed in. A lengthy VAR check took place after the goal to examine whether Ethan Pinnock was offside and interfering with play earlier in the move.

But VAR officials then missed the fact Christian Norgaard was in an offside position when he hooked the ball across for Toney to equalise. Brentford's goal was not the only controversy of a bad Saturday for officiating in the Premier League.

Brighton had a goal wrongly ruled out in their 1-1 draw with Crystal Palace. Pervis Estupinan's strike was disallowed after a VAR review deemed the Ecuadorian to be offside. However, the lines drawn by the VAR official to determine the offside used the wrong Palace defender with Marc Guehi stood behind James Tomkins.

"PGMOL can confirm its Chief Refereeing Officer Howard Webb has contacted both Arsenal and Brighton & Hove Albion to acknowledge and explain the significant errors in the VAR process in their respective Premier League fixtures," said a statement issued by PGMOL.

Mueller keeps Bayern Munich top, Union stay second

Berlin, Germany - Bayern Munich strung three wins together for the first time since November, beating Bochum 3-0 at home in the Bundesliga on Saturday ahead of next week's Champions League clash with Paris Saint-Germain.

Surprise challengers Union Berlin stayed right on Bayern's heels however, winning 2-1 away at RB Leipzig to come within one point of the Bavarians in Saturday's late game.

Bayern lacked fluidity early against a strong Bochum side in their afternoon fixture but were gifted a goal in the first half, when veteran forward Thomas Mueller pounced on an under-hit back pass from Bochum defender Saidy Janko to score.

Bayern's Bochum-born midfielder Leon Goretzka almost doubled the lead one minute before half-time, but headed wide from right in front.

In-form French forward Kingsley Coman made it 2-0 on 64 minutes, while former Arsenal



Bayern Munich's Thomas Mueller (R) celebrates with Joao Cancelo after scoring against Bochum on Saturday (AFP)

winger Serge Gnabry won and converted a penalty with just over 15 minutes remaining to give his side a comfortable win.

Bayern, who started the season with three straight 1-1 draws, have now won three matches on the trot ahead of Tuesday's trip to face PSG in the Champions

League.

Despite the win, a frustrated Bayern boss Julian Nagelsmann said his side needed to improve before the PSG meeting.

"We played well in the first six minutes, after that we weren't in the game," he said.

AFP



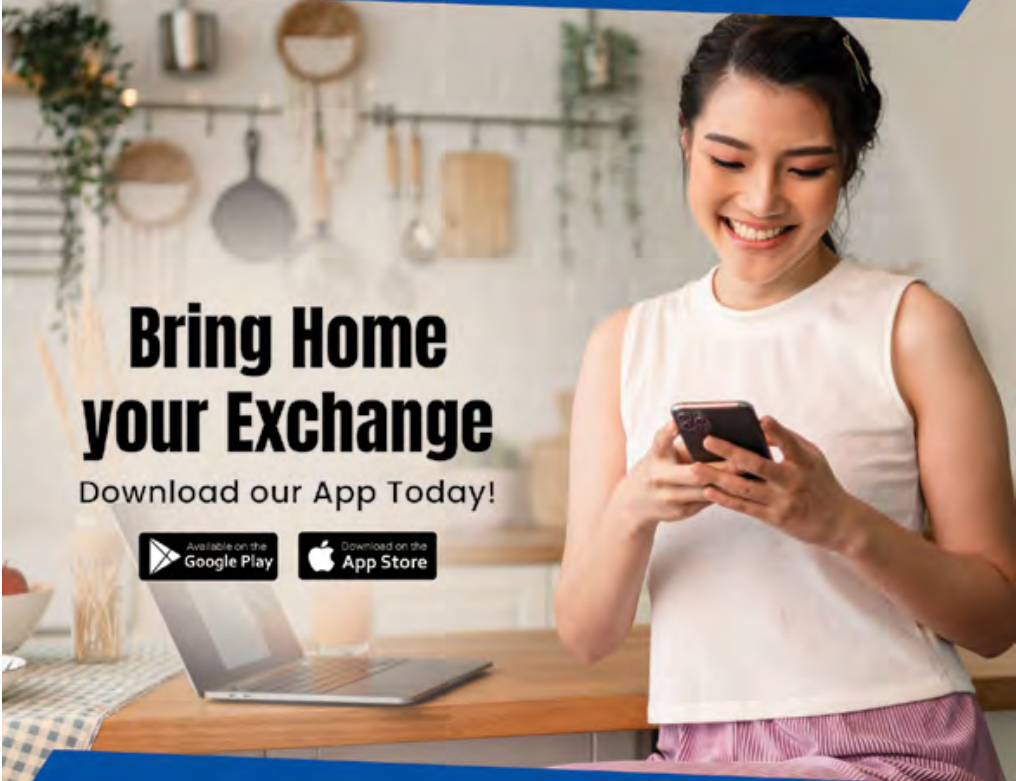
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LABOUR
EXODUS

Like other businesses across Cuba, Nel Paradiso is grappling with a worker shortage amid unprecedented levels of people fleeing the island nation. In just over a year, the central Havana restaurant has seen 50 employees leave.

"There wasn't enough time to replace the personnel," said hiring manager Annie Zuniga, 26.

After being forced to close its doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nel Paradiso had been open for only two months when Nicaragua, an ally of Havana, abolished visa requirements for Cubans.

That move in November 2021 kicked off the island's largest exodus since the Communist regime came to power over six decades ago.

"Nicaragua's opening was a blow... from 50 workers, in one week we were left with 30," Zuniga told AFP. Of the 60 employees recruited during the last 14 months, only 10 still live on the island.

Replacing employees that emigrate has become a time-consuming and costly task.

"We haven't been able to create a united and lasting team because when we think, 'good, this is the team'... one of them comes to me and says, 'this is my last week, next week I'm leaving.' It's a catastrophe," said Zuniga.

Incalculable grief

In 2022, US border authorities intercepted more than 313,000 Cubans who entered the country illegally, according to official data. Most Cubans fleeing the island attempt to reach the United States, usually via Central America. However, sea crossings between Cuba and the US state of Florida - a treacherous 140km journey often in unsuitable vessels - have also soared.

The wave of emigration comes at a time when the 11.1 million Cuban population is aging and the country is wrangling with its worst economic crisis in three decades.

Inflation is rampant and daily queues to buy food and fuel are interminable, while it is near impossible to find many medicines and power cuts are frequent.

"The lack of staff puts us in difficulty," said Nel Paradiso head waiter Norberto Vazquez. Also a sommelier professor, Vazquez says he has trained more than 50 people who are no longer in Cuba.

"Some students tell me, 'Professor, the only thing I'm thinking about is how I will leave,' and that gives me incalculable grief," he said.

Most Cubans that emigrate are highly educated and between 19 and 49 years old, according to Havana University. Many industries are affected by the exodus, including tourism, a vital part of the country's economy that was badly hit by the pandemic.



People queue outside the US embassy in Havana.

CUBAN CATASTROPHE

THE INCREASING EXODUS OF CUBAN WORKERS SEEKING EMPLOYMENT AND BETTER PROSPECTS REPRESENTS A SORRY STATE OF AFFAIRS FOR THE ISLAND'S BUSINESSES



Some 30 per cent of employees at the Parque Central hotel, a business part-owned by the government and by Spanish group Iberostar, emigrated and its executives were forced to contract students to cover the vacancies, a source told AFP under the condition of anonymity.



Every young person who abandons their studies and work to emigrate represents 'a defeat' for the country

PMIGUEL DIAZ-CANEL



Annie Zúñiga (2-L), in charge of hiring personnel at Nel Paradiso restaurant

Migration, a defeat

Frenchman Stephane Ferrux has been running a travel agency in Havana since 1995. He said 60 of the agency's service providers emigrated in one year. And it was not just for economic reasons as some of them earned US\$1,500 a month, a sum 45 times the average in the island nation.

"When you cannot find anything" due to shortages of most products, "and you feel you have no future, even if you have the means, that triggers the fleeing," said Ferrux. Even embassies and universities have been affected.

In January, the desperate cry of a university science professor went viral on social media. "The laboratories are emptying... the best ones are leaving," the professor complained.

President Miguel Diaz-Canel admitted in October that emigration is high in Cuba, and blamed US laws for encouraging it.

"Every young person who abandons their studies and work to emigrate" represents 'a defeat' for the country, he said.

AFP

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Jorge Ivan Cortés, an avocado farm worker, shows a fruit from a tree at a plantation in Armenia, Quindio Department, Colombia

AFP under condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, however, said the number of farmers like Hernandez being negatively impacted is mushrooming.

Avocado producers have not only covered the drains on their own properties but have also allowed water to flow onto their neighbours' properties ... which causes (soil) erosion and harms other crops.

Environmental activist Monica Florez says multinationals - mostly from Chile, Mexico and Peru - began arriving in Pijao in 2017, at the exact time that FARC guerrillas were disarming following their 2016 peace deal with the state.

"There was a change in the use of the land, in economic terms and in the environmental impacts left by the companies," said Florez, director of Pijao Cittaslow NGO. On the highest peak in the municipality is a moor that is home to a fragile ecosystem comprising the region's water source and the Quindio wax palm, a native species to Andean forests, that is in danger of extinction.

Discarded packets of pesticides bear witness to the harmful practices that interrupt the cycle of the moor, from where two rivers flow, the engineer says.

Organised crime

In Mexico, the avocado industry is mired in some of the country's worst vices - violence, drug trafficking and deforestation. In Michoacan, Mexico's largest avocado-growing region, organised criminal gangs subject growers to robbery, kidnappings and extortion.

Chile is enjoying an avocado boom in arid areas that is exacerbating an already serious water shortage.

AVOCADO FARMS

GREEN GOLD

Super Bowl snack – avocado - hurts Colombian farmers, affects the environment

During the Super Bowl between the Philadelphia Eagles and Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday, millions of arm-chair fans will tuck into a tasty snack of tortilla chips and guacamole.

But unknown to them, in far away Colombia, local farmers are paying the price for their gastronomic pleasure, while environmentalists are warning about water pollution.

The explosion of avocado plantations in central-western Colombia resulted in changing land-use patterns that, in turn, left Jose Hernandez's coffee crops flooded.

Unlike his neighbours in the Pijao municipality in Quindio department, Hernandez refused to switch to growing the lucrative 'green-gold'. But rivers of water came cascading down from higher up in the mountains surrounding his farm and scouring out ditches up to two metres deep.

The 64-year-old lost 4,000 coffee plants and he points a finger at avocado multinationals who use copious amounts of water and even divert natural streams to satiate their thirsty crops.

"I lost 20 years of work with those waters that fell on me," Hernandez told AFP.

More important than oil

The Colombian countryside is rapidly being overtaken by crops of the Hass avocado that is mainly exported to the United States, the Netherlands, Spain and Britain.

It is the main ingredient in guacamole. And demand peaks in the weeks leading up to the Super Bowl - American football's annual showpiece.

According to Colombia's agriculture ministry, the country will send more than 1,400 tonnes of avocados to the United States for consumption specifically during Sunday's match.

In 2021, total avocado exports were 97,000 tonnes with 55,000 hectares of planted crops. Colombia is the third-largest producer of avocados after Mexico (2.3 million tonnes) and Chile (186,000 tonnes).

While leftist President Gustavo Petro has embraced this crop, saying "avocados are more important than oil," environmentalists, however, warn that the crop can pollute water sources and lead farmers to intrude on protected areas. They add, that multinationals have bullied villagers into selling their land.



Workers pack avocados for export at the Los Cerritos avocado group ranch in Ciudad Guzman, state of Jalisco, Mexico



Aerial view showing avocado plantations and Palma de Cera palm trees, Quindio wax palm (Ceroxylon quindiuense), Colombia's national tree, which is threatened by avocado crops, in Pijao

In 2021, the state body charged with protecting the environment in Quindio accused avocado producers of illegal water harvesting, pollution of water sources and illegal logging.

Negative impact

Pijao was once a coffee-growing country but now has 789 hectares of avocado crops, a 245 per cent increase in seven years, according to the local mayor's office.

Initially, foreign companies were unaware of environmental rules, admits Diego Aristizabal, president of the avocado producers federation, although he claims they now follow them to the letter. Some from the industry complain of being demonized and point to the creation of 26,000 jobs.

An agro-industrial engineer, speaking to

Researchers from King's College London and the University of Wisconsin have linked the expansion of avocado plantations in Colombia to the flight of small-scale farmers from their farms. And this is in a country where unequal land distribution is at the heart of a half-century-long conflict.

Hernandez never heard again from his old neighbours. The powerful avocado multinationals want to send them packing, he said.

Florez says very few resist the industrial pressures while those that stay are effectively locked up by larger surrounding farms.

Meanwhile, the coffee landscape is changing and in 2022, the world's third-largest coffee producer recorded its worst harvest in almost a decade.

AFP



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