

Unemployment, a growing challenge

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Unemployment among youth in Oman is a growing problem despite the government's efforts to improve the situation.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), Oman's unemployment rate decreased from five per cent in February to 4.10 per cent in March this year.

The figures, however, are skewed in favour of men. The rate of female jobseekers remains high at 13.7 per cent, compared to 1.7 per cent for males. Bachelor's degree holders form the largest group of jobseekers, accounting for 11.3 per cent.

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) reported that by the end of March, there were 110,000 registered jobseekers, marking a significant increase from the previous quarter's 85,000. To address this issue, MoL had announced plans to create 35,000 job opportunities this year, 14,000 of these to be provided through replacements in the private sector and 2,000 through government initiatives.

In January, MoL launched an app called Maak, or 'With you', designed to assist jobseekers and employers in boosting job creation.

Despite these efforts, many graduates remain unemployed



A more innovative approach is needed to address the job situation effectively. Companies do not recruit through job fairs. They hire internally or through third parties

HILAL AL KINDI

and have limited job prospects.

Ahmed al Harthi, a chemical and process engineering graduate from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), expressed his frustration stating that "the job

market is saturated and campus placements do not provide viable opportunities". He noted that the majority of recent graduates are unemployed.

Harthi believes that it will take

MoL time to remedy the situation. Asked about Maak, he said, "I don't know of any such app for jobseekers."

Only two out of ten students *Muscat Daily* spoke with were aware of Maak.

Sultan al Jassasi, an electrochemical engineering graduate, also from SQU, echoed similar views emphasising the frustration among recent graduates.

"The annual job and training fair in March allows interaction with companies but does not guaran-

tee placements. No university guarantees placement in any sector."

While acknowledging the government's efforts to provide jobs, Hilal al Kindi, a 2020 graduate in operations and management currently engaged as an account executive with Memac Ogilvy, suggested a more innovative approach to address the job situation effectively.

"Companies do not recruit through job fairs. They hire internally or through third parties,"

National career guidance platform launch this week

Muscat - As part of its efforts to create sustainable solutions and generate job opportunities across sectors in the sultanate, the National Employment Programme (NEP) will officially launch a national career guidance platform called Khuta on Wednesday.

The launch ceremony, held under the patronage of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, will take place at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

An NEP official revealed that Khuta has already undergone an experimental trial phase, receiving positive feedback from

users.

"On July 5, the platform will be officially launched to provide valuable services. The platform collaborates with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, offering information on study and training programmes, future skills, and labour market requirements."

Khuta will serve as a hub for local universities and colleges to connect, ensuring seamless access to educational resources. It will also provide free courses for various community groups and raise awareness of parents and school administrators.

Kindi said in reference to campus placements.

"My advice to fresh graduates is to remain active on platforms like LinkedIn and to gain experience and knowledge even if it's just an internship."

Hilal, too, wasn't aware of Maak. "I haven't heard about the app and I don't think any of my friends or colleagues have ever mentioned it. The government should promote such apps and initiatives."

Considering the opportunities

for Omani citizens, expectations of expatriates finding jobs need to be realistic.

Nidhi Harish, who graduated from College of Banking and Financial Studies last year, too, highlighted the lack of response from companies at job fairs. Suitable jobs are scarce, working conditions poor and salaries low.

"When the job market is not good for locals, expectations of expat's finding employment are at best ambitious."

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► NEWS BRIEF

OMAN OLYMPIC FOOTBALL TEAM SET TO MEET ALGERIA

Algiers, Algeria - The Oman Olympic football team will kick off its campaign at the 15th Arab Games with a match against hosts Algeria on Wednesday.

Oman is placed in Group A alongside Algeria, Lebanon and Sudan.

Oman is participating in the Arab meet in five disciplines - football, athletics, weightlifting, sailing, and athletics for persons with disabilities.

Oman's athletics team is fully prepared to bring honour to the country. It includes Barakat al Harthi, Ali al Balushi, Muhammad al Saadi, Rashid al Asimi, Khaled al Ghailani and Mohammed al Sulaymani among others.

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Non-oil sector to drive Oman's growth in 2023

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Anitha Rajan drums into a male-dominated profession

FRANCE BURNS AS RIOTS CONTINUE



A pedestrian uses her smartphone to capture footage of a damaged and burnt merchandise truck near an Aldi store in the Les Flamants neighbourhood of Marseille, in southern France on Saturday, after a fourth consecutive night of rioting in France over the killing of a teenager by police. French police arrested 1,311 people during the nationwide riots (AFP)

See also Page 09

New water, wastewater law to enhance investment in utility services: APSR chief

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A recently published law regulating the water and wastewater sector is a significant step towards supporting private sector investment and embracing modern technologies, according to Dr Mansoor Talib al Hinai, Chairman of Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR).

The law, detailed in Royal Decree No 40/2023 issued on June 20, aims to drive sustainable development, align with Oman Vision 2040 and enforce stringent



Dr Mansoor Talib al Hinai

control measures.

Under the law, APSR will shoulder various responsibilities, including defining specifications and conditions for water, sewage and treated water networks and

equipment, as well as establish mechanisms for registration, approval and protection of subscribers' interests, public health and safety.

Hinai informed that market liberalisation procedures will be implemented by the authority upon approval from the Council of Ministers. The law outlines measures considered as market liberalisation, such as restructuring the market, establishing new operating companies and transferring economic interests in electricity and water-related entities. "The goal is to foster

healthy competition among licensed suppliers of water and treated water."

To safeguard environmental well-being, the law strictly prohibits the discharge of hazardous waste from commercial, industrial, agricultural and medical activities into sewage networks without prior approval.

The law clarifies the responsibilities of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in developing and promoting the water and sanitation sector, including governance principles and encouraging investments.

MHUP to house 3,800 families with RO100mn social scheme

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) is actively working to fulfil a Royal Directive of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to provide housing assistance to those in need.

This year, the ministry aims to allocate RO35mn to support 1,200 families, as part of a broader social housing assistance programme that has dedicated RO100mn to benefit 3,800 families between 2021 and 2023.

In 2021, housing units worth RO30mn were successfully delivered, benefitting 1,200 families. Continuing the momentum, MHUP handed over housing units worth RO35mn in 2022, providing housing solutions for 1,400 families.

MHUP has made significant progress this year, having delivered 53 housing units as part of the housing assistance initiative. The ultimate goal of the project is to foster social stability and improve living standards of citizens by offering suitable housing options.

Earlier this year, MHUP issued Ministerial Decision No 9/2023, which revised the value of housing assistance for citizens. According to the decision, the amount of support is determined based on the number of family members and the construction area.

For families consisting of two or three members, a maximum amount of RO25,000 is granted to facilitate house construction or



This year, MHUP aims to allocate RO35mn to support 1,200 families; 53 housing units have been delivered as part of the housing assistance initiative

reconstruction, provided that the building area is not less than 140sqm. If the area is between 140sqm and 250sqm, the beneficiary is expected to contribute for additional expenses.

In the case of families with four or more members, a housing assistance of RO30,000 is provided, with a minimum building area requirement of 190sqm. Should the beneficiary wish to construct on an area exceeding 190sqm, the total construction area should not exceed 300sqm.

According to an earlier decision, the value of housing assistance for building, rebuilding, restoration or making additions to a house was limited to a maximum of RO20,000 for two- to three-member families, and the minister had the authority to raise the value of assistance in areas of difficult topography. For a family with four or more members, the limit was RO25,000.

Wilayats liven up with Eid celebrations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Wilayats across the sultanate came alive during the three days of Eid al Adha with large-scale celebrations planned by their respective walis and governors.

Celebrations in Al Awabi, South Batinah, kicked off on Thursday with 'Eid al Awabi' - a grand three-day affair. Organised by the Office of the Wali of Al Awabi and overseen by the Governor's Office, the festival aimed to showcase the wilayat's natural heritage and tourism assets.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Ahmed al Junaibi, Wali of Al Awabi and Chairman of the Organising Committee of the event, presided over the opening ceremony. Notable attendees included Badr bin Nasser al Sharqi, Member of Majlis A'Shura, among several esteemed guests and officials. The festival presented a diverse array of activities, including theatre performances, an Awabi poetry competition, traditional games, and theme corners dedicated to children, the environment and technology.

In Al Buraimi, the Eid al Adha



activities organised by the Governor's Office captivated attendees across all age groups. Over

the course of three days, a multitude of programmes and events unfolded, including theatrical

performances featuring beloved cartoon characters and engaging musical acts.



In Mudhaibi, North Sharqiyah Municipality organised 'Eid Delight', a two-day affair. Parti-

cipants took part in competitions, horse riding, games featuring cartoon characters and a range

of children's entertainment activities. 'Eid Joy' corners offered face painting, photo ops, delectable food and showcased products crafted by productive families.

Liwa, North Batinah, hosted a two-day event - 'Al Ayud' - celebrating the wilayat's renowned folk artistes. The event featured

Walis and governors planned large-scale celebrations during the Eid al Adha holiday in their respective wilayats

captivating performances to ensure a memorable experience for children and a wide array of recreational activities spanning sports, cultural competitions and art sessions.

These Eid al Adha celebrations brought communities together in wilayats, fostering a sense of unity and joy. The wide variety of activities created an unforgettable experience for residents and visitors alike, further enriching the festive spirit of the occasion.

Potash ore exploration, mining agreement inked for No 53-A

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MEM) recently finalised a concession agreement for exploration and extraction of potash ore. The agreement is for concession area No 53-A, which lies within the swamps of Umm As Sameem.

The agreement was signed by H E Salim Nasser al Auqi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Nasser al Araimi, Chairman of Sinbad Mining Resources Company, marking a crucial milestone in Oman's mining industry.

By strategically allocating concession areas, MEM aims to overcome challenges related to



reception of requests, establish an integrated geological and exploratory database, safeguard mineral ore sites from urban en-

croachment, and provide consistent exploration and mining opportunities in the sultanate. Emphasising minerals of high

economic value, particularly metallic minerals, represents a shift in the ministry's focus, resources and efforts.

This move also seeks to attract international companies specialised in exploration and mining, thereby bolstering the establishment of mining industries and generating valuable employment opportunities for the nation.

Through this concession agreement, MEM has paved the way for sustainable growth and development in the mining sector, contributing to Oman's economic prosperity and positioning the sultanate as a prominent player in the global mining landscape.

Campaign launched to promote tax compliance

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Tax Authority has stepped up efforts to increase tax awareness and compliance in the community through a campaign called 'Register with Us'.

Focused on the contracting sector in Muscat governorate, the campaign aims to encourage entrepreneurs to register and fulfil their tax obligations.

Highlighting the importance of tax compliance, a Tax Authority official stated that the campaign seeks to raise awareness among business owners in the real estate and contracting sectors. "By promoting tax registration, the cam-



paign aims to minimise the risk of legal consequences resulting from non-compliance," the official said.

Last week, the campaign was held in the wilayats of Amerat, Muscat, Bausher and Seeb.

"These targeted efforts are part of a broader strategy to educate various sectors about tax compliance and encourage businesses to adhere to the regulations set by the Tax Authority."

In support of Omani entrepre-

neurs, the authority offers a range of tax exemptions for those who meet the necessary requirements. This incentive aims to stimulate investment in the private sector, empower individuals to pursue their own projects and achieve success, the official added.

Through 'Register with Us', the authority strives to foster a culture of tax compliance among companies and institutions at all levels. By raising awareness and providing guidance, the authority aims to achieve its strategic goal of improving tax compliance while highlighting the benefits and significance of fulfilling tax obligations.

OPINION

SALEH MIRI, MUSCAT DAILY COLUMNIST, IS AN ARCHITECT WHO CAME TO OMAN IN THE EARLY 1980S



CHANGE IN VALUES

Last century, values were completely different from those of today.

Money, as per its meaning, was a tool used to do any business. Today it has become a priority and even an objective. To access money, people are ready to bypass respect, laws, priorities, culture and sometimes they kill to reach money, such as we see what drug traffickers do on a daily basis. If you look at the various countries in the world, you will never find anybody who leaves this world with bags of money. What remains of people is their reputation, their achievements, their positive thoughts, and their contribution to humanity, rather than their wallets.

Respect is another element which seems to have disappeared from our world. When you see young drivers making extremely loud noise with their motorcycle or with their cars, it is obvious that they do not care about others. When people throw garbage on the streets, it shows that they do not care about our planet. When a country aims to revive its past history and tries to control another one, this means that what had been agreed upon, worldwide, such as international borders, nothing remains from past values

and decisions. If a country's aim is to attract investors, it should write its decisions in a language that foreigners can understand, which, unfortunately, is often not the case.

New technologies and artificial intelligence have taken over, and people use their phones as a source of real news, which quite often is information put on air because of particular interests, and seldom reflect an impartial view.

Punctuality was also very important in the past; out of respect to others one would reach the location of the meeting a couple of minutes earlier. Today, blaming traffic or lack of parking space, people reach their meeting point, sometimes half an hour late, if not more.

Generally, personal interests have overshadowed empathy, care of environment, laws and regulations and this change is a real danger for our world in the coming decades if we do not correct it. Education is a real important element which could contribute to correct these changes. Many countries expect their governments or their leaders to take the right decisions, but we all are responsible and if each of us changes his thoughts and environment, then countries and the world will witness the desired changes. Movies these days reflect this lack of values. Generally they talk about wars, invasions, destruction etc. Even novels talk more about aggression, wars, thefts etc, rather than friendship, love and hope.

In the past, confidentiality allowed exchange of information with trusted people. Today, even important security and highly confidential elements appear on your Whatsapp. Trust seems to have disappeared.

We go from a quasi-healthy world towards a chaotic one, allowing technology and greed to take over without realising it. Let us wake up and work on this challenge.

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Yanqul residents build their own 25,000m³ capacity dam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a remarkable feat of collaborative efforts among charitable groups and residents, a village in Yanqul, Dakhliyah, has constructed a dam of 25,000m³ capacity. This endeavour aims to enhance self-sufficiency in water and promote the growth of greenery in the area.

Known as Wadi Aahen Dam, the underground recharge facility was built at a cost of RO40,000 in the Hail Masoud area of Sadama al Darawsha village.

Badr al Essai, who led the project's supervising committee, said, "Construction work commenced in February 2022. The dam is at a height of 5m and is 12m long."

Constructed with stones and cement concrete, the dam adheres to strict technical and engineering standards of the Ministry



(Supplied photo)

of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. Built between two mountains, it incorporates two water discharge outlets.

The dam is the result of relentless efforts of citizens and logistical support provided by charitable groups in the govern-

orate. The dam's primary objectives include supplying groundwater to nearby farms and orchards, elevating the water level of existing wells in the village, and facilitating the expansion of green cover in its surrounding areas.

According to Essai, future plans for the project include development of a recreational zone adjacent to the dam. "This area will feature various amenities designed to attract tourists and serve as a destination for families in the region."

RO18,000-prize money OMQ Film Awards invites entries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Organisers of the OMQ Film Awards are inviting makers of short films to register for the second edition of the event. Offering prize money of RO18,000, the awards aim to elevate the Omani film industry and inspire aspiring filmmakers to showcase their talent.

Supported by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and OQ Company, and organised by OMQ Productions, the awards are committed to nurturing young Omani filmmakers and fostering a vibrant filmmaking culture in the country.

In an interview with *Muscat Daily*, Khalid al Abri, owner of OMQ Productions, said, "We encourage Omani youth to participate in the awards."

Considering the success of the inaugural edition in 2020, which saw the participation of 42 Omani films, Abri anticipates a



bigger response this year with over 50 films expected to compete.

"The awards' primary objectives are to support Omani youth, stoke passion for filmmaking, and encourage production of local films for regional and international competitions," Abri informed.

The awards were established in memory of three talented photographers - Mohammed al Nahdi, Ahmed al Abadi and Oman al Adawi - who tragically lost their lives in an accident.

The prize money - RO18,000

in all - will be awarded to winning films, actors, actresses, directors and production staff in different categories.

"The competition is open to all types of films - feature, documentary, 3D and animation. However, only Omani filmmakers can compete."

Abri further informed that films produced after January 25, 2022, can participate. Entries must be of two- to 15-minute duration. Films previously submitted for other competitions in Oman, screened for public viewing or shared on social media platforms will not be accepted.

"Films should be submitted in their final cut, with two versions - one with cast and credits and another without. Additionally, films can be in any language, provided there are Arabic subtitles if it's not in Arabic."

Filmmakers have until July 16, 2023, to submit their entries through the official website <https://award.omqpro.com/>

Dhofar Municipality offers incentives to vendors to bolster SMEs during khareef

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dhofar Municipality is taking steps to bolster small and medium enterprises (SMEs) by providing seven designated locations for street vendors during the ongoing khareef season in the governorate.

The municipality is offering stalls and carts to street vendors free of charge, aiming to support employment opportunities and foster entrepreneurship among

young Omanis.

Announcing the initiative, a Dhofar Municipality official stated, "Priority will be given to individuals holding Riyada Cards issued by the Authority for SME Development."

The deadline for submitting applications is July 2. Successful applicants will be exempt from fees and must employ Omani staff throughout the specified operating period from July 15 to October 15.

The allocated sites for street

vendors include Maqshen Oasis, Italat Hamrir, uptown area of Atteen plain, Darbat waterfalls, Canal Walk in Wadi Darbat, Ain Jerziz and Al Mughisail.

Additionally, in an effort to ensure food safety and adherence to health control measures, the municipality has launched a campaign to electronically monitor food preparation in restaurants and cafes. As part of the first phase, the campaign mandates the installation of HD surveillance cameras (CCTVs) in food prepa-

ration areas of restaurants, bakeries, cafes and commercial kitchens.

These establishments are required to have a television screen - minimum 32 inch - in the dining hall, enabling customers to observe real-time food and beverage preparation. The campaign's objectives include reducing violations, enhancing health control measures, and monitoring food preparation and staff performance to ensure the safety of visitors and overall food safety.

SalamAir starts flights to Rize

Muscat - SalamAir, Oman's low-cost carrier, has launched direct flights to the coastal city of Rize in Turkey. The airline now operates flights to Rize every Saturday and Tuesday, consolidating its position as one of the first international airlines to offer direct connectivity to this vibrant destination. With this addition, Sala-

mAir now operates a total of 18 weekly flights to Turkey, including Istanbul and Trabzon.

According to Capt Mohamed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, these new direct flights from Muscat to Rize establish SalamAir as a pivotal bridge connecting Rize with various local and international markets in the Middle East.

Unemployment, a growing challenge

Continued from Page 01

She pleaded with the government to promote employment opportunities for expats, especially women, citing examples of other countries.

Citing her own experience of struggling for two years before finding employment, Alyasa al Balushi, a 2020 graduate in Arts, Public Relations, Advertising and Communications from SQU, emphasised the need for the government to adopt an innovative approach, breaking away from the traditional methods to create more job opportunities.

Acknowledging the gap be-

tween academia and the evolving labour market, Dr Ahmed al Balushi, Dean of National University of Science and Technology, highlighted its efforts to promote entrepreneurship among students.

"We have launched an extensive entrepreneurship programme to encourage startups and SMEs. We are giving students an opportunity to prove themselves by empowering them in different areas," Balushi said.

That's a start but there's a great deal more needed before Oman's unemployment situation improves.

CONDOLENCES

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Non-oil sector to drive Oman's growth in '23

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Non-oil sector will drive Oman's economic growth in 2023, thanks to positive momentum and rapid expansion in a range of sectors in the sultanate, according to a new report.

'The outlook for Oman's non-oil sector remains positive, buoyed by government infrastructure spending, a surge in tourist arrivals, and falling inflation,' Emirates NBD, a leading bank of the UAE, said in a research report.

Emirates NBD forecasts Oman's real GDP growth at 1.7% for 2023, following 4.3% in the previous year. For non-oil GDP, Emirates NBD forecasted a growth of 3.5% this year.

'One of these (sectors) is tourism, with the sector bouncing back from the COVID-19 pandemic last year with 2.9mn visitors, marking an increase of 348% year-on-year and contributing to the 17.3% growth in restaurants and hotels GDP. 2023 got off to a strong start

with 177% year-on-year growth in visitors in January, and ongoing investment as part of the Oman Vision 2040 plan will help support this over the coming quarters with numerous new projects earmarked for the next two years,' the report said.

The report noted that nearly two-thirds of the visitors to Oman last year came from the UAE, and the development of the rail network between the two countries will help facilitate ongoing growth in these numbers in the years ahead.

Oman Rail and Etihad Rail have an agreement to develop the rail network from the UAE to Oman, which once passenger services are launched will make leisure travel between the two countries easier as it introduces travel times of 100 minutes between Abu Dhabi and the Omani port of Sohar.

'Crucially, the development of the railway will also buttress another key development industry in Oman, namely logistics, which has been earmarked by the Omani government as a key



target sector to support economic diversification from hydrocarbons,' Emirates NBD noted. It said the ongoing growth of new sectors will support new jobs in Oman, with the labour market having rebounded strongly since the pandemic.

Oman recorded real GDP growth of 4.3% in 2022, the

strongest rate of expansion since 2016. Growth was driven by the hydrocarbon sector which expanded 10.2% and totals just over a third of GDP. Oil GDP grew 11.0%, similar to the double-digit gains seen elsewhere in the GCC, while natural gas expanded 5.9%.

However, the non-oil sector was the laggard in 2022 as it

grew 1.6%.

'As with the rest of the GCC, our expectation is that the dynamics of growth in Oman will be reversed this year due to the voluntary oil output cut of 40,000 barrels per day that the country began in May and intends to continue through to the end of 2024 as things stand,' Emirates NBD said.

Improving fiscal environment

According to Emirates NBD report, Oman is arguably in a stronger growth position thanks in part to a marked improvement in its fiscal conditions over the past several years.

The bank estimates that Oman ran a budget surplus equivalent to 4.0% of GDP in 2022, its first in over 15 years, as the GCC benefited from higher oil prices and a ramp-up in production.

'Oil revenues are set to be lower this year, but with a fall in expenditure also anticipated as the integrated gas company means transportation expenses fall away, the budget will be only moderately negative, at -0.1% in 2023 according to our forecasts, and returning to surplus at 1.0% in 2024,' Emirates NBD said.

Oman's budget surplus increased to RO520mn during the first four months of 2023, compared to a surplus of RO468mn during the same period of last year, according to the Ministry of Finance data.

'The government has tempered any increase in its untargeted spending even as oil prices surged, instead focusing on a series of infrastructure projects that are aimed at supporting the economic diversification programme,' Emirates NBD said.

After ramping up rapidly in the years after the oil price collapse in 2014, government debt peaked at 70.0% of GDP in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic struck and oil demand fell off a cliff.

However, there has been solid progress in bringing debt down while conditions have been more favourable, and it fell to 40.1% last year and the government has paid off a further US\$2.9bn in loans in the first quarter.

This progress has led to a series of upgrades from the major ratings agencies, as Moody's upgraded its credit rating for Oman from Ba3 to Ba2 with a positive outlook last month, edging it closer to investment grade once again.

Galfar bags RO29mn contract from OQ

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company has been awarded a RO29mn worth of engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) contract by OQ Exploration & Production Company, a subsidiary of Oman's global integrated energy group OQ.

'We are pleased to inform our esteemed shareholders that Galfar signed a contract with OQ Exploration & Production for the EPC project of Bisat Permanent Power Supply Project at Block 60,' Galfar said in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange on Monday.

In January this year, OQ Exploration & Production had announced the commissioning of its third crude oil processing plant in the Bisat oil field in Block 60, raising the oil field's production capacity to 60,000 barrels per day.

Galfar said that the estimated value of this contract is 'approx-



imately RO29mn with an execution period of 26 months'.

'We take this opportunity to express our appreciation to OQ Exploration & Production for the confidence vested on Galfar through the award of this project,' Galfar added.

Galfar won several contracts this year, particularly in oil and gas sector.

Earlier in June, Galfar was awarded a massive contract worth RO280mn by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) for Off-Plot Delivery Contract Qarn

Alam.

Galfar estimates the value of this massive call-off contract to be approximately RO280mn for an execution period of seven years. The contract also includes an additional three-year extension option worth RO120mn.

According to Galfar's first-quarter 2023 financial report, for the period ended March 2023, the company continued to maintain a significant project pipeline of RO481mn supported by new project awards worth RO9.1mn in the first quarter of 2023.

France charges Lebanon bank chief's ex-assistant in graft probe

Paris, France - France on Friday charged a former assistant of Riad Salameh, the governor of Lebanon's Central Bank and a subject of judicial probes at home and abroad, with money laundering.

In March 2022, France, Germany and Luxembourg seized assets worth €120mn (US\$130mn approx) in a move linked to a probe into Salameh's wealth.

Salameh is accused of having amassed a fortune during some three decades in the job. Once hailed as the guardian of Lebanon's financial stability, he is being increasingly blamed for the country's financial meltdown.

Many say he helped precipitate the crisis.

Salameh's term ends in July. A judicial source said Marianne Hoayek (43) was questioned on Friday in Paris and placed under investigation for criminal conspiracy and money laundering.

"Marianne Hoayek contests



Lebanon's Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh

these accusations and will provide proof that these funds came mainly from donations from her father [- a rich businessman now deceased],'' her lawyer Mario Stasi told AFP.

Salameh (72) denies any

wrongdoing and says he built his fortune when he worked in US investment bank Merrill Lynch before becoming the governor of Lebanon's Central Bank in 1993.

Judicial authorities in France and Munich in Germany had is-

sued arrest warrants for Salameh over accusations including money laundering and fraud, and Interpol subsequently issued Red Notices targeting him.

An Interpol Red Notice is not an international arrest warrant but asks authorities worldwide to provisionally detain people pending possible extradition or other legal action.

European investigators had questioned Salameh in Beirut, also hearing from others including Hoayek and Salameh's brother Raja and central bank audit firms.

Lebanon does not extradite its nationals, but Salameh could go on trial in Lebanon if local judicial authorities decide the accusations against him are founded, an official previously told AFP.

Following the Red Notices, a local judge questioned Salameh, confiscated his French and Lebanese passports, banned him from travelling and released him pending investigation.

AFP

MSX soars with new initiatives and optimistic outlook

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a positive turn of events, the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) has experienced a rise in trading over the last five days of June.

This surge has propelled the main index to its highest monthly increase of the year, with a remarkable gain of 141 points.

Notably, 86 points were achieved in the final four days of the previous month, culminating in the main index closing at 4768 points, a level unseen since April 17.

This positive surge was mostly due to the new initiatives announced by the National Financial Sustainability Programme and the Oman Investment Authority allocating RO100mn to support liquidity on MSX.

The Muscat Stock Exchange, in collaboration with the National Financial Sustainability Programme, made a significant announcement on June 21.

This announcement introduced six initiatives aimed at



strengthening the stock exchange's position and attracting investments.

Among these initiatives are measures concerning market-makers, securities lending and borrowing, and the introduction of a Liquidity Fund.

The Liquidity Fund initiative was recently launched by the OIA in collaboration with the National Programme for Financial Sustainability and the Development of the Financial Sector.

Aown bin Abbas al Bahrani,

director general of public markets investment at the OIA, said that the Liquidity Fund Initiative is a portfolio worth RO100mn to support market-makers and liquidity providers on the Muscat Stock Exchange.

"This portfolio will constitute a percentage of the daily trading volume in the exchange, taking into account the activity of investors and their interaction with economic news and disclosures of listed companies," he said in a statement to Oman

News Agency.

This positive atmosphere is expected to resonate in July's trading at MSX, coinciding with public joint stock companies announcing their financial results for the first half of the year. These initiatives arrived amid a backdrop of robust national economic growth, propelled by increased government revenues and spending.

This promising outlook is anticipated to have a positive impact on the performance of

public shareholding companies listed on the stock exchange.

Throughout June, the exchange also reaped the benefits of favourable disclosures regarding anticipated mergers and the entry of strategic investors in select listed companies. Consequently, the stock market witnessed price increases in 43 securities, with 26 securities experiencing price declines and 25 securities maintaining stability at their previous levels.

While sectoral indices observed a general rise, the service sector index experienced a marginal decline of 6 points. In contrast, the financial sector index witnessed the most substantial surge, soaring by 271 points.

The industrial sector index also recorded a notable increase of 155 points, while the Sharia index reached a significant growth of 478 points, marking a rise of 12 points.

With the combined impact of new initiatives, positive economic conditions, and upcoming financial disclosures, the Muscat Stock Exchange sets its sights on a promising and vibrant future.

US stocks end strong second quarter with buoyant session

New York, US - Wall Street stocks concluded a winning quarter with a flourish on Friday, cheering better inflation data as Apple surged to a valuation of over US\$3tn.

All three indices spent the entire session in positive territory after the personal consumption expenditures index measure of inflation eased to 3.8% year-on-year in May, a significant drop from 4.3% a month earlier.

The data, which is closely monitored by the Federal Reserve, comes on the heels of other economic reports this week on first-quarter growth and consumer confidence that have added to hopes the US economy can avoid a recession.

The broad-based S&P 500 finished at 4,450.38, up 1.2% for the day and more than eight percent for the quarter.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 0.8% to 34,407.60, while the tech-rich Nasdaq Composite Index advanced 1.5% to 13,787.92.

Apple shares jumped 2.3% to conclude a session above US\$3tn in market value for the first time, as it busted through another new landmark.

Apple's surge helps the broader market because "it's kind of hard for the bears to argue we are in a bear market if you have key stocks like Apple making new highs," said Tom Cahill, director of investment management at Ventura Wealth Management.

Elsewhere, Nike shares fell 2.7% after it reported lower earnings than expected due to elevated freight and logistics costs, and the drag from discounted merchandise.

AFP

Abu Dhabi's non-oil economy grows to nine-year high in Q1

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Statistics Centre - Abu Dhabi (SCAD) has published statistical estimates that show growth of Abu Dhabi's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the first quarter of 2023 by 3.9% compared to the first quarter in 2022, driven by the robust performance of non-oil economic activities in the emirate.

The statistical estimates indicate a remarkable 6.1% growth in non-oil GDP during the first quarter of 2023, propelled by exceptional performances in construction, wholesale and retail trade, transportation and storage, and financial and insurance services.

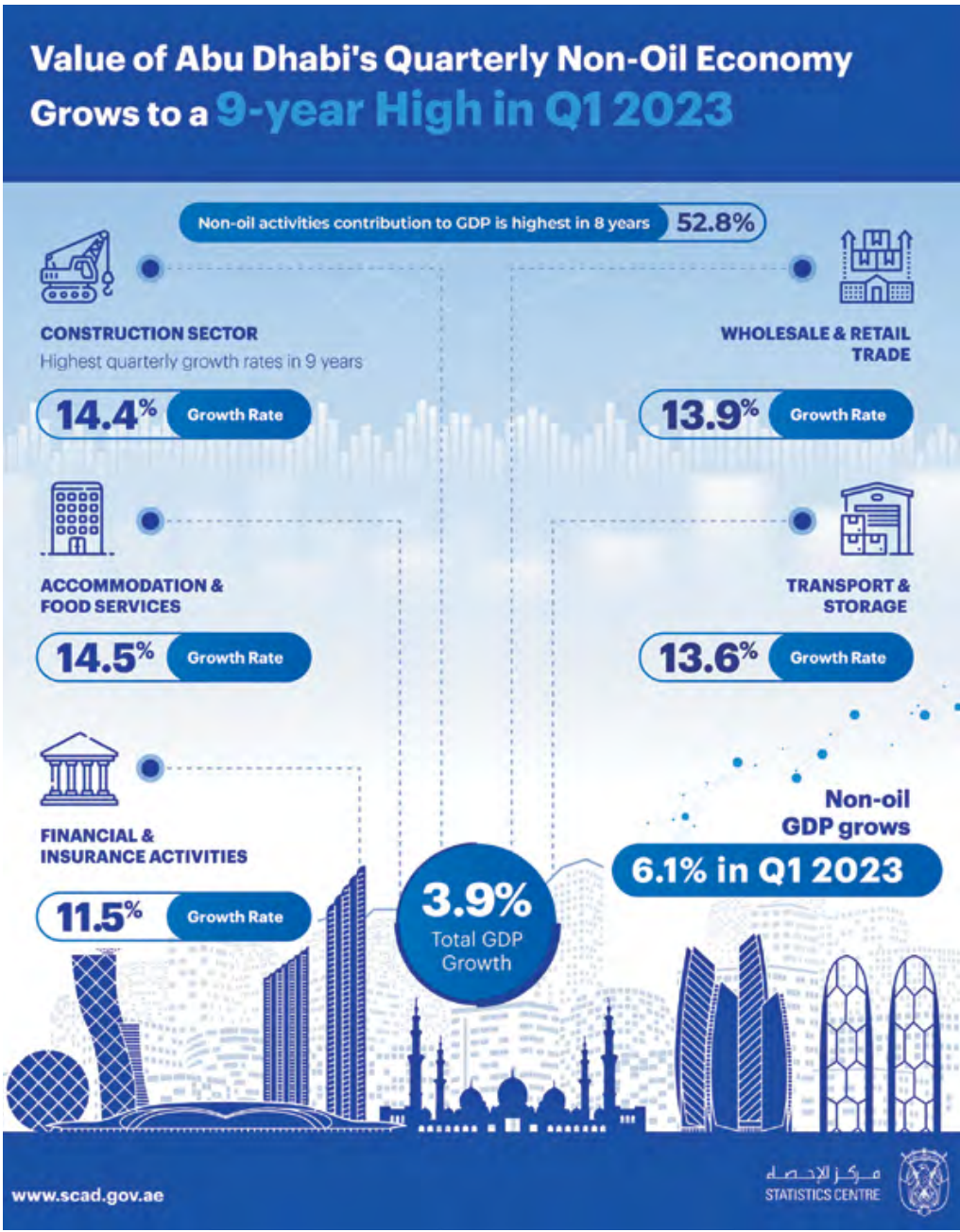
This growth reflects the successful integration of various economic sectors, as a result of the relentless and continuous efforts to maintain the emirate's economic diversification.

According to estimates, the non-oil GDP (at constant prices) surpassed the highest quarterly value of the past nine years, reaching AED146bn in the first quarter of 2023 compared to AED137.7bn in the first quarter of 2022, as the total GDP reached AED276.6bn.

This outstanding growth brought the contribution of non-oil activities to the total GDP to its highest level in eight years at 52.8%.

Ahmed Jasim al Zaabi, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development (ADDED), said, "Abu Dhabi is committed to strengthening its economic scene by achieving a strong, stable, smart and sustainable knowledge-economy. The non-oil activities have been experiencing strong growth rates of non-oil sectors and share of its contribution to the total GDP to 52.8%, despite mounting challenges in the global landscape."

Zaabi further added, "Foster-



Non-oil economic activities account for 52.8% of GDP in Q1 2023	Construction sector achieves the highest quarterly growth rate in nine years	Wholesale and retail, transport and storage sectors show significant growth	Q1 GDP growth of almost 4% is driven by a strong performance of non-oil activities
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ing Abu Dhabi's resilient and diversified economy will continue to be the key focus for decades to come while developing human capital, attracting the best talent, investments, and economic partners. Building upon the latest sta-

tistical data, Abu Dhabi is further opening its economy to the world, strengthening the emirate's appeal as an ideal market for foreign investors, businesses, start-ups, and entrepreneurs from around the world."

Abdulla Gharib Alqemzi, Acting Director General of the Statistics Centre - Abu Dhabi, stated, "The quarterly estimates of the Gross Domestic Product statistics reveal the continued growth of the economy of the

Emirate of Abu Dhabi at remarkable rates. This growth presents increased opportunities for attracting investments and capital while reflecting the success of the ambitious vision embraced by the wise leadership in enhancing the emirate's global prominence."

Alqemzi further added, "The first quarter of 2023 witnessed a strong performance of non-oil activities, characterised by exceptional growth rates. These rates have contributed significantly to the overall percentage of this sector's contribution to the emirate's GDP, reaching unprecedented levels.

"This accomplishment showcases the emirate's success in creating an investment climate that fosters economic awareness among the current and future investor community."

According to the statistical results published by the Statistics Centre - Abu Dhabi, the wholesale and retail trade sector in Abu Dhabi has sustained expansion, with a notable growth of 13.9% during the first quarter of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022.

The added value of this sector reached its highest quarterly level in the past nine years, contributing 6% to the gross domestic product, showcasing the remarkable growth witnessed by the local markets in the Emirate.

It is worth noting that Abu Dhabi's economy achieved the highest growth rates in the Middle East and North Africa region in 2022.

During this period, the GDP recorded an impressive growth of 9.3%, showcasing consistent growth, and reaffirming the leading position of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, due to its competitiveness and favourable investment climate, which continues to attract businesses and investors.



L-R: Swedish Prime minister Ulf Kristersson, European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during a press conference in Brussels on Friday (AFP)

EU eyes €3bn a year for Ukraine from Russian asset tax

Brussels, Belgium - The European Union could raise €3bn a year for Ukraine's reconstruction by taxing the interest earned by Russian central bank assets frozen in the bloc, Belgium's Prime Minister said on Friday.

"We are working on a windfall tax on profits," Alexander De Croo said after a summit of European Union leaders in Brussels. "The estimate is that €3bn (US\$3.3bn) per year could be used for the reconstruction of Ukraine," he said.

The EU has frozen some €200bn of Russian central bank assets as punishment for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. De Croo said that about 90% of those funds are held in Belgium, which hosts the headquarters of the international deposit organisation Euroclear.

He said there was a 'political consensus' among the EU's 27 leaders to apply the windfall tax.

But German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was far more cautious, saying that "there is no proposal that is currently ready for legislation".

"It is all terribly complicated and nobody knows at the moment what is possible," he added.

In the formal conclusions from their summit, the EU leaders said only that they asked the EU's executive, the European Commission, to take work forward "with international partners" on how to use frozen Russian assets.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the executive would soon come forward with a proposal focused 'prudently' on targeting the profits from Russian assets.

"It cannot be that Russia destroys vast parts of the infrastructure of Ukraine and is not contributing to the repair and reconstruction," she said.

EU diplomats say that about €100bn of the Russian central bank assets is in cash, earning roughly 3%, and that is what would be subject to the tax.

Diplomats say once the commission has come up with a proposal the EU would seek to work with its partners from the G7 to make the measures broader.

The European Central Bank and countries including Germany fear that using the Russian assets could scare off other investors from keeping their funds in euros.

AFP

Ethiopia relaunches process for 2nd private telecoms operator

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - Ethiopia announced on Friday it was relaunching the process to issue a second private telecommunications licence as it continues to open up the sector.

The Ethiopian Communications Authority said in a statement it "invites world-class telecommunications operators to come forward and take part in this exciting opportunity to operate within Ethiopia's rapidly growing economy".

Kenyan telecoms giant Safaricom last year became the first private telecommunications operator in Africa's second most populous country, ending a monopoly under the fully state-

owned Ethio Telecom.

In 2021, Ethiopia had issued a tender for two telecoms licences, with one awarded to Safaricom, while a bid by South Africa's MTN was deemed too low and turned down.

In February, the Ethiopian government said it planned to sell up to 45% of Ethio Telecom, part of a push to open up the tightly controlled economy in the country of about 120mn people.

Ending the state monopoly in the telecoms sector is a key component of an economic reform package that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced after coming to power in 2018.

AFP

Argentina makes IMF loan repayment partly with yuan

Buenos Aires, Argentina - Short on dollars, Argentina on Friday made a US\$2.7bn loan repayment to the International Monetary Fund partly using Chinese yuan, the economy ministry said.

To avoid dipping into its limited foreign currency reserves, the country also used so-called Special Drawing Rights - an asset created by the IMF to supplement countries' official reserves - for part of the payment due.

IMF spokeswoman Julie Kozack in a statement confirmed, "The Argentine authorities continue to remain current on their financial obligations to



the Fund."

Government spokeswoman Gabriela Cerruti told reporters on Thursday the payment would be made "partly with Special Drawing Rights of the Treasury and

partly with yuan, without using Central Bank reserves".

Argentina reached a deal with the IMF last year to restructure a loan of US\$44bn - the legacy of a record loan contracted in 2018

under former president Mauricio Macri.

Argentina is the target of the largest IMF assistance program as it grapples with year-on-year inflation exceeding 100%, a severe shortage of foreign exchange and a poverty level of about 40%.

A record drought has seen agriculture exports plummet.

In April, the South American country announced it would use yuan to pay for Chinese imports instead of US dollars in order to preserve its reserves following a currency swap agreement with Beijing.

Kozack said technical discussions continue with Argentina "on a policy package to safeguard economic stability in the context of a challenging situation, partly affected by the historic drought".

"Discussions are focused on strengthening macroeconomic policies to support reserve accumulation and improve fiscal sustainability, while protecting the most vulnerable."

A refinancing deal struck last year requires of Argentina to boost its international reserves and reduce the fiscal deficit.

AFP

Major firms warn EU over plans to regulate artificial intelligence

Brussels, Belgium - More than 150 leading companies warned the EU's plan to regulate artificial intelligence risk harming Europe's competitiveness and do not go far enough to tackle challenges, in a letter seen by AFP on Friday.

There have been growing calls for regulation after an array of examples like OpenAI's chatbot ChatGPT passing medical and bar exams that have demonstrated AI's dizzying advances but also the possible risks.

The European Parliament earlier this month backed a draft law that will be the basis for the world's first comprehensive

rules for AI.

It includes specific provisions for generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT and Dall-E, capable of producing text, images and other media.

The parliament and the EU's 27 member states will negotiate on the regulation before it is approved and the bloc wants to strike a deal by the end of the year. The rules stipulate that AI-generated content must be declared as such and bans some AI including real-time facial recognition systems.

"In our assessment, the draft legislation would jeopardise Europe's competitiveness and technological sovereignty with-



Members of the European parliament take part in a voting sessions on the AI act in mid-June (AFP)

out effectively tackling the challenges we are and will be facing," executives from France's Airbus, Peugeot and Renault, Germany's Siemens, and Facebook parent firm Meta said in the open letter to EU institutions.

They warned under the draft law, generative AI "would be heavily regulated" and that such regulation could lead "highly innovative companies" to move their activities abroad and investors withdrawing their capital from the development in Europe.

"The result would be a critical productivity gap between the two sides of the Atlantic," they

added.

One of the MEPs who spearheaded the legislation through parliament, Dragos Tudorache, said he was 'convinced' the executives had 'not carefully read the text', adding the 'concrete suggestions' made in the letter had already been included in the text.

"It is a pity that the aggressive and misleading lobby of a few is capturing other serious companies in the net," Tudorache said.

He said, "[T]he complaint undermines the undeniable lead that Europe has taken in this file on the global stage."

AFP

India's national security advisor visits Oman

Muscat - Ajit Doval, the National Security Advisor (NSA) of India, paid an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman on June 26.

During his visit, Doval called on His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and delivered a personal message of greetings from Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He also had a wide ranging discussions with Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Nomani, Minister of the Royal Office, and Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister of the Sultanate of Oman.

The discussions enabled a high-level review of the multi-faceted bilateral relations between India and the sultanate with focus on strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation in key areas for economic and technological development, mutual security and regional



stability.

The visit by India's top security advisor reflects the strong

bilateral relationship between India and Oman, the importance of Oman as a key partner

for India in the Gulf and highlights India's commitment to strengthening its strategic partnership with Oman, the Indian Embassy stated.

The visit provided an oppor-

tunity for high-level engagements and further cemented the strong bonds of friendship

between India and the Sultanate of Oman, it further added.

BWH Hotels expands in ME

Princess Muna al Hussein of Jordan becomes ADI Honorary Ambassador

BWH Hotels, one of the world's leading hotel companies, is celebrating continuous expansive growth of its 19 distinctive brands across every chain scale segment - from luxury to premium economy - adding several new properties to its global portfolio of hotels and resorts.

Most recently, the company has expanded in North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia.

"Travellers will be pleased to find the increased presence of BWH Hotels properties in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Austria, Canada, Ethiopia, France, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand and the United States," the company stated.

"This summer season, we are excited to offer travellers even more convenient accommodations in key destinations around the world," said Larry Cuculic, President and Chief Executive Officer, BWH Hotels.

"We are growing our global presence thoughtfully to serve our valued guests wherever their travels take them. From upscale, luxury and lifestyle hotels to midscale, premium economy and extended stay brands, BWH Hotels offers properties that cater to all travel needs."

"It is with great enthusiasm that we invite new properties to



join our distinguished global portfolio," said Ron Pohl, President, International Operations and WorldHotels.

"I am particularly proud of the continued growth of WorldHotels. By becoming a member of WorldHotels, these fine independent hotels benefit from the reputation and strong global presence of BWH Hotels while maintaining their individuality. We are excited to share these new properties with travellers for their upcoming globetrotting adventures."

BWH Hotels has maintained its momentum through the first half of the year with plans to continue its growth and development in the third and fourth quarters. The brand looks forward to further growing its di-

verse portfolio, which now includes approximately 4,300 hotels in over 100 countries and territories around the world, while providing travelers with unique offerings and experiences.

"We continue to celebrate the rapid expansion of our boutique brands like Aiden across the U.S. and other global markets, as well as ongoing growth of our timeless brands," said Brad LeBlanc, Senior Vice President and Chief Development Officer, BWH Hotels.

"We remain focused on evolving our offerings to resonate with modern travelers and developers and delivering the authentic experiences that make BWH Hotels stand out as a global hospitality company."

Her Royal Highness Princess Muna al Hussein of Jordan has become an Honorary Ambassador of Alzheimer's Disease International (ADI), the federation of 105 Alzheimer and dementia association from around the world.

Princess Muna is an internationally renowned figure in global health and is the World Health Organization's (WHO) patron of nursing and midwifery in the Eastern Mediterranean region and an honorary adviser for the WHO Collaborating Centre for Nursing Development in Jordan.

"I am delighted to have been appointed an Honorary Ambassador of ADI," Princess Muna said on her new appointment.

She reminded that dementia is a condition which affects millions globally, with particularly high numbers forecast for the Middle East and North Africa region. "In my capacity as Honorary Ambassador, I look forward to raising awareness of dementia, as we work towards improving the lives of all of those living with the condition, their carers and families."

Princess Muna will be the first ADI Ambassador from the Middle East and joins Queen Silvia of



Paola Barbarino

Princess Muna al Hussein

Sweden, Queen Sofia of Spain and the Luis Guillermo Solís Rivera, Former President of Costa Rica in this role.

ADI chief executive officer Paola Barbarino said that the members of the organisation are delighted and honoured that "Her Royal Highness Princess Muna al Hussein has accepted our invitation to become an Ambassador of ADI".

"Her outstanding work in global health and nursing will be critical for raising awareness about the condition, which is expected to affect over 13.8mn people by 2050 in the MENA region," she noted.

for Alzheimer's Patients Care Association and the Middle East we are beyond honoured to work alongside HRH Princess Muna Al Hussein in dementia care and welcome the news of HRH becoming the Honorary Ambassador to Alzheimer's Disease International.

Her Royal Highness's passion and commitment to improving the lives of people with dementia and their caregivers is an inspiration to us all. We are confident that, together, we can make a real difference in the fight against this condition."

Estimates show that 55 million people live with dementia globally, a figure set to increase to 139 million by 2050.

Within the Middle East and North Africa, WHO data shows that the number of people living with dementia currently is around 3 million people, a number predicted to increase by 367 percent to over 13.8 million cases by 2050.

The figures for Jordan are equally concerning with over 37,000 people living with the condition, a number set to increase by over 500% to over 232,000 by 2050.

Sharjah Summer Promotions opens with surprises, exclusive discounts across emirate

The Sharjah Summer Promotions, an annual summer bonanza organised by the Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), commenced on Saturday, marking the start of a 65-day extravaganza filled with promotions, mega discounts, entertainment events, and valuable prizes across the emirate.

Considered one of the key events in Sharjah's annual retail calendar, this year's edition holds special significance as it celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Sharjah Summer Promotions under the slogan 'Ya Hala Bsaifna in Sharjah' (Welcome Summer in Sharjah).

To commemorate this milestone, residents and visitors will enjoy discounts ranging from 25% to 75% on renowned international brands, along with attractive promotions at shopping malls and stores throughout Sharjah.

Sharjah Summer Promotions 2023 rewards shoppers spending AED100 or more with a chance to win a wide range of prizes.

The Sharjah Chamber has al-



Mohammed al Awadi

Ibrahim Rashid al Jarwan

Abdulaziz Mohammed Shattaf

located vouchers worth over AED100,000, as well as hotel packages, tourist packages, and a grand draw for a brand-new Nissan Patrol 2023.

Additionally, shopping malls across the emirate have dedicated valuable prizes for participants.

Mohammed Ahmed Amin al Awadi, Director General of the Sharjah Chamber, said that this year, the Emirate of Sharjah is set to immerse itself in a vibrant and festive summer atmosphere, bringing joy to both residents and visitors during the Sharjah Summer Promotions.

"Celebrating its milestone 20th anniversary, the event

stands as one of the emirate's most significant commercial happenings," Awadi added.

He noted that retailers and shopping centres are eagerly participating to capitalise on the heightened spending trends during this season filled with enticing events, discounts, competitive prices, and prizes, as well as a plethora of recreational activities catering to diverse age groups and visitors.

For his part, Abdulaziz Mohammed Shattaf, Assistant Director-General of the Communication and Business Sector at the Sharjah Chamber, stated that this year's edition will be exceptional in every aspect,

reflecting the chamber's commitment to organising successful festivals and performances throughout the year.

"With over five decades of experience in organizing leading economic events, the Sharjah Chamber collaborates with its strategic partners from the public and private sectors to bolster the retail sector, drive economic growth, and encourage businesses both within and outside the emirate to invest, expand, and establish companies."

Shattaf also emphasised the importance of strengthening Sharjah's tourism presence to solidify its position as the leading attraction in the region.

Ibrahim Rashid al Jarwan, Director of the Economic Relations and Marketing Department, SCCI, said that Sharjah Summer Promotions has become the perfect destination for those seeking a blend of shopping, savings, and cultural experiences, given the emirate's rich historical and tourist attractions.

He described it as a golden period for the retail sector, with commercial centers and retail stores actively competing to attract a wide range of visitors and shoppers.

They do so by launching compelling offers, competitively pricing their products, and providing extensive discounts, catering to the shopping and entertainment needs of a diverse audience spanning various ages and nationalities.

Jarwan also stressed that the Sharjah Chamber is committed to continually enhancing the Sharjah Summer Promotions in collaboration with its strategic partners, ensuring that they align with the wide-ranging and fast-paced developments occurring throughout Sharjah.

Ooredoo's high-speed 5G network coverage spreads across Oman

Ooredoo is celebrating being the first in Oman to have 5G coverage across the country.

"Whether you have to share huge files for work, want to download an entire TV series, game, chat, share or snap 24/7, Ooredoo's high-speed and responsive 5G network is here to meet your every need," the company stated in a release.

"5G is the next generation of mobile network technology that can take your life and business to new heights. Imagine no compromises on download speeds or coverage, even when you are on the go or share a busy office or household using the same network", it further said.

Ooredoo 5G is set to upgrade every customer's world, no matter what their needs and whether individual or business.

Thanks to ultra-low latency, the transformative technology provides faster speeds for huge data transfer and heavier streaming.

With an ever-growing network, Ooredoo's high quality and super-fast 5G has paved the way for keeping people across Oman connected and providing an awesome experience.

As leader in the telecoms industry, and partly through the enhanced rollout of the ultra-fast 5G, Ooredoo continues to provide a seamless, omni-channel digital experience. 5G is the future of wireless technology and supports Ooredoo in further improving the customer journey.

Find out more about Ooredoo's 5G network, products and services through the Ooredoo Website, App, the eShop or at one of Ooredoo's stores, conveniently located across Oman.

Hamas puts its weapons on public display for first time

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - The armed wing of Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas has put its weapons on public display for the first time, drawing hundreds of Palestinians including children brandishing rocket launchers for selfies.

Dressed in black balaclavas and tactical camouflage suits, members of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades mingled with young men and women at the exhibition in Gaza City's Unknown Soldier's Square.

"Resistance is an image and a memory. Take souvenir photos with many of Al-Qassam's weapons," the group said in an

invitation on social media and posters in mosques.

The event was the first at which Hamas has allowed the public to take photos of weapons. It follows the latest surge in worsening Israeli-Palestinian violence, which cost 16 Palestinian and four Israeli lives in the occupied West Bank over six days in late June.

In May, fighter groups in Gaza and Israel traded cross-border fire for five days, killing 34 Palestinians, among them six commanders of the Islamic Jihad, fighters from other Palestinian armed groups and civilians including children. One



A Palestinian poses for a souvenir picture with an RPG launcher during an exhibition by the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades in Gaza City on Friday (AFP)

Israeli woman died. Among the Hamas weapons on display in Gaza City on Friday were a range of locally

manufactured missiles, 'Shihab' drones, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and Russian-made 'Kornet' missiles.

Exhibitions are also scheduled to take place on Saturday in the north and centre of the Gaza Strip, where people are normally forbidden to approach and photograph military sites.

At the entrance to the Gaza City exhibition a banner welcomed visitors, some of whom had come with their families and children, an AFP correspondent said.

Dozens of uniformed Al-Qassam Brigades members were on hand.

'Proud of the resistance'

A young boy in fatigues and wearing a green Brigades headband smiled for the cameras as a man propped a rocket launcher on his shoulder.

Another held the controls of an anti-aircraft gun as young men posed in front of a display of rockets on stands. "I came with my family to take photos with the weapons and reinforce the spirit of resistance in our children," said Gaza resident Abu Mohammed Abu Shakian.

The exhibition is 'encouraging and means that the liberation of our land is near', added

Shahadeh Dalou, who also came with his children.

Bassam Darwish, 58, said people wanted to show their support for the Al-Qassam Brigades. "Everyone is happy and proud of the Al-Qassam exhibition. We are here because we're proud of the resistance," he said.

Around 2.3mn Palestinians live in the impoverished Gaza Strip which has been under a crippling Israeli-led blockade since Hamas seized power in 2007. Israel and Palestinian fighter groups in Gaza have fought several wars since.

AFP

Death toll from Kenya road disaster reaches 49

Nairobi, Kenya - The death toll from a grisly road crash in western Kenya has risen to 49, a government minister said on Saturday, as rescuers worked to clear the wreckage where more victims are feared trapped.

In one of the deadliest accidents in Kenya for several years, a truck carrying a shipping container veered out of control and ploughed into multiple other vehicles and people at a busy road junction on Friday evening, police said.

"Unfortunately we lost 49 people in an accident here in Londiani," Transport Minister Kipchumba Murkomen told reporters during a visit to the scene of the disaster.

"Investigations have been launched to establish the cause of this accident but we urge drivers to be cautious and follow the rules," he added.

Rescuers have resumed a search for victims of the crash, which occurred on a highway between the lakeside town of Nakuru and Kericho, an area known for its lush tea plantations. "The search has resumed and we want to remove two of the bodies in the wreckage, we don't know if they are more," Rift Valley Regional Commissioner Abdi Hassan said.

He said more than 30 people were also injured when the truck rammed into cars, minibuses, boda bodas (motorcycle taxis) and market stalls at the teeming Londiani junction.



The wreckage of a vehicle is seen after an accident on the highway between the towns of Kericho and Nakuru in Kenya on Friday (AFP)

Investigations have been launched to establish the cause of this accident but we urge drivers to be cautious and follow the rules

KIPCHUMBA MURKOMEN

Footage from the scene late on Friday showed the overturned truck and the mangled wreckage of multiple vehicles, doors torn

off minibuses and debris strewn across the road, as rescuers worked under pouring rain.

Officials had given a death toll of 48 late on Friday.

The fate of the truck driver was not immediately clear.

'People screaming'

Kenyan leaders including President William Ruto expressed their condolences after the accident and Londiani was trending on social media, with many people posting sombre pictures of a candle next to the word Londiani on Twitter.

"The accident happened in a flash, many of them had no time to escape," said one witness, Joel Rotich.

"There was a lot of confusion because people were screaming all over and everyone was running after the accident."

Murkomen said on Saturday that the government planned to organise for street traders to move from roadside areas to designated markets in a bid to avoid such catastrophes in future. He also called for increased safety measures at the site of the accident and for long-distance

truck drivers to ensure they have proper rest breaks and also take refresher courses.

According to figures from Kenya's National Transport and Safety Authority, at least 21,760 people were involved in road accidents last year, including 4,690 who died.

Last July, at least 34 people perished when a bus plunged into a river at a notorious blackspot in central Kenya, while a bus crash in October 2018 in Kericho county claimed the lives of 50 people.

AFP



Brazilian former President, Jair Bolsonaro, speaks to the press at the Juscelino Kubitschek International Airport in Brasilia on Friday (AFP)

Brazil's Bolsonaro to appeal against public office ban

Brasilia, Brazil - Brazil's far-right ex-president Jair Bolsonaro vowed on Friday to appeal a court ruling barring him from public office for eight years over unfounded attacks he had made against the country's voting system.

The ruling renders the 68-year-old ineligible to stand in the next presidential election in 2026 - opening the contest for a new leader for Brazil's political right.

Bolsonaro was tried by the Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE) over claims he made in a televised meeting with foreign diplomats in July 2022, during which he claimed electronic voting machines in use since 1996 compromised election transparency.

He gave no proof for the claims he made just three months ahead of his election defeat to leftist Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Prosecutors say Bolsonaro's claims contributed to a violent invasion of the presidential palace, Congress and Supreme

Court in January by supporters angry about his electoral loss.

In a verdict that stretched over several days, five of the seven judges of the TSE in Brasilia voted to censure Bolsonaro for alleged abuses of power. Two found in his favour.

The former president told journalists the TSE decision was a 'stab in the back' and he would appeal to the Supreme Court.

"I'm not dead, we're going to keep working," Bolsonaro told journalists in Belo Horizonte in Brazil's southeast - far from the court in Brasilia.

"This is not the end of the right in Brazil," he insisted.

The lead judge on the case, Benedito Gonçalves, had ruled on Tuesday to convict Bolsonaro, saying he had used 'violent speech and lies' that 'endangered the credibility' of Brazil's electoral system. Gonçalves said the 2022 meeting 'served to incite a state of collective paranoia' about elections at a time Brazil was deeply polarised.

AFP

Somalia: AU force fulfils first phase of drawdown

Mogadishu, Somalia - The African Union force in conflict-torn Somalia said it has completed the first phase of a troop reduction aimed at eventually putting security fully in the hands of the national army and police.

The African Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) said in a statement dated Friday that a total of seven bases had been handed over to Somali security forces, enabling the drawdown of 2,000 troops by the June 30 deadline.

ATMIS chief logistics officer Bosco Sibondavyi described the handover as an 'important milestone' in the implementation of the Somalia Transition Plan and UN Security Council resolutions on the transfer of security responsibility. The Security Council on Tuesday renewed for six months its

authorisation of the AU force, which has a deadline of the end of September for the departure of a further 3,000 soldiers.

The ATMIS contingent had included over 19,000 soldiers and police officers from several African nations including Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, but will have to be reduced to zero by the end of 2024. In April 2022, the Council approved the replacement of AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia), which had been set up in 2007, by ATMIS, a mission with a reinforced mandate to fight Al-Shabaab Islamists.

The group having links with Al-Qaeda, has been waging a bloody insurgency against the government in Mogadishu for more than 15 years.

AFP

'Agenda 47': What Trump has promised if he wins

Washington, US - From unleashing a fleet of flying cars to executing drug dealers, Donald Trump has not been coy about his unorthodox vision for America as he seeks to retake the White House.

The former president and frontrunning Republican candidate for 2024 - sometimes accused of lacking a clear political philosophy - has explained in speeches and a series of 'Agenda 47' policy videos how he would govern.

Often thin on detail, the eye-catching pronouncements form the backbone of a platform that Trump says will 'make America great and glorious again'.

Critics say it spells out why he should never be allowed to return to the Oval Office as the country's 47th president.

The Jetsons revisited?

One of Trump's more striking proposals is a competition to design up to 10 state-of-the-art



Former US President Donald Trump gestures after delivering remarks at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster, New Jersey, on June 13 (AFP)

'freedom cities' - roughly the size of Washington - on federal land.

Built around cutting-edge 'hives of industry' brimming with factories, these innovation hubs would represent a 'quantum leap in the American standard of living'. Trump envisages commuters darting about in flying cars in an echo of *The Jetsons*, the space-age 1960s cartoon about a family living in an automated,

push-button future.

Year-long birthday bash

Trump has proposed a 'Salute to America', honouring the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, with 'an entire year of festivities across the nation' from Memorial Day 2025 through July 4, 2026.

"I will work with all 50 govern-

nors, Republican and Democrat alike, to create the Great American State Fair, a unique one-year exhibition featuring pavilions from all 50 states," he said. "It'll be something."

An American utopia

Trump wants to launch 'a great beautification campaign' to improve US cities, making the streets more pleasant for ordinary Americans.

The Republican, whose Las Vegas hotel was named one of the world's ugliest skyscrapers by Architectural Digest, says he wants to replace grotesque buildings with 'magnificent' classical architecture. Streets would be renamed in honour of 'great American patriots' while the homeless, on threat of arrest, would be sent to tent cities on 'large parcels of inexpensive land'.

A new war on drugs

The former president has vowed to designate Mexican cartels as

foreign terrorist organisations and to impose the death penalty on drug dealers and people traffickers.

The former president pardoned multiple dealers during his time in the White House and struggled to grasp the apparent contradiction during a Fox News interview in mid-June.

He boasted of pardoning a convict who had been in prison for 21 years for involvement in a cocaine ring, and became flustered when the network pointed out that she would have been executed under his new policy.

Trump has promised to issue pardons to 'a large portion' of the rioters jailed after the deadly 2021 assault on the US Capitol.

More than 600 of his supporters have been convicted over the worst attack on the seat of US democracy in two centuries - with some 140 police wounded with flag poles, baseball bats and pepper spray.

AFP

IN BRIEF

One dead, one missing as Japan hit by heavy rain

Tokyo, Japan - Heavy rains across parts of Japan have left one person dead and at least one missing, authorities said on Saturday, as they issued evacuation warnings for nearly two million residents.

The country's weather agency has warned of potential landslides, flooding and other disasters in western, central and eastern Japan, as a seasonal rain front triggered strong downpours.

In Yamaguchi prefecture, 'a man was found dead' inside a car that had been washed into a river, a local police official told AFP.

Suicides in Singapore rise to 22-year high

Singapore - Suicides in Singapore rose nearly 26 per cent last year to their highest level in more than two decades, reflecting the 'unseen mental distress' in the city-state, according to a local NGO. The suicide rates among young people aged 10-29 and elderly people aged 70-79 were particularly concerning, the prevention centre Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) said in its annual press release containing statistics on the issue. A total of 476 individuals killed themselves in 2022, 'the highest recorded suicide deaths since 2000', up from 378 the year before, the SOS release said.

NASA helicopter ends 63 day-radio silence

Washington, US - NASA has re-established contact with the intrepid Ingenuity Mars Helicopter after more than two months of radio silence, the space agency said on Friday. The mini rotorcraft has already survived well beyond its initial 30-day mission to prove the feasibility of its technology in five test flights. Since then, it has been deployed dozens of times, acting as an aerial scout to assist its wheeled companion in searching for signs of ancient microbial life from billions of years ago, when Mars was much wetter and warmer.

AFP

Cambodian PM Hun Sen kicks off campaign in one-sided election

Phnom Penh, Cambodia - Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen kicked off a three-week election campaign on Saturday, with his party poised to sweep the one-sided contest after the top challenger was barred from taking part.

Cambodians will vote on July 23 in an election widely seen as a sham after authorities denied registration to the Candlelight Party - considered the only viable rival to Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party.

Hun Sen - who has ruled Cambodia for 38 years - told a sea of tens of thousands of supporters dressed in party T-shirts and hats that his government would build more roads and schools while boosting wages and economic growth.

He also vowed to eradicate 'hostile circles seeking to incite national division, social chaos and political instability'.

"If the Cambodian People's Party wins, the Cambodian people are the winners," he told the crowd.

Hun Sen - one of the world's longest-serving leaders - has hinted he will retire in the near future. He has backed his eldest son Hun Manet, a four-star gen-



Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen (right) and President of Cambodia's National Assembly Heng Samrin release doves during a rally for the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in Phnom Penh on Saturday (AFP)

It's a stab in the back to the people of Cambodia. They don't have a choice. It's more of the same

PHIL ROBERTSON

eral, to succeed him.

At Saturday's rally, he handed the party's flag to Hun Manet, who led a convoy of scooters, cars and banner-festooned trucks carrying musical performers on a procession through Phnom Penh's streets.

Party supporter Yin Linda said she hoped Hun Manet, who was educated in Britain and the

United States, would 'bring new ideas from overseas to develop our country's prosperity'.

But a tuk-tuk driver who didn't want to be named characterised the election as 'meaningless' and said that opposition supporters were deeply unhappy with the state of Cambodian politics.

"The international community will not accept the results," the

50-year-old said.

Hun Sen's party won every seat in the 2018 national election after a court dissolved the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party.

Human Rights Watch's Asia Division deputy director Phil Robertson dismissed the election campaign as 'Hun Sen going through the motions... claiming that this is democracy in action'.

"When in reality he's done everything possible to make sure he faces no real opposition whatsoever," Robertson added. "It's a stab in the back to the people of Cambodia. They don't have a choice. It's more of the same."

Opposition suppressed

Cambodia's parliament last week approved laws to ban anyone who fails to vote in this year's poll from running for office in future elections - a move that will affect Hun Sen's exiled rivals.

On the eve of the election campaign, Hun Sen, a prolific Facebook user, quit the platform ahead of its parent company Meta announcing it would remove one of his videos and was considering a recommendation to suspend his account.

The video, filmed in January, showed Hun Sen threatening his opponents with legal action or a beating if they accused his party of vote theft in July's polls.

The ruling on the video by Meta's Oversight Board said his speech contained 'unequivocal statements of intent to commit violence' against opposition politicians.

Analysts say that China's political and financial support has emboldened Hun Sen's unprecedented crackdown on political activists, the media and civil society - an assault spurred by major opposition gains in previous elections.

Rights groups accuse Hun Sen of using the legal system to crush any opposition, and scores of political opponents have been convicted during his time in power.

Opposition leader Kem Sokha was sentenced in March to 27 years in prison and placed under house arrest for treason over an alleged plot with foreigners to topple Hun Sen's government.

Another opposition figure, Sam Rainsy, has been living in exile in France since 2015 to avoid prison for convictions he says are politically motivated.

AFP

CIA chief made secret trip to Ukraine, says US official

Washington, US - CIA Director William Burns recently traveled to Ukraine where he met with intelligence counterparts and President Volodymyr Zelensky, a US official confirmed to AFP on Friday.

The trip - not reported at the time - comes as Kyiv's brigades pursue a counteroffensive in their nation's east and south against Russian forces, launched earlier this month after weeks of anticipation.

During his trip the CIA director reaffirmed 'the US commitment to sharing intelligence to help Ukraine defend against Russian aggression', the US official said.

According to *The Washington Post*, which first reported the visit, Ukrainian officials shared plans to claw back Russian-occupied territory and begin ceasefire



CIA Director William Burns (AFP)

negotiations by the end of the year.

Burns 'traveled to Ukraine as he has done regularly since the beginning of Russia's recent aggression more than a year ago', the US official said. *The Post* reported that the visit occurred in June.

The trip took place before the 24-hour insurrection by the leader of the Wagner private mil-

itary company, Yevgeny Prigozhin, according to the official. The mutiny, which was widely seen as the biggest threat to Kremlin authority in decades, 'was not a topic of discussion', the official added.

The United States has attempted to make clear to Russia it played no role in the rebellion, with major US media reporting on Friday that Burns called the head of Russia's SVR foreign intelligence service, Sergei Naryshkin, following the uprising to assert that the United States was not involved.

The Ukrainian military's commander-in-chief Valery Zaluzhny has said his country's counteroffensive plans are being hobbled by the lack of adequate firepower, from modern fighter jets to artillery ammunition.

AFP

CELEBRATION TIME IN HONG KONG



People wave the flags of Hong Kong and China on the Tsim Sha Tsui water front in Hong Kong on Saturday as they celebrate the 26th anniversary of the city's handover from Britain to China. (AFP)

July 4th weekend celebrations to test travel system in US

New York, US - America's stressed travel infrastructure faces a major test this weekend as it contends with record turnout expected for the annual July 4th festivities.

The five-day stretch culminates in Tuesday's Independence Day celebration, a highlight of the US summer calendar, marked by fireworks, barbecues and lazing by the pool.

A record 50.7mn Americans are expected to venture at least 50 miles (80km) from home in the period heading into July 4th, eclipsing the prior peak of 49mn in 2019, according to the American Automobile Association.

AAA expects elevated volumes across travel modes, with the heaviest road traffic on Friday when travel times will be 30 per cent over normal.

The busiest day for flying was Thursday, which was also the biggest day for air travel since COVID, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Twitter.

But airport chaos in recent

days has put many travelers on guard as airlines struggle to meet torrid demand.

"We talked about flying," Nick Kendall said on Friday as he awaited a train to Virginia at New York's Penn Station. "I'm really glad we took the train."

Kendall, who travels regularly for work, said planes have been packed for months in a big shift from the sleepy early pandemic period.

US airlines had spoken more hopefully about improvements this summer, but this week's difficulties suggested it may have been wishful thinking.

Storms in New York and other East Coast destinations wreaked havoc, forcing the cancellation of more than 3,200 flights to and from the three major New York-area airports since Monday.

Travelers are also tracking smoky air from Canada that's moving east from the Midwest. And extreme heat in Texas and other states has driven talk of a federal disaster declaration to mitigate public health risks.



Travelers are seen ahead of the fourth of July holiday weekend at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia on Friday (AFP)

Paying up

Travel experts see this weekend's expected historic tourist volume as reflecting favourable factors, including a strong US job market and a drop in gasoline prices.

More than four-fifths of the travelers over the long weekend

will be going by car, benefitting from the 25 per cent slide in gasoline prices. But they will likely experience 'grief at the grill', as Rabobank said of double-digit price increases on beef, lettuce, soda, white bread and potato chips.

Even before the pandemic,

young consumers had shown a preference for spending on experiences, such as travel, compared with older generations.

If anything, those trends were boosted by the isolation of the pandemic, helping fuel the current go-go spending on hotels, flights and cruises.

"Travel remains really robust," said Siye Desta, an equity analyst at CFRA Research. "There hasn't been any sign of any pullback in consumer spending in travel, even though prices have meaningfully increased."

Stormy weather ahead?

For people traveling this weekend by plane, the biggest worry will be the continuation of the turmoil of recent days.

In what has become a recurring theme in air travel, this week has seen another round of horror stories of flight cancellations, stranded luggage and airport mass sleep-ins.

"It was a madhouse at the airport," said Jason Rinka, who learned upon landing in New York from Beijing that his connecting flight to Raleigh, North Carolina was cancelled.

Rinka, along with his wife and daughter, stayed in New York for a few days. They were heading via train Friday to Washington, where they would catch a flight

to North Carolina for the first visit with family in four years due to COVID-19.

The circuitous itinerary saves the family more than US\$1,000 compared with last-minute direct flights from New York to Raleigh, Rinka said.

United Airlines, the carrier at the centre of this week's New York travel chaos, blamed understaffing at the FAA for the out-sized impact of the storm.

But pilots and flight attendant unions pointed at United management, while Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg noted other major carriers have recovered from severe weather.

Buttigieg described United's disruptions as 'elevated but moving in the right direction', adding on Twitter on Friday that the FAA 'continues to monitor weather and smoke'.

United still had more than 230 cancellations and nearly 800 delays on Friday, more than other major US carriers, according to FlightAware.

AFP

INDIA

At least 25 dead after bus catches fire in Maharashtra

The bus was travelling to city of Pune when it hit a pole and overturned

Mumbai - At least 25 people were killed and eight others were injured in western India when a bus crashed and caught fire on an expressway early on Saturday.

The bus was travelling to the city of Pune when it hit a pole and overturned after midnight, causing its diesel tank to catch fire, senior police officer Baburao Mahamani told AFP.

"There were about 30 to 35 people in the bus. Twenty-five people have died and eight others are injured," he said.

The injured have been admitted to a hospital near the site of the crash in Maharashtra state, about 400km (250 miles) east of India's financial capital Mumbai. The driver and conductor of the bus were taken into custody for questioning, state rural development minister Girish Mahajan told reporters.

"The driver is saying the tyre of the bus burst, after which it hit a pole. But it seems he had dozed off. We will have to see what actually happened," he said.

Mahajan added that the bodies had been charred beyond



People gather around the wreckage of the bus that caught fire along the Samruddhi Expressway near Sindkhed Raja, Maharashtra state, on Saturday (AFP)

recognition and forensic teams were on their way to help in identification.

One of the survivors of the accident said he got out of the burning vehicle via a window.

"The passenger seated next to me and I managed to escape by breaking the rear window," he told the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency. "But not everyone could do it."

A witness to the crash told PTI he unsuccessfully tried to help rescue passengers stuck inside the burning bus.

"We saw people getting burnt alive," he said. "The fire was so intense that we could not

do anything."

Dangerous roads

Police said they had launched an inquiry into the crash.

"The priority at this moment is to identify the bodies and hand them over to their family members," local media quoted police superintendent Sunil Kadasane as saying.

Images published in local media showed the bus engulfed in flames and later the charred remains of the vehicle overturned on the highway.

Three children were among the dead, a police officer told reporters. "Deeply saddened by

the devastating bus mishap in Buldhana," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter.

"My thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who lost their lives. May the injured recover soon."

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said he felt 'deep grief' over the accident and pledged compensation of 500,000 rupees (US\$6,100) to the families of those killed.

Accidents are common on India's vast network of roads, which are poorly maintained and notoriously dangerous.

The country accounts for 11 per cent of the global road death

toll despite having just one per cent of the world's vehicles, according to a World Bank report released in 2021.

The same report estimated 150,000 car crash fatalities in India annually, or one every four minutes.

It added that road crashes cost the Indian economy around US\$75bn each year, with medical expenses and loss of income pushing many accident survivors into poverty. In May, at least 21 people died when a bus veered off a bridge in India, reportedly after the driver fell asleep at the wheel.

AFP



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the 17th Indian Cooperative Congress at Pragati Maidan, in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

Cooperatives should become carriers of social policies: Modi

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said cooperatives should be the conveyor and carrier of social and national policies as opposed to being a vehicle of politics.

Addressing the 17th Indian Cooperative Congress on Saturday, Modi said: "Cooperatives will soon emerge as a powerful economic backbone of a new India. We need to help villages achieve self-sufficiency by following a cooperative model." The remark assumes significance in the context of the political tussle over the Nandini Milk Cooperative in Karnataka, with the Congress accusing the BJP-led Centre of driving the local dairy giant out of business by opening the market to Amul. The Congress even made it a key plank for the recent Assembly elections.

Inaugurating the Congress at International Exhibition-cum-Convention Centre (IECC) in the national capital, Modi also launched the NCUI Haat portal.

The main theme of the Congress was 'Amrit Kaal: Prosperity through Cooperation for a Vibrant India'.

Modi also launched an e-commerce website for cooperative marketing, and cooperative extension and advisory services portal.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who also handles the Union Ministry of Cooperatives, also attended the event.

During his address, Modi dwelt at length on the measures undertaken for the farmer's welfare over the last nine years.

Modi said as opposed to scant support to farmers in the

past and rampant exploitation by middlemen, crores of food-grain growers across the country were now getting the benefits of the Centre's flagship Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme transferred directly into their bank accounts.

"Over the last four years, Rs 2.5 lakh crore under this scheme were transferred to the farmers' accounts in a transparent manner. Rs 2.5 lakh crore is a big amount if we consider the

Cooperatives will soon emerge as a powerful economic backbone of a new India. We need to help villages achieve self-sufficiency

NARENDRA MODI

cumulative budgetary outlay for the agriculture sector over five years before 2014 (under the Congress-led UPA), which was less than Rs 90,000 crore. The amount transferred to farmers' accounts over the last four years under a single scheme is, thus, more than three times the total agriculture budget of over five years (before 2014)," Modi said.

He said while a farmer in India presently pays about Rs 270 for a bag of urea, the same is priced at Rs 720 in Bangladesh, Rs 800 in Pakistan, Rs 2,100 in China and Rs 3,000 in the US.

ANI

Navy to extend lease of 2 drones inducted in 2020

New Delhi - The Indian Navy is planning to extend the lease of two Predator drones which have flown more than 12,000 hours for surveillance across the country including the boundary with China.

The two drones were inducted by the Indian Navy under the emergency powers on lease in November 2020 during the initial phase of the military standoff with China and have been used extensively by the force. "We are planning to extend the lease of these two Predator drones as the contract is set to get

over by the end of this year," defence sources told ANI.

The two drones of the older version of the Predators were taken on lease along with the ground control stations and other equipment.

After extensive flying operations and use of these drones for surveillance requirements of the Indian Army and Indian Air Force, it has now been decided that the defence forces would get a total of 31 of the latest Predator MQ-9B drones which will be used for surveillance. ANI

THE JOURNEY BEGINS



A Sadhu (Hindu holy man) begins the pilgrimage to the cave shrine of Amarnath from a base camp in Pahalgam on Saturday (AFP)

Emmanuel Macron shelves Germany state visit over France riots crisis

Paris, France - President Emmanuel Macron on Saturday informed Berlin he was postponing a state visit to deal with the urban rioting that has rocked France for the last four nights, as the 17-year-old whose killing by police sparked the protests was laid to rest.

Police arrested 1,311 people overnight on Friday to Saturday, the highest figure since the violent protests began over the point-blank killing by a policeman of Nahel M in the Paris suburb of Nanterre on Tuesday.

Shops were ransacked and town halls attacked in various locations nationwide, despite the interior ministry sending out 45,000 members of the police and also armoured vehicles to deal with the rioting.

The protests over the death of teenager Nahel M, who was of



Policemen ride their motorbikes on a commercial street in Strasbourg, eastern France, on Saturday (AFP)

Algerian origin, have again exposed the severe racial tensions in modern France and increased scrutiny on the police who have long been accused of singling out minorities. The crisis is a hugely unwelcome development for

Macron, who was looking forward to pressing on with his second mandate after seeing off protests that erupted in January over raising the pensions age.

The German presidency announced that Macron spoke by

telephone with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier 'and informed him of the situation in his country' as he requested the visit scheduled to begin on Sunday be postponed. The move is hugely embar-

assing for Macron who earlier this year was forced to postpone a visit by Britain's King Charles III to France due to the protests over pensions.

'Peaceful and constructive ways'

Nahel's funeral ceremony began in the Paris suburb of Nanterre where he lived, with a large crowd gathering at the local cemetery in a tense atmosphere, an AFP reporter said. The family wanted to be as intimate as possible, and far from the cameras. A ceremony is scheduled for early afternoon at the mosque in Nanterre and the interment will then take place in the giant Mont Valerien cemetery in the area.

In a rare intervention on a social issue, the French national football team, many of whose top players are of minority back-

ground, joined calls for an end to the clashes. "The time of violence must give way to that of mourning, dialogue and reconstruction," the team said in a statement posted on social media by captain and Paris Saint-Germain superstar Kylian Mbappe.

Les Bleus said they were 'shocked by the brutal death of young Nahel' but asked that violence give way to 'other peaceful and constructive ways of expressing oneself'. Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said that overall the scale of violence was less intense than previous nights but there was still intense rioting in certain areas including the cities of Marseille, Lyon and Grenoble, with bands of hooded rioters pillaging shops.

Provisional ministry numbers released early on Saturday said 1,350 vehicles and 234 buildings

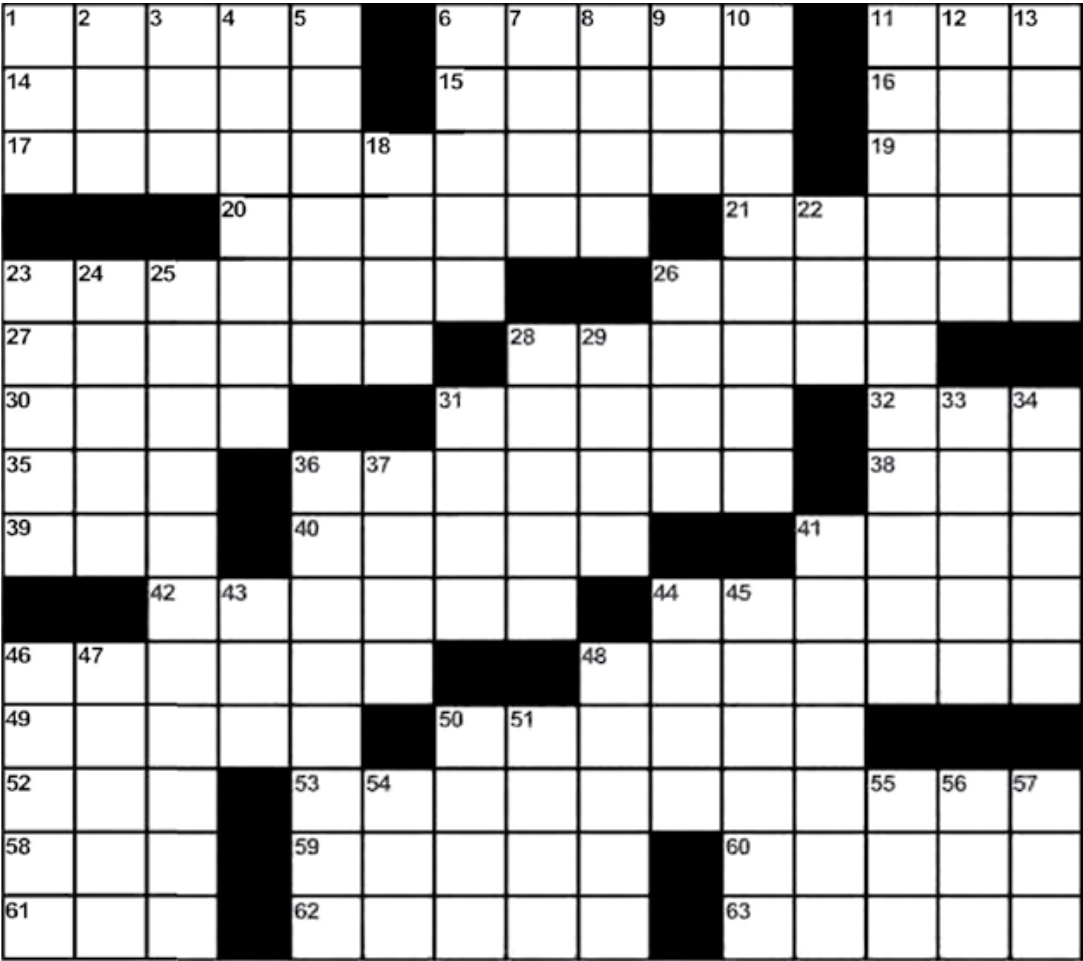
had been torched overnight, and there had been 2,560 incidents of fire set in public spaces. The ministry also said 79 police or gendarmes had been injured.

The southern port city of Marseille was again the scene of clashes and looting from the centre and further north in the long-neglected low-income neighbourhoods that Macron visited at the start of the week.

In a bid to limit the violence and trams in France have stopped running after 9pm (1900 GMT) and the sale of large fireworks and inflammable liquids has been banned.

Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne also announced the cancellation of large-scale events across the country, which included two concerts this weekend by singer Mylene Farmer. AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS
- 1) Oahu welcome

6) Toned down, as a trumpet

11) Amigo

14) Band of schemers

15) Give a formal speech

16) Bit of financial planning (Abbr.)

17) Symbol of deep concentration

19) Quick, small drink

20) Something to blow if angry

21) There are five great ones

23) Strikes with revulsion

26) Zombie, once

27) Address of affection

28) Greg's sitcom mate

30) Elevator inventor

31) Fishing net

32) CBS alternative

35) Compete in a race

36) Having spots of color, as a horse

38) One-many link

39) Broad-antlered creature

40) T.S. or George of literature

41) Arab sailing vessel

42) "Actually ..."

44) Pluck eyebrow hairs

46) Muscle Beach spectators

48) Shaved, as sheep

49) Very, musically

50) Virgil epic

52) Devoured

53) Good thing to desert

58) Word teamed with "neither"

59) Carried piggyback

60) "Ho!" preceder

61) Ending for "sit" or "write"

62) Material for a dry cleaner

63) Penned up, as sows
- DOWN

1) Be in a film

2) Well, _di-dah ..."

3) Geisha's belt

4) Large airport buildings

5) Acid-neutralizing base

6) Cloister inhabitants

7) Encourage strongly

8) Diplomatic trait

9) Airport info, initially

10) Disapproved of strongly

11) Film with Inspector Clouseau (with "The")

12) Astrological ram

13) Pass by, as time

18) Galapagos unit

22) Get battle-ready

23) Have affection for

24) Flower part

25) Some prescriptions

26) Sugar source

28) Bus or railroad terminal

29) Sword handle

31) _ and Span (cleaner brand)

33) Staggering order?

34) Frightened into submission

36) Does a freezer chore

37) Expression of sorrow

41) Absolutely resolute

43) Gross less expenses

44) Now's partner

45) Considers carefully

46) Citizen of Muscat

47) Mounted

48) Nasty, as a remark

50) Kick into the pot

51) _ out a living (stretched a budget)
- 54) Debt acknowledgement

55) Cut-and-dried grass

56) It may be added to impress?

57) _ XING (street sign)

NOTE PAD

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Try to be as meticulous as you possibly can today. If you get lazy with the little details, you will only be overwhelmed when they start to snowball out of control. Take care of things right away. And don't forget to make lists, lists, lists! They are the key to keeping yourself sane. Sweeping things under the rug is a big no-no! This stuff will only come back later, bigger and badder than ever before. Nipping things in the bud is the best way to play it today.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Inspiration will be humming all around you and coming from predictable sources as well as a few very surprising ones. Sure, the gorgeous sky and the melodious sounds of nature ignite the poet in you, but don't be surprised if your creativity gets stimulated by the rhythm of traffic or the symmetry of grocery store checkout lines. Your brain is hungry for excitement, so much so that it will resort to some fun, creative ways to find it. Enjoy your new perspective.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Despite the glowing reviews you've received from coworkers and authority figures, today is not the day to ask for a raise. Your professional life is going to get quite interesting soon, and what you might be lacking in compensation right now will be paid back to you in the form of some nice perks. If you're eager to travel, then you might be asked to go on an exotic business trip soon. Money isn't the only way that your employers can show you how much they value you.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
The social energy level in your world is positively buzzing this morning, and it will only increase as the day continues. You are going to love feeding off the energy of others, which makes today a wonderful day to be with people, strangers and friends alike. You're in good shape if you've got tickets to a popular concert or a big sporting event or you're planning to go to a popular restaurant tonight. Crowds will inject you with positive energy and a sense that anything is possible.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
The last thing you need to be is a bit player in someone else's life today. So if a drama erupts, just step back and let them handle the mess on their own. You didn't create the problem, so you shouldn't have to help tidy it up. And if they ask directly for your help, you should easily be able to find a diplomatic way to extricate yourself from the situation. Maybe your workload is too heavy. You have relatives visiting. You suddenly got transferred to Shanghai. Stay out of things today.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
When you notice a business or financial problem today, don't panic! Get organized. Be methodical. Don't just pull everything apart and start over again. Making a few small adjustments will prove to be all it takes, and this afternoon will bring you a lightning bolt of inspiration. Take your time and have confidence that you'll sort everything out well before you need to start worrying. But do start on it today. Procrastination is the only thing that could trip you up.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Listen to a friend when they ask for a moment of your time today. They want to start communicating more clearly about what they need from you, and you will definitely want to hear what they say. It's a good and healthy time for you to both reevaluate this relationship. Could it be time to move things to another level? You're definitely ready. It's important to be brutally honest and willing to be vulnerable. You can't get what you want unless you're willing to ask for it.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
As fun as today will be, there will also be a multitude of distractions happening around you. The nagging voice in your head will be telling you that you're forgetting to do something, and you've got no choice but to listen and obey whatever it says. In order to get all your boring things done quickly so you can have more time for fun, stay focused on each task as you do it. That will make the time fly and help you get everything done right the first time.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
If you're worried that one of your relationships is going through too much turmoil right now to survive, rest easy. Something is going on beneath surface with them and they aren't ready to tell you what's really going on. While it might not feel too good to know that they're keeping things from you, you have to realize that they can't share their feelings until they're ready. Let things go for now, and check back in with them in a few days. They'll be ready soon.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Today is a good day for starting new journeys. You have the confidence you need to handle unfamiliar experiences in new locations. So if you're about to begin a vacation or trip, you can expect it to go very well. Plans might get uprooted at the last minute, but in the end the outcome will be better than it would have been before. The journey you begin today doesn't have to be a literal one. Your spiritual journey is still continuing, and it could take a fun turn.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Why are you in such a hurry to get to the next step in your life? Try to keep your focus on what needs to happen today, and let tomorrow take care of itself. If you need some sort of distraction, then call up one of your friends who always has a lot going on in their life. Getting the lowdown on their drama will help you take your mind off things, and it could clue you in to some new gossip. Get permission before spreading it around, of course.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Today, you need to act first and ask questions later. Time is going to be slippery, and it might easily get away from you when you're not looking! Your actions will help others more than you know, because people are counting on you to be their inspiration. Sounds like a heavy burden, right? Not for you! Almost effortlessly, you can go beyond people's expectations without breaking a sweat. The key is you just can't think too much about it. Pondering your next move is going to paralyze you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. In the British version of "The Apprentice", which first went to air in February 2005, who do the contestants try to get a job with?

A. Alan Sugar (Lord Sugar)

B. Richard Branson

C. Nick Hewer

D. Karren Brady
02. Who was known as "The Waltz King"?

A. Johann Strauss

B. Johan Sebastian Bach

C. Ludwig van Beethoven

D. George Frideric Handel
03. Which Olympic Games was the most northerly to be held?

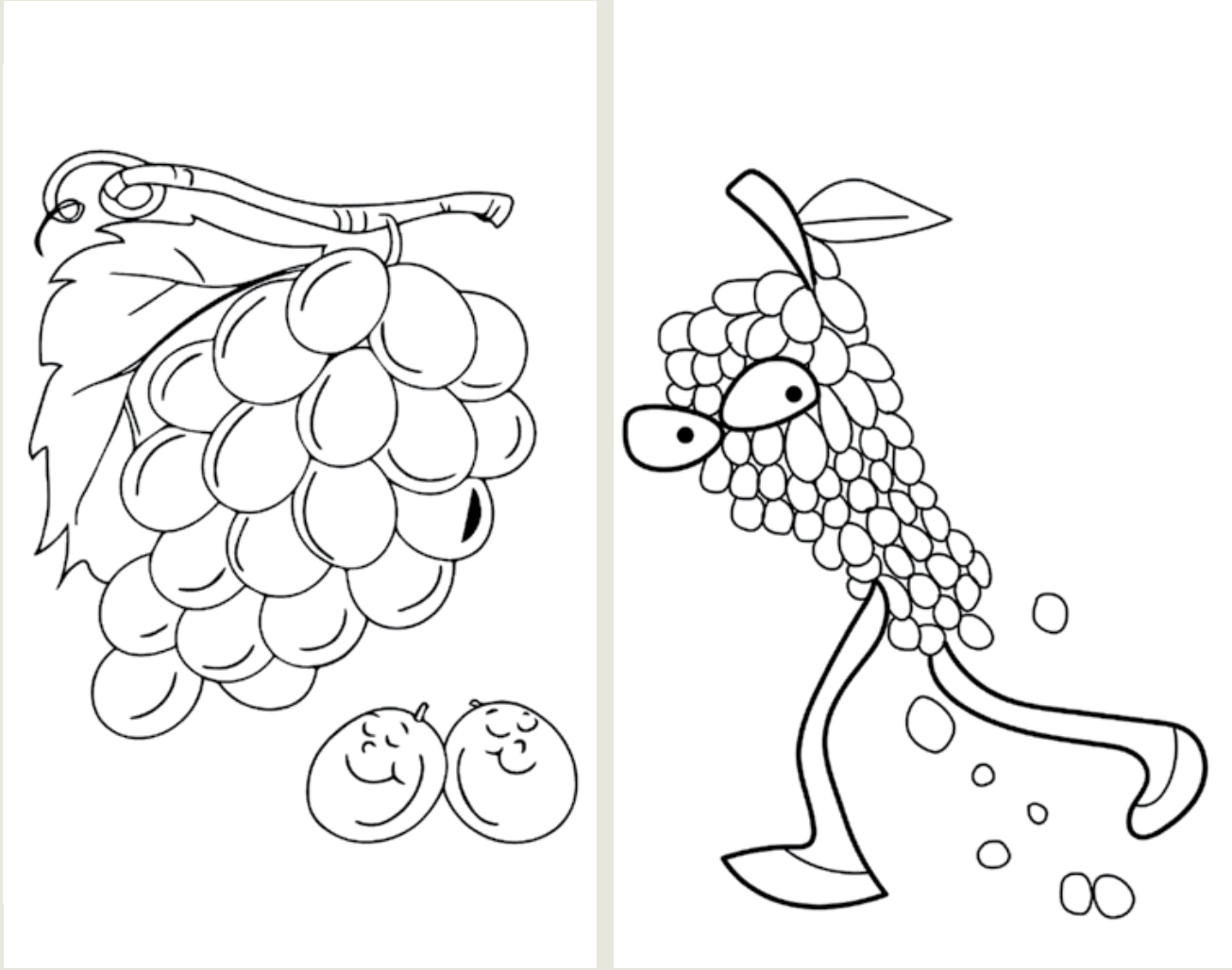
A. 1952

B. 1976

C. 1994

D. 1956
- Answers: 1. A, 2. A, 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

G	O	N	O
R	I	I	O
M	I	D	T
A	R	S	M

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

'HE'S STILL MOVING LIKE A CAT'

After winning French Open, Djokovic eyes eighth Wimbledon title and 24th Slam crown

London, United Kingdom - Novak Djokovic has Roger Federer's record of eight Wimbledon titles and a 24th major in his sights as he closes in on a first calendar Grand Slam in 54 years.

Fresh from breaking out of a tie with Rafael Nadal for 23 Slams at the French Open, the 36-year-old Djokovic will comfortably be the overwhelming favourite at the All England Club when he starts his title defence on Monday.

With a 10th Australian Open and third Roland Garros already wrapped up this season, an eighth Wimbledon triumph would leave Djokovic needing just the US Open in September to emulate Rod Laver's sweep of all four majors in 1969.

"He takes your legs, then he takes your soul, then he digs your grave and you have a funeral and you're dead. Bye-bye. Thank you for coming," said coach Goran Ivanisevic when asked to caption the Serb's Grand Slam mindset.

Djokovic has won the title on his last four visits to Wimbledon and has not lost on Centre Court since the 2013 final.

His 86 match wins are only bettered by the now retired Federer and are more than the rest of the current top 20 put together.

Of those players, only two - Cameron Norrie and Hubert Hurkacz - have made the semi-finals of Wimbledon. Amongst his top five rivals, not one has got beyond the last 16 while two-time champion Nadal is sitting out the rest of the year through injury.

A 24th major for Djokovic would take him level with Margaret Court for the most Grand Slam titles won by one player.

World number one Carlos Alcaraz will be Djokovic's biggest threat, especially as the young



Novak Djokovic

Spaniard now has a maiden grass-court title in his collection thanks to his win at Queen's last weekend. However, Alcaraz conceded key ground by admitting that the stress and tension of fac-

ing Djokovic in the semi-final at the French Open caused the cramping that sparked his defeat.

'Like a Ninja'
Ivanisevic described Djokovic as

"unbelievable".
"He's still moving like a cat on the court. He's there. Like a Ninja, he's everywhere. He's going to find some kind of motivation to win 24, maybe 25, who knows

where is the end."
Not surprisingly, Alcaraz has attempted to shift all the focus onto Djokovic.
"I saw that Djokovic has never lost a match on Centre Court

He takes your legs, then he takes your soul, then he digs your grave and you have a funeral and you're dead. Bye-bye. Thank you for coming

GORAN IVANISEVIC ON NOVAK DJOKOVIC

behind me to change that stat."
Moscow-born Elena Rybakina was the shock women's champion in 2022.

Her decision to switch allegiance to Kazakhstan in 2018 proved to be a wise move when all Russian players were banned last year. However, her chances of successfully defending her title have suffered a setback by her failure to shake off a virus which forced an early withdrawal from the French Open.

World number one and four-time major winner Iga Swiatek, who is looking for a maiden Wimbledon title to add to her US

and French Open crowns, has yet to progress beyond the last 16.

The 22-year-old Pole made the semi-finals of a grass-court tournament for the first time this week at Bad Homburg in Germany before suspected food poisoning forced her to withdraw.

World number two Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus, banned last year because of her country's support for Russia in the war in Ukraine, made the semi-finals in 2021. Sixth-ranked Ons Jabeur was runner-up 12 months ago and was a grass-court champion in Birmingham in 2021.

Sentimental votes for a potential women's champion will be cast for 43-year-old five-time winner Venus Williams as well as 2011 and 2014 champion Petra Kvitova.

'Visionary' Billie Jean King still leading 50 years after WTA foundation

London, United Kingdom - Fifty years after playing a leading role in the revolutionary foundation of the Women's Tennis Association, Billie Jean King remains a "visionary" with a message for the next generation.

Fuelled by her desire to ensure female players were paid the same prize money as their male counterparts, King was the catalyst behind the WTA's birth at a London hotel in 1973.

Now 79, King, a 12-time Grand Slam singles champion, remains fiercely committed to the cause of equality, while also keeping a close eye on trends

that affect the modern player.

And, on her return to the Gloucester Hotel on Friday to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the WTA, the American was keen to pass on her wisdom to the young stars who are the future of women's tennis.

Female players including Naomi Osaka, Paula Badosa and Amanda Anisimova have highlighted their struggles with mental health issues on the tennis circuit, a high-pressure environment that often leaves competitors alone and isolated.

"I know mental health is very big with the WTA. That's the

"I'm big on asking for help. I've had therapy for a thousand years"

BILLIE JEAN KING

challenge they have, with the anxiety, the loneliness and the pressure they feel," King said.

"If you are on the tour, ask for help. I want them to put down their damn phones, look at each



Billie Jean King

other and connect. Relationships are everything.

"I'm big on asking for help. I've had therapy for a thousand years, I've had an eating disorder and all those things. People can really help you."

King's empathetic message is typical of a woman who has always put others first, in the process earning the admiration of the players who formed the WTA with her.

Many of them travelled to London to celebrate the WTA party with King, and their strong bond all these years later was clear as they chatted and affec-

tionately poked fun at each other.

Rosie Casals was one of those alongside King at the event, as she was during their time as a successful doubles team that won several Wimbledon and US Open titles.

Casals, 74, knows better than most just what a force of nature her fellow American has always been.

"I learned to believe in her. She has always been a visionary and someone who leads. When she feels strongly she says what she feels," Casals said.

AFP

'Play until I'm 50?' Venus won't rule it out

London, United Kingdom - Venus Williams insists she's not ready to call time on her career, claiming on Saturday she is probably the only player able to keep competing until she's 50.

The 43-year-old American, a seven-time major winner, kicks off her 24th Wimbledon on Monday, 26 years after her debut at the All England Club.

Brushing aside questions over whether she intends to follow younger sister Serena into retirement, Venus insists that even playing at 50 is not out of the question.

"It's never been done before so if there is anyone who could do it, it would be me," said the five-time Wimbledon champion.

Martina Navratilova won the Wimbledon mixed doubles title with India's Leander Paes in 2003 at the age of 46.

Three years later, she retired at the US Open, just a few weeks before her 50th birthday.



Venus Williams

"The Grand Slams mean the most to me," added Williams, a former world number one whose ranking has slipped to 554 in the world after spending most of 2023 battling a hamstring injury.

"But you have to be competitive."

Despite her senior status on tour, Williams is adamant that she is not a flag-bearer for the over-forties.

"I'm not carrying a torch for anyone. My motivation is to keep going just as I have always done.

"I have reached a level that few others reach in life or anything."

When Williams first played Wimbledon in 1997, she was a first round loser.

Back then, she wore white beads in her hair. This year, she has dyed her hair pink.

She was champion in 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2008 when she beat Serena in the final.

AFP

Keys lifts Eastbourne title for second time

Eastbourne, United Kingdom - Madison Keys claimed the Eastbourne International for the second time on Saturday after holding off a fightback by Daria Kasatkina to win 6-2, 7-6 (15/13).

The American appeared to be cruising towards her third grass court title as she raced through the first set and led 4-1 in the second.

Kasatkina was battling the blustery conditions and a series of net cords that went in Keys' favour but found her stride to take five of the next six games.

However, the Russian, who will enter the world's top 10 next week, was broken when serving to take the second set.

Instead a marathon tie-break ensued as Kasatkina again battled back from 5-2 down to have four set points.

Keys' booming forehands though dug the world number 25 out of trouble and she eventually



Madison Keys celebrates with her trophy after beating Daria Kasatkina in the Rothesay Eastbourne International final (AFP)

took the title on her fifth match point.

"It feels like home," said Keys of backing up her first ever WTA title at Eastbourne in 2014. "Being able to win the title here twice now makes me have very fond memories of Eastbourne."

Keys will now turn her attention to Wimbledon, where she faces British wildcard Sonay Kartal in the first round on Tuesday.

Kasatkina is in action at the All England Club on Monday against American Caroline Dolehide.

AFP

REIGN OF REDBULL

Verstappen wins Austrian Grand Prix sprint race, Perez second

Spielberg Bei Knittelfeld, Austria - Max Verstappen led team-mate Sergio Perez home with a dominant display as Red Bull stormed to a comfortable one-two in Saturday's wet-dry sprint race at the Austrian Grand Prix.

The defending double world champion and series leader added eight points to move into a 70-point lead in the drivers' title race as he won by 21.102 seconds.

Ferrari's Carlos Sainz finished third ahead of the two Aston Martins of Lance Stroll and two-time champion Fernando Alonso with Nico Hulkenberg finishing sixth for Haas ahead of Alpine's Esteban ocon.

Mercedes' George Russell took a bold eighth ahead of Lando Norris in his upgraded Mercedes and team-mate seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton who had started 18th.

The Red Bull drivers exchanged sharp words after an opening lap battle that saw Verstappen run wide on the grass at one point, but they recovered to triumph.

"Once I got back in the lead, it was a good race," said Verstappen. "I had to manage the tyres, 24 laps is a lot for 'inters' and we had a hairy moment out of Turn



Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen competes in the sprint race at the Austrian Grand Prix in Spielberg on Saturday (AFP)



One."

Perez said: "I had a good start and a bit of a fight with Max before I lost a position to Nico. I had to fight to get back past him.

"I think Max was angry at Turn Two, but I didn't see him there. Visibility was so bad. I gave him the place back."

Heavy rain showers left the

track in semi-wet conditions and everyone except Valtteri Bottas began the race on intermediate tyres, the Finn, starting 19th,

Once I got back in the lead, it was a good race. I had to manage the tyres, 24 laps is a lot for 'inters' and we had a hairy moment out of Turn One.

MAX VERSTAPPEN

gambling on dry mediums. He pitted for intermediates after the formation lap.

Charles Leclerc in the second Ferrari started ninth, after taking a three-place grid penalty for impeding Oscar Piastri, before the lights went out and Perez out-

started Verstappen to prompt an opening lap scrap for positions.

Hamilton, from 18th, rose to 13th through the plumes of spray

sult of their duel.

The flying Dutchman soared five seconds clear by lap 10 and eight by 12 as Perez passed Hulkenberg for second at Turn Five while Hamilton finally overtook Kevin Magnussen after a wheel-to-wheel battle. Lacking traction, the German driver struggled on the exit from slow corners, Sainz blasting by on lap 13 before Russell pitted for slicks on lap 17, rejoining last, as the track dried. By lap 20, he was 10th.

Hulkenberg and Hamilton led a group of others who followed for dry tyres with five laps remaining, but the Red Bulls had the luxury of track positions and remained out on intermediates to the flag.



Timothy Weah

USA winger Weah signs for Juventus

Milan, Italy - Timothy Weah signed for Juventus from Lille on Saturday, the USA international following in his father's footsteps to Serie A.

"Timothy Weah has officially become a Juventus player. The American arrives on a permanent deal from Lille," the Italian club said in a statement.

The son of 1995 Ballon d'Or winner and current president of Liberia George Weah, the 23-year-old will replace Colombia winger Juan Cuadrado who is set to leave as a free agent.

Weah senior starred for Monaco, Paris Saint-Germain and then AC Milan, where he won league titles in 1996 and 1999 and was Africa's top scorer in Serie A until Victor Osimhen overtook him last season.

His son, who has played 29 times and scored four goals for the USA, is Juve's first new signing of the summer after a troubled season.

Juve finished seventh in Serie A after a 10-point deduction for illicit transfer activity which means they might not have European football next term despite earning a spot in the Europa Conference League.



Marcus Thuram

France forward Thuram signs for Inter Milan

Milan, Italy - French international striker Marcus Thuram signed for Inter Milan on a free transfer on Saturday, the Serie A club announced.

Son of 1998 World Cup winner Lilian Thuram, the 25-year-old signed a five-year deal with last season's Champions League finalists worth a reported 6.5 million euros (\$7.1 million) a season.

Inter secured his services on the back of his most successful season for Bundesliga side Borussia Moenchengladbach in which he scored 13 goals -- he became a free agent at the end of the campaign. "Marcus Thuram signs for Inter," read a statement on the club's website.

"The forward, who was born in 1997, joins the Nerazzurri following four seasons with Borussia Moenchengladbach."

Thuram will play up front alongside Lautaro Martinez

after picking the country of his birth rather than Paris Saint-Germain, replacing veteran Edin Dzeko who signed for Turkish giants Fenerbahce last week.

He was born in Parma where his father played for five seasons, winning the UEFA Cup and Italian Cup in 1999 as part of a star-studded outfit which also featured Italian icons Gianluigi Buffon and Fabio Cannavaro.

Buffon and Cannavaro got the better of Thuram senior at the 2006 World Cup, beating France in the final on penalties.

Thuram senior had wanted his son to take up either fencing or judo but he defied his father.

Thuram junior also suffered World Cup heartache at the hands of Martinez and Argentina in last December's thrilling World Cup final.

AFP

Iniesta plays last game for Japan's Vissel Kobe

Tokyo, Japan - Spanish football legend Andres Iniesta played his last game for Japanese club Vissel Kobe on Saturday, as he prepares to continue his illustrious career elsewhere.

The 39-year-old started the game in midfield wearing the captain's armband and played the first 57 minutes of Kobe's 1-1 home draw with Consadole Sapporo in the J-League.

Iniesta made over 600 appearances for Barcelona, winning the Champions League four times and claiming nine La Liga titles before joining Kobe in 2018.

He has said he intends to keep playing but has not announced where his next move will be.



Vissel Kobe's Andres Iniesta speaks during his farewell ceremony after their J-League match against Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo

On Saturday, in the 36th minute, he broke into the penalty area and tried to score a goal to the cheers of the spectators.

But 12 minutes into the second half, he was substituted with his team a goal down.

"Thank you Iniesta for playing for Vissel Kobe for many years," a fan tweeted as the Spanish player retreated to the bench.

"Iniesta, thank you for coming to Japan," another fan tweeted.

After the final whistle, a cheering spectator was seeing holding a banner that read "Gracias Iniesta."

Iniesta joined Kobe on a three-year deal on a reported annual salary of \$30 million, which he

extended in May 2021.

He won Japan's domestic Emperor's Cup in 2019 and led Vissel to the semi-finals of the Asian Champions League a year later.

But he has been used sparingly by the club this season, explaining in May that he wanted to leave Kobe so that he could "retire while I'm still active". He played for Kobe in a friendly against Barcelona in Tokyo last month, sharing a hug with manager and former midfield partner Xavi as he left the pitch.

Widely considered one of the greatest players of his generation, Iniesta has been linked with a non-playing role at Barcelona. AFP



Allan Border

Australia cricket great Border reveals he has Parkinson's

London, United Kingdom - Former Australia captain Allan Border revealed on Friday he is suffering from Parkinson's disease.

The 67-year-old has gone public seven years after being diagnosed with the illness and said he and a doctor friend both agreed it would be "a miracle" if he makes 80.

"No way am I going to get another 100, that's for sure," Border told News Corp.

"I'll just slip slowly into the west."

Border had told only one per-

son of his diagnosis, former team-mate Dean Jones, who died of a heart attack in 2020.

The former skipper said he had been happy to keep the news to himself but a friend had told him recently that many of his close associates had noticed his shaking.

"I'm a pretty private person and I didn't want people to feel sorry for me, sort of thing," he said. "Whether people care, you don't know. But I know there'll come a day when people will notice."

AFP

Chelsea swoop for Nicolas Jackson from Villarreal

London, United Kingdom - Chelsea's new-look strikeforce is taking shape after the Blues confirmed the signing of Nicolas Jackson from Villarreal on Friday.

The Senegal international has signed an eight-year deal at Stamford Bridge after impressing in La Liga last season with 12 goals in 26 appearances.

Jackson, 22, will cost a reported £32 million (\$47 million).

Chelsea's co-sporting directors Laurence Stewart and Paul Winstanley said: "We are excited to welcome Nicolas to Chelsea. He is a young player with big potential, as he showcased for Villarreal last season. "We believe he is ready for this next step in his career and look forward to him working with our new head coach, Mauricio Pochettino, and his Chelsea teammates."

Chelsea have been busy in the first few weeks of the transfer window as they were forced to move on a number of players to



Nicolas Jackson

meet financial fair play regulations after splashing over £500 million on new signings last season. Kai Havertz has crossed London to join Arsenal, Edouard Mendy and Kalidou Koulibaly joined the exodus of stars from Europe to Saudi Arabia, while Ruben Loftus-Cheek joined AC

Milan on Friday. A deal has also been agreed between Chelsea and Manchester United for the sale of Mason Mount.

However, they have also reinforced a blunt attack with Jackson set to battle Christopher Nkunku for the role as Pochettino's first-choice number nine.

Khawaja becomes Australia's quiet driving force to retain the Ashes

Star performer in first match shines in second Test as well

London, United Kingdom - Usman Khawaja has persevered through racism and a career crisis to emerge as the understated driving force behind Australia's bid to retain the Ashes.

Khawaja extended his fine start to the series in England with a typically efficient second-innings 77 as Australia looked to press home their advantage in the second Test at Lord's on Saturday.

The 36-year-old had already delivered a man-of-the-match performance in Australia's recent first Test win at Edgbaston, scoring 141 and 65 as he became one of only 13 players to bat on all five days of a Test.

He is perfectly suited to the role of Australia's quiet anchor-man after spending much of his life trying to avoid being the centre of attention.

Pakistan-born Khawaja moved to Australia with his family when he was five years old, growing up in the shadow of the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Khawaja quickly picked up his father's love for cricket, but opportunities to watch Australia in action were few and far between for a family that could not afford tickets at the SCG.

Instead, Khawaja would wait outside the gates in the hope of

being allowed in for free later in the day.

That was the least of Khawaja's worries during his cricket journey, with racism a recurring theme in his younger years.

"At school I was called things by other kids I had never heard before," he said after revealing he was routinely labelled a "curry muncher" by other children.

At school I was called things by other kids I had never heard before. Getting sledged by opposition players and their parents was the norm. Some of them said it just quietly enough for only me to hear

USMAN KHAWAJA

"Getting sledged by opposition players and their parents was the norm. Some of them said it just quietly enough for only me to hear."

Khawaja was forced to build a resilient personality to cope with the abuse.

"It still hurt, but I would never show it. Most of the time it was when I scored runs," he said.

That refusal to be cowed by the ignorance around him stood Khawaja in good stead and he



Australia's Usman Khawaja plays a shot during his knock of 77 against England in the second Test at Lord's on Friday.

eventually became the first Muslim to play for Australia when he was selected to face England in 2011.

'I stick out like a sore thumb'

"I've grown up as a coloured cricketer in a very white Anglo-Saxon country and a very white Anglo-Saxon cricket team," he said.

"I stick out like a sore thumb. I don't drink, I fast, English was my second language, my name is Usman Khawaja. When you think of an Australian cricketer you do not picture me."

Even after breaking into the Australia team, Khawaja still had obstacles to overcome as he struggled to hold down a regular place. Following a two-year absence, he was only recalled to the Test team in January 2022 because Travis Head was ruled out of an Ashes clash after testing positive for Covid-19.

Khawaja seized his chance and is now established as the metronome at the top of the Australian batting order.

Khawaja's maiden Test hundred in England prompted him into a rare display of emotion as he roared with delight and punched the air.

Even England bowler Ollie Robinson's foul-mouthed sledging after dismissing Khawaja in the first Test couldn't unsettle the opener.

AFP

Limping Lyon helps Australia set England 371 to win 2nd Ashes Test

London, United Kingdom - Nathan Lyon came hobbling out to bat as Australia set England a Lord's record 371 to win the second Ashes Test on Saturday.

There had been doubts over whether Lyon, appearing in his 100th consecutive Test, would feature again in this match after suffering a calf injury while fielding on Thursday.

But the off-spinner received a standing ovation from spectators at the 'Home of Cricket' after coming out to bat with Australia 264-9. For all his bravery, Lyon was still struggling to run.

And with runners no longer allowed in Test cricket, the match descended into farce as the only apparent way Australia could add to their total was by hitting boundaries.

Starc thought he had hoisted Stuart Broad for six, but the ball was knocked back in over the rope by substitute Rehan Ahmed.

The ball was in the air for such a long time, however, that a hobbling Lyon managed to compete a single.

With England putting all their fielders, bar wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow, out in the deep a stalemate ensued.



England's Stuart Broad (R) and Ben Stokes celebrate after the wicket of Australia's Usman Khawaja

Starc did hit a six and the courageous Lyon pierced the field with a pulled four off Broad.

Lyon's defiant effort eventually came to an end after 13 balls when he holed out off Broad, the veteran paceman leading England's attack with 4-65 as Australia were dismissed for 279 in their second innings.

He departed to a pat on the

back from England captain Ben Stokes and a standing ovation from the crowd.

The 35-year-old Lyon's gutsy presence in the middle was also a testament to Australia's regard for England's run-chasing ability.

In the past year, Stokes' men have achieved three of England's highest fourth-innings run chases, including a national

record 378 against India at Edgbaston in 2022.

The most any side have made to win in the fourth innings of a Test at Lord's, however, is West Indies' 344-1 in 1984.

Ashes holders Australia, 1-0 up in the five-match contest, resumed on Saturday morning on 130-2, a lead of 221 runs.

AFP

Ingebrigtsen, Aregawi shine at Lausanne Diamond League

Lausanne, Switzerland - Norwegian Jakob Ingebrigtsen stormed to an impressive victory in the men's 1500m over Ethiopian challenger Lamecha Girma at the Lausanne Diamond League meet on Friday.

Ingebrigtsen clocked 3min 28.72sec for a new meet record at the Stade de la Pontaise in unseasonally chilly conditions at the sixth of the season's 14 meets in track and field's elite circuit.

Girma had set a new world record in the 3,000m steeplechase in Paris earlier this month, on the same night that Ingebrigtsen broke the rarely-run 2 miles record.

But the Norwegian made no mistake in Lausanne with a masterful display, Girma having to content himself with second place in an Ethiopian record of 3:29.51.

"I have had to make some adjustments with my strategy, I have been putting in extra miles in the last couple of weeks," said Ingebrigtsen.

Girma's teammate Berihi Aregawi, 22, became the fifth fastest runner ever over the 5,000m when he soared to a win



Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen wins ahead of Ethiopia's Lamecha Girma in the 1500m at IAAF Diamond League meeting in Lausanne

in 12:40.45, another meet record - and also a personal best and the world's fastest time this season.

With temperatures hovering around 17 degrees Celsius (64F), Aregawi, who was fourth in the 10,000m at the Tokyo Olympics, launched into an impressive solo assault that saw Uganda's world record holder Joshua Cheptegei finish second (12:41.61).

Bol, Ta Lou victorious

Dutchwoman Femke Bol continued her winning ways in the 400m hurdles, clocking a domi-

nant 52.76sec for a new meet record.

Ivorian Marie-Josée Ta Lou sprinted to the win in the women's 100m in 10.88sec, shorn of her principal Jamaican rivals and the sole runner to dip below the 11-sec mark.

"I was happy with my race, but not really with my time," she said. "I will have to work as usual with my coach. The conditions weren't ideal, it was cold for me. But I'm happy, at least I ran under the 11 seconds barrier."

AFP

Ledecky wins 400m freestyle at World Championships

Los Angeles, United States - Katie Ledecky easily won the 400m freestyle at the US swimming championships on Friday, but the US great knows she'll need to do more to challenge for the title at the World Championships in Fukuoka, Japan, next month.

"It wasn't great," Ledecky sighed after clocking 4min 0.45sec to lift the title in Indianapolis, Indiana.

She set a world record of 3:56.46 in winning gold at the Rio Olympics in 2016.

Since then, Australia's Ariarne Titmus has upset Ledecky for the 2019 world title and out-duelled her in the Tokyo Olympic final in 2021. Titmus lowered the world record and Canadian teen Summer McIntosh lowered it again in March with a time of 3:56.08.

With Titmus having clocked 3:58.47 at the Australian trials

this month, Ledecky was clearly dissatisfied with her time but not discouraged.

"So many things to learn from," said the seven-time Olympic gold medallist and owner of 19 world titles. "So I'll try to learn as much as I can and be better in a couple of weeks."

Ledecky, who had opened the week with her fastest 800m free time since 2016, said she felt her rhythm was off from the start.

With Fukuoka looming, she said, she'll focus on "making sure I'm ready to go when I dive in and build throughout the race."

Ledecky was still nearly three seconds ahead of runner-up Bella Sims, whose time of 4:03.25 was her best by more than three seconds and made the 18-year-old the seventh-fastest performer in the world this year.

Regan Smith grabbed her third title of the week with a vic-

tory in the 100m backstroke, clocking the second-fastest time of the year of 57.71 to hold off Katharine Berkoff, who punched her ticket to Fukuoka in 58.02.

"Super-happy with that time," said Smith, who also won the 200m backstroke and 200m butterfly this week as her training with coach Bob Bowman - former mentor to Michael Phelps - pays dividends.

AFP



Katie Ledecky celebrates after winning the women's 400M

WEST INDIES SUFFER NEW LOW

Two-time champions miss out on World Cup for first time after losing to Scotland in qualifier

Harare, Zimbabwe - The West Indies failed to qualify for the Cricket World Cup for the first time as the two-time champions slumped to a seven-wicket thumping by Scotland at the qualifying event on Saturday.

The Caribbean side, needing a win to keep their slim qualification hopes alive, were bowled out for 181 in their 50 overs before Scotland chased down the target with 6.3 overs to spare in Harare.

Shai Hope's men have zero points with only two matches remaining in the Super Six stage in Zimbabwe after previous defeats by the hosts and the Netherlands.

"There is not one thing I can put my finger on. We let our

selves down in the entire tournament," said captain Hope.

"The preparation needs to be better. We cannot come here and expect to be an elite team without preparation. Cannot expect to wake up one morning and be a great team."

The global one-day showpiece, which will be held in India from October 5 until November 19, will be notable for the absence of one of the sport's traditional powerhouses.

Scotland exacted revenge for an agonising and controversial loss by the West Indies at the previous World Cup Qualifier in 2018 which saw them miss out on the main tournament with a first one-day international win



Scotland's Brandon McMullen celebrates after dismissing Johnson Charles of West Indies (ICC/Getty Images)

over their opponents.

"A really important win. We know the importance of every game," said Scottish skipper Richie Berrington. "Playing for the World Cup is as big as it gets. The boys were outstanding."

They now sit just two points behind Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, with the top two to qualify for the 10-team event, ahead of their final two games against Zimbabwe on Tuesday and the Dutch two days later.

"Should be another great game (against Zimbabwe). All to play for still," added Berrington. "Two important points on the line, so should be a good test against them at home in Bulawayo."

The damage was done early on by the Scottish seam bowlers as they reduced the Windies to 81-6 after winning the toss and electing to field first.

Young all-rounder Brandon McMullen dismissed the West Indies top three of Brandon King, Johnson Charles and Shamarr Brooks and finished with 3-32 from nine overs. Scotland's spinners kept the squeeze on despite a brief fightback from Jason Holder and Romario Shepherd.

Shepherd was brilliantly caught by Safyaan Sharif off the bowling of Mark Watt for 36 and Holder was trapped lbw by Chris Greaves three balls later, as the Windies lost their last four wickets for 23 runs.

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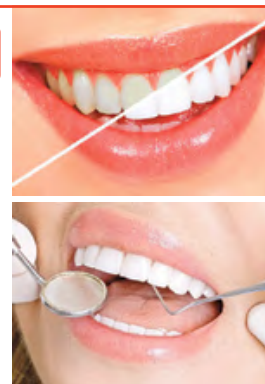
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An overhead view shows the dried bed of March Haigh Reservoir, near Marsden in northern England

Sustainability lies at the centre of British polar science strategy

With research stations shifting to renewable energy and artificial intelligence mapping out fuel-efficient marine routes, the British Antarctic Survey is putting sustainability at the heart of its new 10-year plan.

"The main target for our strategy is really focused on climate change because the polar regions are the regions on Earth which are changing most drastically," BAS director Jane Francis said, adding that these changes are "affecting the whole planet".

"What we're trying to do is plan the future of our science more now than we used to, because I think it's really so urgent that we can understand how our climate is changing. We need to support the relevant people in making good decisions about renewable energy, about how to save carbon, and how to live in better balance with our planet," she told AFP.

At the BAS headquarters in Cambridge, eastern England, AFP saw some of the cutting-edge technology used by scientists studying the polar regions.

Autonomous underwater vehicles are used to collect data from deep within the icy waters of the Southern Ocean, which encircles the Antarctic and acts as a carbon sink, absorbing heat and carbon from the atmosphere.

From the sky, drones and satellite technology help monitor and count animal populations in remote or inaccessible parts of the polar regions.

Ice core study

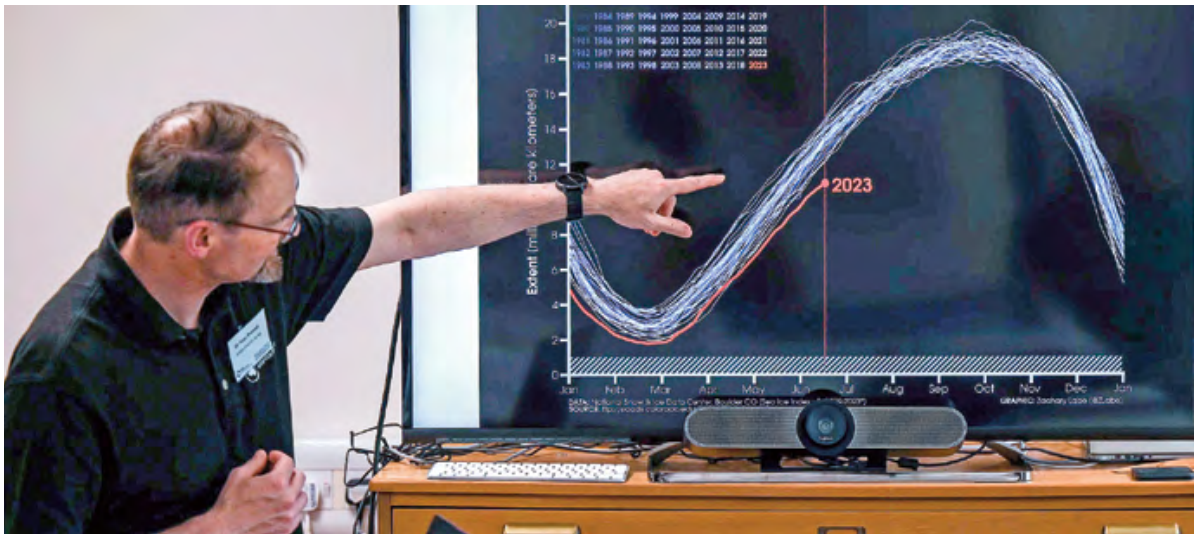
To gather information about atmospheric conditions in the past, scientists are drilling into ice sheets and glaciers to retrieve ice cores, some containing ice that is hundreds of thousands of years old.

The ice is cut inside a special cold room at the BAS labs where the temperature is kept at -25 degrees Celsius (-13 degrees Fahrenheit).

The air bubbles trapped inside are extracted to measure the concentration of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane.

In the field, the BAS currently operates five research stations in the Antarctic, one of them only during the southern hemisphere summer.

The stations are serviced by a fleet of vehicles, ranging from snowmobiles to Sno-Cats and tractors, that make their way through the workshops at BAS headquarters before being deployed.



A Professor of the British Antarctic Survey explains a graph on the situation of the Antarctic sea ice at different years



A Professor of the British Antarctic Survey shows a drone used to monitor wildlife



Professor and Director of British Antarctic Survey Jane Francis delivers a speech during a visit of the British Antarctic Survey's headquarters in Cambridge



We don't need to take the ship so far, we don't need to take the aircraft using fuel, we can send out our drones, we can send out our marine robots. And it means that we can collect data, so much more data, faster and do much better science

JANE FRANCIS



A Professor of the British Antarctic Survey shows a picture of one of the bases in the Antarctic region of Polar Science for a Sustainable Planet

The kit is modified to ensure it's fit for purpose when it lands on the ice, for example by installing pre-heating systems that will help the engines start in freezing temperatures, BAS head of vehicles engineering Ben Norrish said.

Some snowmobiles are equipped with vehicle-tracking devices that have a distress button to request assistance from the station but also keep a record of refuelling stops and other activity while out in the field.

It gives BAS "some kind of carbon accounting to see where we've gone during any given season," Norrish added.

Net-zero targets

Reducing carbon emissions is part of the BAS's wider sustainability strategy with the aim to be fully decarbonised across its operations by 2040, said Net Zero transition lead Nopi Exizidou.

"For our research stations, we are investing a lot in renewable energy technology," Exizidou said, adding that BAS aims to decarbonise its polar stations within the next seven years.

The Bird Island station, off the northwest tip of South Georgia, west of the Falklands, is using a solar energy system and battery storage that is expected to reduce fuel use by 50%.

King Edward Point station, midway on South Georgia, has a hydropower plant, which meets 80 percent of energy demand in heating and electricity.

At Rothera, the largest British Antarctic research station located on Adelaide Island off the west coast of Antarctica, the new two-storey energy-efficient Discovery Building is set to replace several old buildings.

BAS also has a team of engineers developing an artificial intelligence and machine learning toolkit that will help plan marine routes and run research ships, such as the £200m RRS Sir David Attenborough, more efficiently.

"They are developing tools that will sit alongside the master of the ship and will help him take more informed decisions on how to go from A to B," said Exizidou. "We are developing, as we say, the Google maps of the Southern Ocean." BAS director Francis said the changing technology that researchers will be using in the coming years is really revolutionary now.

"We don't need to take the ship so far, we don't need to take the aircraft using fuel, we can send out our drones, we can send out our marine robots. And it means that we can collect data, so much more data, faster and do much better science," she observed.

AFP

LADY 'TEMPLE DRUMMER'



Sound of passion

Anirban Ray

With a 20kg 'chenda' (Indian drum) strapped snugly onto her shoulders, the loose end of her saree tucked around her waist, and gripping drumsticks firmly, Anitha Rajan begins whipping up a frenzied beat until it reaches a tumultuous crescendo – one which transports the listeners into a sacred realm and leads the player herself into a rhythmic resonance with the divine.

In a society where gender roles often dictate one's path, here stands a woman with strong arms, strong shoulders, and a stronger heart. Anitha Rajan has emerged as a fearless artist challenging conventions and paving the way for a new narrative of music and empowerment.

Romancing the chenda with ease, Anitha is the only woman in Oman who has been playing this percussion instrument since 2018. A mother of two, she is also multi-talented - a singer, painter and stage actor. Somehow, defying stereotypes comes naturally to her, and by playing this instrument she has challenged a domain traditionally dominated by men.

Traditional art

Panchari Melam, is a traditional musical art wherein musicians play instruments like chenda, ilathalam, kombu and kuzhal in harmony mainly to herald rituals surrounding temple festivals in Kerala (India) where it is present in arguably the most classical manner.

Standing among men and playing the chenda with equal enthusiasm, speed and power, Anitha initially found it challenging to match the masculine energy. But with practice and determination, she has managed to stay in step with them at all performances.

"My father was an ardent lover of Panchari Melam, a percussion ensemble, which is being performed at temples and marriages in Kerala. Panchari Melam is one of the major forms using chenda and he was very fond of it. He never ever missed any opportunity to play in temples. Though I did not learn it in childhood, the love for that instrument seemed to be in my genes, and during the pandemic I was inspired to take it up in all earnestness.

"I have been in Oman for 14 years, but

Anitha Rajan, an Indian expatriate, is a singer, actor, painter, all rolled in one. But what really sets her apart is her passion for making inroads into a male-dominated profession - playing a traditional temple drum that is used in religious rituals as well as cultural celebrations in southern India to bring in an element of solemnity

viewers as well as players but never foul competition. Indeed, most of the men motivate and train me. My husband has been my main support and he never thought twice when I suggested my intention of learning this art form."

Hard work, sore palms

During the initial days, Anitha's soft palms became sore and often bled. There were bruises and cuts on her palms but she never gave up. Slowly she conditioned her hands and made them rough and tough – she also pokes fun at herself stating that she has 'manly' hands.

A good chenda costs Rs18,000 (around RO90) and needs regular maintenance, like tightening or loosening the ropes and skin during different seasons which have a bearing on the drum's tone and tenor.

Anitha has, so far, staged four performances, including one at Darsait Church during the Christmas season a few years back. She also looks forward to perform in India.

"I have a dream to play at the Guruvayur temple in Kerala, some day. This is a very revered temple and also a venue for several prestigious artistic shows."

Unfortunately, Anitha is unable to regularly practice in her home in Muscat as beating this drum involved loud sounds which creates a disturbance for neighbours and others in the vicinity. So, she prefers to do rehearsals with the Muscat Panchavadya Sangha.

By choosing to delve into a musical realm primarily reserved for men, Anitha has not only demonstrated her unwavering dedication but has also embarked on a transformation journey of self-discovery. "I feel liberated when I hear the rhythms of the chenda," she quips.

Anitha's story is testament to the power of determination, resilience, and the unflinching spirit that drives individuals to shatter barriers. By embracing her passion and defying societal expectations, she has not only redefined her own destiny but also opened doors for countless others who dare to dream.

"We must respect our traditions and heritage, and it should be our duty to teach the younger generation to value the arts of yesteryears," she says.

(photos: V K Shafeer)



this sudden inspiration motivated me and I got down to the task of mastering this drum. Four other women also took it up along with me but there were not able to keep up to it as they eventually went back to India. Since I was fortunate to stay back, despite many challenges, I trained under Unni Aashan and Amal Aashan, along with my team-mates from a group called 'Muscat Panchavadya Sangham' (formed by Tichur Surendran Aashan and Manoharan Guruvayoor).

With practice of almost two hours,



It was an incredible moment being on the stage, and being the only woman gave me both, goosebumps as well as excitement

ANITHA RAJAN

twice a week, Anitha managed to stage her Arangetam (initiation concert) in 2022. "It was an incredible moment being on the stage, and being the only woman gave me both, goosebumps as well as excitement. The limelight was on me. Even now, people are initially surprised to see a woman bearing a heavy chenda, but they soon realise my potential."

Anitha is thankful to the men in her team as well as her family for all the support given to her. "I hardly face any discrimination - there is curiosity among