



H M decrees promulgation of School Education Law

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has issued Royal Decree No 31/2023 promulgating the School Education Law after presenting the same before the Council of Oman.

The Royal decree reads as follows:

Article 1 states that the School Education Law attached to this decree will be enforced.

Article 2 states that the Minister of Education will issue the executive regulation for the attached law. The minister will also issue bylaws and decisions necessary for the implementation of the attached School Education Law. Till such time, the existing regulations and decisions will be enforced without prejudice to the provisions of the attached law.

Article 3 annuls Royal Decree No 68/77 on establishing private schools. It also cancels all that contradicts the attached law or contravenes its provisions.

Article 4 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from the day following its date of publication.

ONA



Moody's upgrades 7 Oman gov't-related companies

TOWARDS ONE DESTINY

ARAB SUMMIT CONCLUDES STRESSING ON STRENGTHENING JOINT ARAB ACTION BASED ON COMMON FOUNDATIONS, VALUES, INTERESTS AND ONE DESTINY

Our Correspondent Muscat

Arab leaders welcomed Syrian President Bashar al Assad back into the fold on Friday at the 32nd Arab Summit in Jeddah on Friday that also grappled with conflicts across the Middle East and beyond.

A triumphant Assad called for a 'new phase' in regional cooperation in his remarks to the summit, which also featured a surprise appearance by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, a sign of host Saudi Arabia's growing diplomatic clout.

It was the first time Assad had appeared at the Arab League since Syria was suspended in 2011 over the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators that led to civil war.

"I hope that it marks the beginning of a new phase of Arab action for solidarity among us, for peace in our region, and development and prosperity instead of war and destruction," Assad told the gathering.

"We are pleased today by the attendance of Syrian President Bashar al Assad in this summit," Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in his remarks, adding that he hoped the return would lead to "stability" in Syria.



Syria's President Bashar al Assad (2L) greets his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el Sisi as Tunisia's President Kais Saied (L) and Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said (3L) look on in Jeddah on Friday (AFP)

H M sends message to Ukrainian President

Kyiv - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a written message to President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine.

The message deals with relations between Oman and Ukraine and means of promoting these, in addition to issues of common concern that serve international peace and security.

The message was handed over by Ambassador at Large Sheikh Abdulaziz Abdullah al Hinai, when Ukraine's Special Envoy for the Middle East and Africa Maxim Sobh received him in Kyiv on Friday.



sidelines of the Arab Summit in Jeddah on Friday.

The meeting reviewed bilateral relations between the two countries and developments of the war in Ukraine. They also touched on means of achieving just peace in accordance with the rules of international law, respect for the sovereignty of countries, good neighbourliness, and peaceful coexistence among all states and peoples.

Jeddah Declaration

The Jeddah Declaration, issued at the 32nd Arab League summit, emphasised the importance

of strengthening joint Arab action based on common foundations, values and interests. The declaration highlighted the need

for 'unity, solidarity and cooperation to maintain security and stability, protect sovereignty, and strive for progress in Arab coun-

tries and work towards one destiny'.

The declaration addressed several key issues. It reaffirmed the centrality of the Palestinian issue and condemned violations against Palestinians, calling for a comprehensive and just settlement based on the two-state solution. The international community was urged to fulfil its responsibilities in ending the occupation of the city of Jerusalem and its holy sites.

The Arab leaders expressed concern about the crisis in Sudan and emphasised the importance of de-escalation, dialogue and unity to restore security and stability.

The Arab League welcomed the decision to resume the participation of Syrian government delegations in its meetings, supporting stability and the preservation of Syria's territorial unity. Pan-Arab efforts to assist Syria in

overcoming its crisis were also emphasised.

The declaration expressed support for efforts to achieve security, stability and peace in Yemen through a comprehensive political solution based on agreed references.

The leaders also expressed solidarity with Lebanon and called for dialogue among Lebanese parties to elect a president and implement necessary reforms to address the country's crisis.

The declaration emphasised the importance of investing in resources, addressing challenges and utilising technology to achieve an Arab industrial and agricultural renaissance. Solidarity, interdependence and unity among Arab countries were encouraged to achieve the aspirations of Arab peoples.

(With inputs from agencies)

\$800mn pacts inked to operate 2 solar power projects in Manah

Muscat - Nama Power and Water Procurement Company signed two agreements on Thursday to the tune of US\$800mn with investment consortiums for two independent power projects (IPPs) to produce electricity using renewable energy in the wilayat of Manah in Dakhliyah.

The two IPPs - Manah I and Manah II - will have a total production capacity of 1,000MW, generated using solar photovoltaic technology. The two projects, which will include over 2mn solar panels, will be set up on an area of 14.5mn sqm.

Manah I Solar IPP will be developed by a consortium consisting of EDF from France and the Korea Western Power Company from South Korea.

Manah II Solar IPP will be developed by a consortium led by Sembcorp Utilities, a wholly owned subsidiary of Sembcorp Industries from Singapore, and Jinko Power Technology from China.



The agreements were signed at a ceremony where the company announced its rebranding from Oman Power and Water Procurement Company. The event was held under the auspices of H E Dr Khalfan Said al Shuaili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning.

On the occasion, Yaqoob Saif al Kiyumi, CEO of Nama Power and Water Procurement, said, "Our new brand identity reflects our commitment to sustainable development. We are committed to promoting the use of renewable energy in Oman and ensur-

ing the long-term energy security of the country along with contributing to the achievement of the net zero target of the sultanate."

Kiyumi informed that the company will develop the Manah I and Manah II solar projects in partnership with the private sector on a build, own and operate basis.

The company is also working on developing a new solar power project in lbri of 500MW production capacity, in addition to wind power projects of 400MW production capacity.

Qatar embassy in Sudan stormed, vandalised

Muscat- Oman has condemned the storming and vandalism of the Embassy of Qatar in the Sudanese capital Khartoum by armed forces.

In a statement issued on Saturday, the Foreign Ministry

affirmed the sultanate's firm position rejecting any action targeting diplomatic missions, and the need to protect diplomatic buildings according to the customs and charters that govern and regulate

diplomatic work.

Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that embassy staff had been evacuated previously and that none of the diplomats or embassy staff were hurt or harmed.

SULTANATE OF OMAN
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ANNOUNCEMENT

The Directorate General of Khoula Hospital invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on/ Before 09:00 am Wednesday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
MOH/DGKH-11/1846/2023	Supply and Installation of furnishing for Maternity Ward at Khoula Hospital	27/May/2023	07/June/2023	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in Excellent Grade	R.O 25,000

- Tenders should be submitted on line on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.
- For any Clarification, you may contact via Telephone: 24402200 , Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

HM'S TOUR TO EGYPT

Oman-Egypt ties to scale new heights

Our Correspondent
Muscat

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will head to the Arab Republic of Egypt on Sunday. With the visit, Oman-Egypt relations are set to scale new heights, ushering in a new era of prosperity and expanded cooperation.

The visit is affirmation of the depth of historical relations between the sultanate and Egypt and the keenness of the two countries' leaderships to enhance ties.

The two countries are bound by deep-rooted ties, which will be consolidated further by His Majesty the Sultan's historic visit, his first official visit to Egypt since he assumed power on January 11, 2020.

The relations between the two countries were bolstered with President Abdul Fattah el Sisi's visit to Muscat in June 2022 and with His Majesty's tour, it will have a further positive impact.

It is worth mentioning that Oman and Egypt signed a number of MoUs and executive programmes during President Sisi's visit to Oman.

Oman-Egypt relations are established on solid and enduring principles reflected in the tangible progress made between the two countries in political, economic, social, cultural and security spheres.

The visit is evidence of these



relations being continuous, open and expected to see further comprehensive growth.

Figures released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information indicate that the vol-

ume of trade exchange between Oman and Egypt increased in 2022, amounting to RO393.628mn, compared to RO217.742mn in 2021.

The value of Omani exports to

Egypt increased from RO157.515mn in 2021 to RO298.077mn in 2022, while the value of imports amounted to RO95.551mn in 2022, compared to RO60.227mn in 2021.

Data shows that the balance of trade between the two countries in 2022 was in favour of Oman, amounting to RO202.526mn.

The two countries' keenness

to exchange views on matters of common concern is reflected in high-level meetings between leaders and top officials, and evinced in the continuous contacts between His Majesty the

Sultan and President Sisi.

Omani-Egypt diplomacy converges on many visions, notably combating terrorism and safeguarding international peace and security.

The remarkable growth and expansion in Omani-Egyptian relations is in pursuance of a benign march led by the Late Sultan

The volume of trade exchange between Oman and Egypt increased to RO393.628mn in 2022, compared to RO217.742mn in 2021

Qaboos bin Said and the presidents of Egypt over the past decades. It is a march based on solid foundations and clear-cut principles that distinguish the ties of the two countries. These relations resulted in agreements and joint ventures in several fields.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham's visit to Egypt and his meeting with President Sisi will give impetus to the bilateral relations and constitute a new beginning to establish a prosperous future for the peoples of the two countries. This visit will open vistas of co-operation in the fields of business and investment among others.

Oman welcomes Syria back into Arab fold

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, delivered a speech at the opening of the Arab Summit in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia on Friday.

At the start, he conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and his support and backing for the 32nd Arab Summit. "We, in the Sultanate of Oman, perceive that the success of this summit has been achieved through the Arab nations closing ranks, thanks to the wisdom of King Salman (bin Abdulaziz al Saud) and the leaders of Arab countries."

He also thanked all the Arab leaders for their endeavours to revive Arab solidarity, to end the region's crises through Arab solutions and to pave the way for a bright future of the nation's march. "This will benefit our countries, our peoples and our Arab nation. It will undoubtedly reflect positively on other countries of the world."

Sayyid Asaad said that in his first address to the nation after assuming power, His Majesty the Sultan pledged to continue backing the Arab League, cooperate with leaders of Arab countries, improve the lives of citizens, distance this region from conflicts and disagreements and take



Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman al Saud in Jeddah on Friday (ONA)

steps to achieve economic integration that serves the aspirations of the Arab peoples.

"From the vantage point of those principles and goals, we are pleased to welcome the resumption of the active participation of the brotherly Syrian Arab Republic in the tasks of the League of Arab States. We would like to express satisfaction with the presence and participation of President Bashar al Assad in this summit. We are confident

We are confident that, God willing, Syria will restore its status as a historical edifice and a recognised Arab lighthouse

SAYYID ASAAD BIN TARIK AL SAID

that, God willing, Syria will restore its status as a historical edifice and a recognised Arab lighthouse."

Speaking on the Palestinian issue, Sayyid Asaad said that Oman, like other countries and peoples who value justice and peace, believes that the inability of the international community to find a fair settlement for the suffering of the Palestinian people is the source of the tensions that from time to time afflict the region and the world.

"We cannot hope for a future for peoples that lies in coexistence and stability without ap-

plying the principles and standards of the international law, as well as resolutions of international legitimacy, to the Palestinian cause or without granting the Palestinian people the right to establish an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, based on the lines of June 4, 1967, in accordance with Security Council resolutions issued in this regard, the Arab Peace Initiative and the principle of Land for Peace."

He concluded by saying that Oman is confident that preserving and developing the Arab League will consolidate the bonds of cooperation, integration and exchange of benefits among Arab countries and other countries of the world.

"This confidence stems from the cultural heritage of the Arab nation, its civilised history and its contribution to humanity. We hereby affirm our ability, as an Arab nation, to elevate our countries to broader horizons of prosperity and progress and place our peoples in the position that they deserve."

Tax Authority raises awareness on compliance

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its remit to spread awareness on taxation, the Tax Authority continues to visit different governorates to educate people and corporates on the need to understand the tax structure in Oman and the importance of following related laws.

Last week, the authority launched a campaign in Al Wusta, about which Abdul Aziz al Mukhaini, Director General of Tax Authority, said, "The initiative aims to enhance tax awareness and serve the largest segment of taxpayers in the governorate. The programme includes clearing all taxes for various types of transactions, assisting taxpayers fulfil their tax obligations and responding to their inquiries regarding taxes."

The initiative also aims to increase awareness of the significance of submitting returns on time and raise tax compliance rate among taxpayers in order to avoid fines and legal accountability.

"Inspectors of Tax Authority have conducted awareness visits across the governorate,"

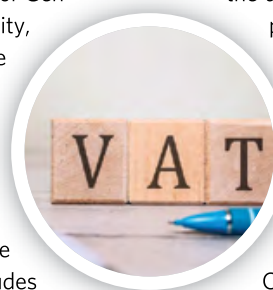
Mukhaini told Muscat Daily

Specialists from the authority presented publications and tax law booklets on corporate income tax and value added tax (VAT) to educate taxpayers about the importance of tax compliance, following up their registration with the authority, updating their data, and submitting tax returns in a timely manner.

Also, during the awareness campaign, taxpayers were urged to use services provided through the authority's e-services portal to facilitate easy clearance of their tax transactions.

He added that the Tax Authority is in constant co-operation with Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry to spread tax awareness among various categories of entrepreneurs and facilitate administrative procedures, whether through seminars, working papers or direct meetings across all governorates.

"We also urge taxpayers to monitor bulletins issued through the authority's social media platforms and the media to know the latest developments in the tax laws and regulations," Mukhaini added.



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MOH No: 658/2023

Oman's flights with aid arrive in Sudan's capital

Khartoum, Sudan - The first lot of the relief flights operated by the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Oman Charitable Organization (OCO), in cooperation with the Royal Air Force of Oman, reached Khartoum in Sudan on Friday.

The military transport aircraft of RAFO carrying various relief materials and necessary goods for humanitarian assistance, were received at the Port Sudan New International Airport by H E Ali bin Sulaiman al Darmaki, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Republic of Sudan, and Sudanese officials such as Ahmed Adam Bakhit, Minister of Social Development and chairman of the Higher Committee for Handling Humanitarian and Health Conditions, Fathallah Haj



Ahmed, governor of the Red Sea State, and Othman Abu Fatima, representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

'The operation of these flights comes within the framework of the humanitarian efforts provided by Oman in emergency and exceptional cases for brotherly and friendly countries,' ONA stated.

MoL calls on employers to provide safe environment to their workers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has issued guidelines for employers to provide safe work environment so as to ensure the well-being of their workers.

A statement issued by the ministry said that an employer 'is obligated to ensure that the working conditions are adequate for the safety and well-being of the employees'.

As per the notice, employers are required to take the following into consideration:

- ▶ Prevent the presence of contaminated air, and establish a natural or industrial ventilation system that ensures consistent air renewal in the workplace.
- ▶ Additionally, use a localised ventilation system in areas where pollution sources are present to efficiently extract polluted air.



- ▶ Ensure maximum ventilation and easy maintenance, windows should be in sufficient numbers and of appropriate width. For warehouses, it is recommended to install ventilation vents on the roofs as well as lower vents above the ground barrier level.
- ▶ Ensure that the workplace maintains an oxygen level of at least 21 per cent - same as that of the atmospheric air - and not less than 19.5 per cent in places of underground work.
- ▶ The velocity of air inside the workplace must not exceed 15 metres per minute in winter and 50 metres per minute in summer. If it exceeds these limits, work will be suspended or relocated to another site.
- ▶ Ensure that the relative humidity in the workplace does not exceed 80 per cent and if the limit is exceeded, cease work or relocate to a different area.

US 5th Fleet awards sailors who aided car crash victims in Oman last month

Manama, Bahrain - The US 5th Fleet honoured four sailors with awards for providing assistance to four victims of a car accident in Oman last month.

Vice Adm Brad Cooper, commander of the US Naval Forces Central Command, US 5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, presented the awards to the three Navy divers and a medical corpsman during a ceremony at the US Embassy in Muscat on May 10, according to the official US navy website.

Chief Navy Diver Davin Jameson was travelling on a highway in Oman with three other sailors on April 23, when they spotted four victims of a car accident, who needed medical assistance.

Without hesitation, Jameson along with Navy Diver 2nd Class Nicolas Arpaia, Navy Diver 2nd Class Benjamin Ching and Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Alec White, stopped to help.

"Being of service that afternoon was a humbling experience," said Jameson. "The corpsman on our team is trained



for a lot of different scenarios, but it was the first time the rest of us were responding to an emergency situation like this."

While waiting for Omani medical services to arrive, the team provided first aid to the victims suffering from shock, heat stress and traumatic injuries. Although one of the accident victims died due to the severity of his injuries, the Navy dive team's life-saving efforts were crucial to the survival of the other three.

"It made me appreciate the training we do because it made responding to the crash much

easier," said Jameson.

The sailors are members of US 5th Fleet's task force for expeditionary combat forces that operate across the Middle East. Expeditionary combat forces specialise in explosive ordnance disposal, naval coastal warfare, naval construction, expeditionary intelligence and expeditionary logistics support.

The US Naval Forces Central Command and US 5th Fleet function under the Combined Maritime Forces, the largest multinational naval partnership in the world.

MHT launches online guide for museums

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) on Thursday released an online guide for museums as it celebrated the International Museum Day, which falls on May 18 every year.

'The online guide includes information and data related to Oman's museums, in addition to the requirements and criteria for establishing a private museum or heritage house, a list of licensed private museums and heritage houses and their specialisations.'

The online guide called 'Directory of Museums and Private Heritage Houses in Oman' aims

to display many holdings, antiquities and treasures of national heritage. It also seeks to preserve this heritage so that the future generation can know about Oman's history and culture.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), over 115,000 people visited museums in 2021, an eight per cent increase compared to the visitors in 2020.

Oman has many popular museums such as the National Museum, the Children's Museum, the Al Saiidiya School Museum of Education, and Oman Across Ages Museum among others.

One can go through the guide via link: <https://bit.ly/3BCn1kT>

Registration for Child Culture Award opens

Muscat - The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MCSY) opened registration for a newly launched award for children in culture category. The registration for the Child Culture Award will close on July 31.

The award - for children and personnel promoting culture among children - comprises two competitions named 'Oman Speaks' and 'Speak so I See You'.

The new award seeks to encourage children to hone their cultural and literary abilities.

It will motivate writers and intellectuals to enrich the Arab children's library with literature focusing on human values, MCSY stated.

Tender Announcement

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tender:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Nonrefundable) OMR	Tender Purchase deadline	Clarification deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2023/05/ENG/005	Revamping of Amerat Al Beerain Filling Station In Muscat Governorate.	100/-	25.05.2023	29.05.2023	31.05.2023
TENDER/2023/05/ENG/006	Construction of A New Filling Station In Bousher In Muscat Governorate	100/-			
TENDER/2023/05/ENG/007	Revamping of Al Dreez Filling Station In Al Dhahirah Governorate	100/-			

Bank Name & Account Number

Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)

The Conditions:

- 1- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om The tender may be collected on any working day between 08:00 AM – 03:00 PM.
- 2- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- 3- Offer Submission:** Tender bid should be submitted a sealed envelope and addressed to the **Chairman of Tender Committee**, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- 4- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- 5- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.**
- 6- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.**
- 7- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.**
- 8- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.**
- 9- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without giving any reasons.**
- 10- For any enquiry email us at (procurement@almaha.com.om) or by calling 24610289/24610287/24610355**

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Moody's upgrades 7 government-related companies in Oman



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Global credit rating agency Moody's Investors Service on Friday upgraded the corporate family ratings (CFR) of seven government-related issuers (GRIs) in Oman to Ba2 from Ba3 and maintained the positive outlooks.

Moody's upgraded the ratings of Omantel, Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP), Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC), Dhofar Integrated Services Company (DISC), Majan Electricity Company (MJEC), Mazoon Electricity Company (MZEC) and Muscat Electricity Distribution Company (MEDC).

The rating action on these government-related companies is a direct consequence of Moody's recent rating action on the Government of Oman where the government bond rating was upgraded to Ba2 from Ba3, while the outlook remains positive.

Moody's said that it has upgraded the ratings of these seven companies to Ba2 because of their close linkage to the Omani government and high exposure to the domestic operating environment.

'The upgrade of the ratings reflects the close interlinkage of DISC, MJEC, MZEC, MEDC, OETC and OPWP with the sovereign rating because of their significant exposure to the Omani government in the form of subsidies (OETC and OPWP being indirectly exposed),' the rating agency said.

Moody's, however, noted that the liquidity of DISC, MJEC, MZEC, MEDC and OPWP remains weak because of their continued reliance on short-term funding in the form of working capital facilities. It said MJEC, MZEC, DISC and OETC will also continue to face high capital spending in the next 12-18 months with associated funding requirements and increases in leverage.

The rating agency added that it will be monitoring the impact of the reorganisation of the electricity distribution and supply companies on the capital struc-

Moody's said that it has upgraded ratings of government-related companies to Ba2 because of their close linkage to Omani government and high exposure to domestic operating environment

tures of these entities and their ability to optimise their capital spending.

According to Moody's, the ratings of DISC, MJEC, MZEC, MEDC, OETC and OPWP remain supported by (i) the stable and transparent regulatory frameworks for the electricity and water sectors and the independence of the regulator; (ii) the cost-recovery mechanisms of the regulatory frameworks;

(iii) the low business risk profile of their activities; and (iv) their respective monopoly positions in Oman.

'The positive outlook for DISC, OPWP, MJEC, MZEC, MEDC and OETC are in line with the positive outlook on the government rating', Moody's said.

For Omantel, Moody's said the upgrade of its corporate family ratings to Ba2 from Ba3 and affirmation of the ba3 BCA (baseline credit assessment) reflects the upgrade of the sovereign rating and the company's status as a government-related issuer. Moody's also expects that Omantel's credit metrics will improve over the next 12-18 months which could lead to improvement in the BCA.

According to Moody's, Omantel's credit quality is supported by its (i) strong market position in the Omani telecom market; (ii) resilient demand due to the necessity-like consumer spending on telecom services; (iii) exposure to other Middle Eastern and African markets through ownership in Zain Group; and (iv) efforts to reduce leverage, particularly by using proceeds from the recent sale and leaseback of assets to reduce debt.

The rating agency said that its positive outlook on Omantel is in line with that of the government. The outlook also incorporates Moody's expectation that the company will demonstrate resilient financial performance, reduce leverage and improve liquidity over the next 12-18 months.

BankDhofar announces terms of merger proposal with Ahli Bank

Muscat - After submitting a revised non-binding merger proposal to the board of directors of Ahli Bank on April 26, 2023, BankDhofar has announced further details of its revised non-binding offer of its merger proposal with Ahli Bank.

The revised offer proposes issuance of 1.2910 shares of BankDhofar ordinary shares for each share of Ahli Bank, according to a press release issued by BankDhofar.

The proposed share-swap ratio implies an attractive valuation of 200bz per share for Ahli Bank based on BankDhofar's unaffected share price of 155bz prior to the initial offer of merger proposal as at April 9, 2023. The offer also entails an option for shareholders to opt for cash consideration for up to 25 per cent of their holding in Ahli Bank at the offer price of 200bz per share.

BankDhofar said that the revised offer is a highly value accretive proposition for all Ahli Bank shareholders. The offer price implies a 15 per cent premium to Ahli Bank's unaffected share price, prior to submission and announcement of initial merger proposal to Ahli Bank board.

The offer price values Ahli Bank shares at 1.30x book value. Moreover, based on latest share



BankDhofar says its revised non-binding offer implies significant premium to Ahli Bank's as well as Omani banking sector's valuations, translating into compelling proposition for Ahli Bank's shareholders

price of BankDhofar, the proposed offer and share-swap ratio implies further increase in the effective value for each Ahli Bank share to 227bz per share, 1.48x book value and 30.6 per cent premium to Ahli Bank's unaf-

ected share price (applicable to the 75 per cent share component as per the offered share-swap ratio).

BankDhofar noted that the offer price reflects a substantial premium to the valuation multi-

ples of the Omani banking sector.

For entities which are Shariah-compliant, Shariah-compliant juristic shareholders and their subsidiaries, the proposed merger offer includes 100 per cent cash payout at an offer price of 200bz per share, taking into account inability to hold shares in a conventional bank.

BankDhofar intends to fund the cash component of the offer from its existing liquidity and capital resources as well as contribution from BankDhofar's existing shareholders.

The terms of the revised offer for merger with Ahli Bank clearly demonstrate strong commitment by BankDhofar, its board members and shareholders towards further strengthening of Omani banking sector offering improved value proposition to all the stakeholders.

The proposed merger offers an immensely attractive opportunity for shareholders of both entities to benefit from value creation with significant synergy possibilities and to participate in the long-term growth story, whilst ensuring a strong and well capitalised bank on day one.

The transaction is subject to obtaining necessary approvals from relevant regulators as well as boards and shareholders of BankDhofar and Ahli Bank.

World Bank expects GCC economic growth to slow to 2.5% in 2023

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The GCC economies are projected to grow at a slower pace in 2023 compared to the previous year, in the face of lower oil and gas earnings and a global economic slowdown, according to the World Bank.

As per the new World Bank Gulf Economic Update report, the GCC economy is expected to grow by 2.5 per cent in 2023 and 3.2 per cent in 2024. This compares to the region's remarkable GDP growth of 7.3 per cent in 2022, which was fuelled by a strong increase in oil production for most of that year.

'The weaker performance is driven primarily by lower hydrocarbon GDP, which is expected to contract by 1.3 per cent in 2023 after the OPEC+ April 2023 production cut announcement and the global economic slowdown,' the World Bank said.

However, robust growth in the non-oil sectors, which is anticipated to reach 4.6 per cent in 2023, will dampen the shortfall in hydrocarbon activities, driven primarily by private consumption, fixed investments, and looser fiscal policy in response to 2023's relatively high oil revenues.

The latest issue of the World Bank's Gulf Economic Update



The World Bank expects Oman's overall GDP growth to moderate to 1.5 per cent in 2023 reflecting softening global demand

stated that this year's more modest growth is nonetheless buoyed by the structural reforms undertaken in the past few years.

'Improvement to the business climate and competitiveness, and the overall improvements in female labour force participation in the GCC countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, have all paid off, though further diversification efforts are still needed and is underway,' the report said.

The World Bank said that Oman's economy is forecast to continue to grow, but at a slower pace, driven primarily by accelerated implementation of struc-

tural reforms under Vision 2040.

The sultanate's overall growth is projected to moderate to 1.5 per cent in 2023 reflecting softening global demand. Accordingly, Oman's hydrocarbon sector is anticipated to contract by 3.3 per cent reflecting OPEC+ recent production cuts, while the non-oil economy is projected to continue its recovery trajectory by growing 3.1 per cent in 2023 supported by front-loading of infrastructure projects, increased industrial capacity from renewable energy, and the tourism sector.

The new World Bank Gulf

Economic Update, titled 'The Health and Economic Burden of Non-Communicable Diseases in the GCC' focuses on how non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have become the leading cause of mortality and morbidity, accounting for close to 75 per cent of all deaths and disability in the region. Of these deaths and disability, more than 80 per cent are attributed to just four main NCD categories: cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, and respiratory diseases.

The report also highlights the substantial cost of NCDs to the economies of the GCC countries. A recent study published in the Journal of Medical Economics, a collaborative effort between experts at the World Bank and key stakeholders from across the GCC, estimated the direct medical costs of seven major NCDs to be around US\$16.7bn in 2019 alone.

The same study found that NCDs also impose substantial indirect costs to their economies, through the adverse impact on human capital. The losses to workforce productivity alone cost the GCC economies more than US\$80bn in 2019. With an ageing population, and with it the prevalence of NCDs, these costs are only expected to grow in the future.

CMA approves OQIC-Vision Insurance merger

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has approved the merger between Oman Qatar Insurance Company (OQIC) and Vision Insurance Company.

Following the merger of the two insurance firms, the CMA has canceled the license of Vision Insurance. The CMA has issued a decision canceling the

license of Vision Insurance Services for carrying out general and life insurance and savings business in the sultanate.

In a press statement, the CMA said its decision is based on the approval of the extraordinary general meeting of Vision Insurance to dissolve the company and merge it with OQIC.

The CMA stated that the merger of OQIC and Vision Insurance would raise the capital

of the combined entity. The extraordinary general meeting of OQIC had resolved to increase the authorised capital from RO20mn to RO30mn and the issued capital will be increased to RO22mn.

The CMA said it continuously monitor the financial positions of the regulated companies and encourage solutions that assist the companies to grow and prosper to achieve financial stability.

Oman Insurance acquires majority stake in Arabian Scandinavian Insurance

Dubai, UAE - The UAE-based Oman Insurance Company (Sukoon) has completed the acquisition of 93 per cent of the share capital of Arabian Scandinavian Insurance Company (ASCANA) by way of special deal through Dubai Clear.

Sukoon had signed a share purchase agreement in December 2022 to acquire a majority stake of more than 93 per cent in the DFM-listed takaful insurer.

This acquisition is in line with Sukoon's strategy to diversify its sources of business and consolidate its presence in the UAE and GCC, while allowing it to enter the growing takaful insurance market, according to a press release.

Jean-Louis Laurent Josi, CEO of Sukoon Insurance, said, "This acquisition will not only strengthen Sukoon's ability to meet a wider range of customer



needs with Shariah-compliant products, but it will also allow ASCANA to leverage Sukoon's strong heritage, market positioning and specialized underwriting capabilities. The acquisition marks a new chapter in the history of Sukoon, further reinforcing our position as an insurer of choice in the UAE."

In addition, Sukoon has also confirmed its intent to submit an offer to acquire the shares of the

remaining shareholders of ASCANA, as soon as it receives the regulatory approvals.

Established in 1975, Oman Insurance Company (Sukoon) is one of the leading insurance providers in the UAE. They provide a wide range of comprehensive insurance solutions to more than 800,000 individuals and commercial clients in healthcare, motor, life and general (property, energy, engineer-

ing, aviation, marine and liability) insurance. Sukoon has operations across all emirates in the UAE as well as in Oman.

Sukoon recorded gross written premiums of AED4.39bn in 2022. A public stock company, it is listed on the Dubai Financial Market stock exchange. A financially sound company, Sukoon is A rated by AM Best, A by Standard & Poor's and A2 by Moody's.

Biden still believes US will 'avoid a default'

Washington, US – Talks to avoid a US debt default were on a knife edge Saturday as President Joe Biden warned he would not accept “extreme” Republican demands but said he remained optimistic.

“I still believe we’ll be able to avoid a default and we’ll get something decent done,” he told reporters at the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan.

With the Treasury Department warning that the US government could run out of money as early as June 1 – triggering massive economic disruption in the world’s biggest economy and likely around the globe – the political battle in Washington has see-sawed without any clear sign of resolution.

Republicans, who control the House of Representatives, are demanding steep budget cuts as a price for allowing an extension of the government’s borrowing authority. The White House is seeking to whittle down Republican demands, while arguing that the traditionally uncontroversial annual debt ceiling increase is being weaponized for political gain.

Hopes for a settlement took a blow Friday when Republicans walked out of negotiations, declaring a “pause.”

However, the talks restarted



US President Joe Biden speaks about debt negotiations in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday (AFP)

hours later, leading White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre to say “we are indeed optimistic.”

Biden, on the other side of the world for the gathering of rich democracies, was briefed on the

situation early Saturday, which was still Friday night in Washington, the White House said.

Biden communications director Ben LaBolt said “Republicans are taking the economy hostage and pushing us to the brink of de-

fault, which could cost millions of jobs and tip the country into recession after two years of steady job and wage growth.”

While Biden will not accept “extreme” Republican policies, “there remains a path forward to

arrive at a reasonable bipartisan agreement if Republicans come back to the table to negotiate in good faith,” LaBolt said.

Tax and spending
More borrowing is required by

the US government just to meet expenditures already made, meaning that refusal by the Republicans to lift the debt ceiling would leave Washington unable to pay its bills, triggering an array of economic shockwaves.

Republicans argue that the more than US\$31tn in US national debt is too high to accept and that there should be agreement on getting the books more

Republicans are taking the economy hostage and pushing us to the brink of default, which could cost millions of jobs and tip the country into recession after two years of steady job and wage growth

BEN LABOLT

balanced, rather than simply authorizing a still-higher debt allowance.

Democrats say that they are willing to discuss the budget but that first the debt ceiling needs to be raised without condition so

that the existing bills can be paid and US financial credibility preserved.

Briefly calling off the talks on Friday, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said: “We’ve got to pause,” because “we can’t be spending any more money next year.”

But Biden’s team says the raft of spending cuts being demanded by Republicans are fueled by the agenda of the party’s increasingly dominant hard-right wing.

In his statement, LaBolt said that the Republican budget cuts would lead to large scale job losses and the weakening of social safety nets, while extending tax breaks for the wealthy. The counter-proposal from the White House is to raise taxes on the wealthy to improve revenue and to accept more limited spending cuts.

In his remarks to reporters, Biden expressed a willingness to be patient.

“It’s a negotiation. It goes in stages,” he said. Asked if he was worried, he replied: “Not at all.”

The US president leaves Japan for Washington on Sunday, cutting short a trip that had been set to take him to Papua New Guinea and Australia next week.

AFP



UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak

UK unveils £1bn chip strategy

London, UK – The British government on Friday unveiled a new £1bn semiconductor strategy to invest in infrastructure, research and security as the UK tries to diversify its chip supply chain.

The plan would “safeguard supply chains from disruption and protect tech against national security risks”, the UK government’s department for business, energy and industrial strategy said in a statement.

The investment over the next decade would include up to £200mn between now and 2025.

The new 20-year strategy would “boost the UK’s strengths and skills in design, R&D and compound semiconductors, while helping to grow domestic chip firms across the UK”, the department added.

It comes as European car-maker Stellantis has warned it could close some UK factories

should the British government fail to tweak Brexit trade rules to ease the supply of batteries for electric vehicles, for which semiconductor technology is a key part.

Visiting Tokyo Thursday, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced Japanese investment of more than US\$22bn into the UK, but accepted car-makers’ concern about Brexit trade rules as he confirmed talks with the European Union.

“Semiconductors underpin the devices we use every day and will be crucial to advancing the technologies of tomorrow,” Sunak was quoted as saying in the statement.

“Our new strategy focuses our efforts on where our strengths lie, in areas like research and design, so we can build our competitive edge on the global stage,” he added

AFP

Russia's economy contracts 1.9% in first quarter amid lower oil income

Moscow, Russia – Russia’s gross domestic product shrank by 1.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2023, the country’s statistics agency Rosstat said Wednesday.

The economy was weighed down by another wave of sanctions imposed over its offensive in Ukraine, including a ban by the European Union on Russian petroleum products, on top of a price cap agreed with the Group of Seven and Australia.

According to Capital Economics, an independent London-based think tank, this contraction is “smaller-than-expected”, which “suggests that the economy has turned a corner and that growth accelerated.”

Government spending is boosting industry and retail sales, it added.

“We think that Russia’s economy is on track to post positive GDP growth in 2023 as a whole,” it said in a note published Wednesday.

Russia’s economy contracted 2.1 per cent last year.

Sanctions nevertheless had a measurable impact on the Russian economy.

Despite oil export volumes at their highest level since the offensive began, oil revenues were still down 43 per cent compared to a year ago, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in March.

Lower oil revenues directly impacted the budget deficit, which hit 3.4tn rubles



The finance ministry said the deficit was due to shrinking energy revenues (down 52 per cent) and increasing expenditures (up 26 per cent), partly due to the Ukraine offensive

(US\$42.3bn) between January and April.

This is considerably more than the target deficit of 2.9tn rubles.

The finance ministry said the deficit was due to shrinking energy revenues (-52 per cent) and increasing expenditures (+26 per cent), partly due to the Ukraine offensive.

On Wednesday, Rosstat said however the construction and agricultural sectors had held up well during the first quarter.

Experts said that given this trajectory Russia’s public sector deficit could reach between three and four percent of the GDP, higher than the two percent target.

Inflation dropped in March to

a 3.5 per cent annual rate, and to 2.3 per cent in April.

Russia’s low unemployment rate of 3.5 per cent is not a healthy sign, but rather a symptom of its shrinking labour force.

Russia has for years dealt with a demographic crisis, which only worsened with the Ukraine offensive.

It left the economy contending with a shortage of workers, with various sectors struggling to fill posts.

Russian authorities now believe that growth will be driven by consumption rather than exports, including because of increasing real wages.

AFP



Lorie Logan

US Fed official indicates support for additional rate hike

Washington, US – Another member of the US Federal Reserve’s rate-setting committee indicated her support for an additional rate hike next month, underscoring divisions at the Fed over how aggressively to target inflation.

The US central bank has raised its benchmark lending rate 10 times in quick succession since last year as it looks to suppress demand to tackle inflation, which remain well above its long-run of two percent.

“We haven’t yet made the progress we need to make, and it’s a long way from here to two percent inflation,” Dallas Fed president Lorie Logan told a banking conference in Texas. Logan joins three other member of the Federal Open Markets Committee (FOMC) – which currently has just 11 voting members – in indicating that the Fed may need to raise rates again on June 13-14.

Other officials, including Chicago Fed president Austan Goolsbee, and Fed governor Philip Jefferson – the White House’s nominee for the vacant number 2 position at the US central bank – have suggested adopting a wait-and-see approach to raising interest rates.

“On the one hand, inflation is too high, and we have not yet made sufficient progress on reducing it,” Jefferson said in a speech in Washington on Thursday morning.

AFP

Japan inflation rose to 3.4% in April, meeting market expectations

Tokyo, Japan – Japan’s consumer prices rose 3.4 per cent on-year in April, in line with market expectations, government data showed Friday.

The figure, which excludes volatile fresh food prices, followed a 3.1 per cent rise recorded in both March and February.

Inflation in Japan is lower than the sky-high price increases seen in the United States and elsewhere that have prompted central banks to hike interest rates.

Yet it remains higher than the Bank of Japan’s two percent tar-



Increases in the cost of processed foods, durable goods and telecom fees contributed to Japan’s inflation

get, which has been surpassed every month since April last year.

The Japanese central bank argues that the price rises are fuelled by temporary factors, such as the war in Ukraine, and so has stuck to its monetary easing policies in a bid to encourage sustained growth.

Analysts said the price increases would likely continue to slow from a January peak, when inflation measured 4.2 per cent on-year – the highest level since September 1981, fuelled in part by higher energy bills.

Earlier this week, data showed Japan’s economy grew a faster-than-expected 0.4 per cent in the first quarter, helped by a recovery in inbound tourism after pandemic border restrictions were lifted in October.

The BoJ last month announced a review of its long-standing easing measures under new governor Kazuo Ueda, but said it would maintain them for the time being.

Excluding energy, the data released by Japan’s internal affairs ministry on Friday showed prices

rose 4.1 per cent in April, after a 3.8 per cent rise in March.

Increases in the cost of processed foods, durable goods and telecommunication fees, among other categories, contributed to inflation, it showed.

“Core CPI will likely remain in the level of 3.0-3.5 per cent until this summer” due to high resource costs and the impact of the weak yen, said Saisuke Sakai, chief economist of Mizuho Research and Technologies.

AFP

All-new Toyota Urban Cruiser SUV launched in gala event in sultanate

Under the patronage of Sayyid Ahmed Hilal al Busaidi, wali of Baushar, the all-new Toyota Urban Cruiser SUV was unveiled at an exclusive event. Gracing the occasion was H E Jota Yamamoto, Ambassador of Japan to Oman.

The guest of honour was Masaru Shimada, general manager, Middle East and Central Asia Division, Toyota Motor Corporation. He was accompanied by other officials from Toyota Motor Corporation.

In the opening remarks, Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan, managing director - Corporate, Saud Bahwan Group, said, "For decades, Toyota has been winning hearts in Oman with its high quality products that have not only found a special place in the lives of customers.

"But have also been inspirations in the automotive world. In Oman, Toyota commands a major market share and that is all due to the trust and confidence that customers have in the brand."

Expressing his gratitude to Toyota Motor Corporation he said, "We would like to thank Toyota Motor Corporation, for their constant support and encouragement extended to us at all times. We also take this opportunity to thank our valued customers for their continued patronage."

Later in the evening sharing his thoughts on Toyota's presence in Oman, Masaru Shimada said, "Toyota Motor Corporation



Sayyid Ahmed Hilal al Busaidi, H E Jota Yamamoto, Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan and Masaru Shimada with the all-new Urban Cruiser

has a very long relationship with Saud Bahwan Group, for almost 50 years. They are one of the most important partners among all the distributors in the world. That's why, the late honorary chairman of Toyota Motor Corporation, Dr Shoichiro Toyoda, and his son and current chairman Akio Toyoda have visited Oman and deepened their personal relationship.

Toyota's mission is to produce 'Happiness for All' and therefore here in Oman, we will work very closely with our respectful partner, Saud Bahwan Automotive, to make sure all our

customers are happy in Oman."

Sharing his thoughts on Toyota's future plans and the all-new Urban Cruiser, he said, "Toyota's approach is 'Multi-pathway', by offering wide variety of choices, meaning not only Battery EV but also Hybrid, Plug-in Hybrid, Fuel Cell EV, Hydrogen engine and so on."

The 2023 Toyota Urban Cruiser is a five-seater vehicle, which features a 1.5-litre gasoline engine and Integrated Starter Generator (ISG) that functions as both an electrified generator and motor. Combined with a compact Lithium-ion battery, the

powertrain delivers 102hp and 135Nm of torque, with an average fuel consumption of 19.8km/litre and is paired with six-speed automatic transmission.

The new Urban Cruiser's spacious cabin is designed for greater comfort and convenience. The vehicle's head-up display, 4.2-inch colour Thin Film Transistor (TFT) multi-information display.

Other impressive features include a dual-sliding panoramic roof, 17" wheels, a 7-inch or 9-inch multimedia screen with seamless Apple CarPlay and An-

droid Auto integration, and a wireless smartphone charging system. Additionally, the interior offers three USB ports, a six-speaker sound system, a powerful automatic air conditioning system with rear AC vents, and 60/40 split reclining rear seats.

As with any Toyota model, the new Urban Cruiser comes complete with a comprehensive array of safety features.

A choice of seven exciting exterior hues adds to the new Urban Cruiser's striking visual appeal.

The vehicle's interior features an equally stylish colour scheme,



Special VIP guests at the Event



Guests take a close look at the newly-launched vehicle



Interior of the vehicle

with options.

The all-new Urban Cruiser is

now on display at all Saud Bahwan Automotive showrooms.



OETC hosts forum for consultants, contractors

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) convened the Business Opportunities Forum 2023, connecting current and potential consultants, contractors, and suppliers, who are interested in learning more about the company's future projects and expressing their sincere desire to collaborate with OETC.

This forum offers the company's future plans and provide information regarding upcoming tenders and projects to be launched in the near future.

It also includes procedures for tender submission, ensuring that the tendering process adheres to the applicable laws and standards.

Moreover, the forum seeks to familiarise contractors and consultants with the recent changes in tendering systems and procedures. 'Being aware of these changes will enhance their chances of participating in the company's tenders, aligning with the specifications, regulations, and policies in place,' the company stated.

Ali Saif al Reesi, Chief Financial Officer in OETC and a member of the Tenders Committee, emphasised the company's keenness to provide contractors and consultants clear details about the projects, on which the company is working.

This ensures that the tasks

and projects are more transparent and guarantees the participation of the best companies in the tenders, as well as addressing any inquiries raised by the attendees.

"One of the objectives of this forum is to share the latest plans and developments with stakeholders in order to reduce challenges encountered during tendering and to enhance the quality, clarity and accuracy of the data, ensuring that the work progresses in accordance with the specifications, standards and applicable laws. Such meetings also help to increase contractors and consultants' awareness in the field of tenders," Reesi added.

It is worth mentioning that OETC, member of Nama Group is the only company responsible for the transmission and control of electricity in the sultanate's network, where electricity is transferred from production stations to distributed load centres in all governorates of the sultanate, and the transmission network operates at a voltage of 132kV and above, to cover most of the governorates of the sultanate, whether in the north or in the south.

In addition, OETC manages the interconnection lines between the Sultanate and the Gulf interconnection network with a voltage of 220 kV.

ahlibank brings exclusive benefits for credit card holders

In an effort to provide a top-notch banking experience, ahlibank has introduced a range of special benefits and exciting offers for its premium and private credit card holders. These exclusive privileges are specifically designed for Al Nukhba Signature Credit Card and Exclusiv Infinite Credit Card holders, ensuring that they enjoy a truly exceptional banking experience.

Additionally, these credit cards are equipped with advanced contactless payment technology for fast and secure transactions.

The bank offers several benefits to its Al Nukhba Signature and Exclusiv Infinite credit card holders in addition to the quick processing of banking transactions. The high-end customers will enjoy a complementary chauffeur to any location from



Muscat International Airport within a radius of 60km or vice versa. They will also be eligible to free Airport lounge access through LoungeKey App. Furthermore, they will be able to obtain exclusive benefits, including global concierge services, purchase protection, extended warranty, and many more.

Commenting on the bank's efforts to provide superior benefits for its exclusive customers, Muneer al Balushi, AGM - head of Retail Distribution at ahlibank, stated, "At ahlibank, we always aim to go the extra mile for our customers, and we are dedicated to delivering the best possible services. Our commitment to ex-

ceptional customer service is unwavering, and we are continually exploring new ways to enhance their experience with us.

"Therefore, offering innovative solutions that simplify our customers' lives and providing them with the convenience they deserve is pivotal in our approach. Our premium credit card, Al Nukhba Signature Credit Card and Private Exclusiv Infinite credit card, are packed with features and benefits that deliver real value to our customers. We will continue to innovate and provide unique solutions that make banking with ahlibank an enjoyable experience."

Al Nukhba Signature and Exclusiv Infinite Credit Card holders enjoy various benefits. They receive free cards and receive joining bonuses of 4,000 and 6,000 Pearl Points respectively. Every

POS transaction made with their credit card earns them a one per cent cashback. In addition to that, the customer gets exclusive monthly offers, including 50 per cent discount on cinema tickets at VOX Cinema with complimentary upgrades on popcorn and soft drinks in addition 50 per cent off cinema tickets at Cinepolis Cinema. They can also earn pearl points that can be converted to airline miles with Oman Air and Qatar Airways, which can be used to purchase tickets, upgrades, extra luggage and more.

They will also receive free travel insurance when purchasing airline tickets.

The cards are equipped with advanced EMV chip technology and are verified by Visa (VBV) for secure online transactions, the bank stated.

Student leaders invested at Indian School Darsait

Indian School Darsait inaugurated its newly formed Student Council for the academic year 2023-24 in a grand ceremony held at the senior school auditorium last Tuesday.

Jayapal Manik Dethé, second secretary (political and education) at the Indian Embassy in Muscat and Director of the Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest.

The ceremony commenced with a sense of unity and dynamism as the school choir performed a melodious prayer song following the Lord's prayer. Vice principal Geeta Chauhan vitalised the gathering with a cordial welcome speech.

The investiture ceremony signified the school's trust and confidence in the newly appointed



office bearers. Accepting the mantle of accountability, they pledged to fulfill their duties to the best of their abilities.

Principal Amar Srivastava, introduced the ceremonial heads, general prefects, house prefects, vice captains, and captains, and administered the oath. The

house counsellors introduced the new house prefects, vice captains, and captains.

Jayapal Manik Dethé and Vijaya Saravanan Sankaran, president of the School Management Committee (SMC), conferred the badges and sashes upon the young student leaders, entrust-

ing them with their responsibilities. The solemn moment of taking the oath of responsibility was truly graceful and captivating.

It was a proud moment for the parents of the newly elected members, witnessing their children embark on a new journey as real leaders. The chief guest con-

gratulated the student leaders, advising them to be impartial and honest in discharging their duties. He emphasised the importance of upholding values and shared fond memories of his own school days, inspiring the newly elected council members with his words of wisdom and his life story of success.

Vijaya Saravanan Sankaran, president of the SMC, stressed the importance of unbiased execution of duties by the newly appointed Student Council.

He encouraged the students to actively participate in the myriad of activities that the school offers to develop a well-rounded personality.

Principal Amar Srivastava conveyed his best wishes to all the council members as they take their leadership roles.

Mazda CX-9, CX-30 rank high among SUVs

CX-9 and CX-30 are two of the best offerings in the SUV category from Mazda, which are equally stylish, efficient, and offer plenty of features to make drive comfortable and enjoyable.

Mazda is a well-known brand for its reliable, stylish, and affordable cars. In recent years, they have expanded their lineup to include some of the most popular SUVs on the market; and CX-9 and CX-30 are among them.

‘Whether you are looking for a family car or just a reliable SUV for your daily commute, the Mazda CX-9 and CX-30 are definitely worth considering,’ the company stated.

The Mazda CX-9 is a full-size SUV that provides ample space for families and groups of friends. It has a sleek and sophisticated design that is both modern and timeless. The CX-9 is powered by a turbocharged 2.5-litre four-cylinder engine that delivers a smooth and responsive performance. It also comes with a host of advanced safety features to ensure that you and your passengers are protected on the road.

The Mazda CX-30, on the other hand, is a compact SUV that offers a perfect blend of style and practicality. It has a sporty and dynamic look that is sure to turn heads. The CX-30 is powered by a 2.0-litre four-cylinder engine that delivers a spirited and efficient performance. It also comes with an array of advanced features, including a 360-degree camera, blind-spot monitoring, and rear cross-traffic alert, to help you stay safe on the road.

Both the Mazda CX-9 and Mazda CX-30 are excellent



choices for anyone looking for a quality SUV. They offer a perfect blend of style, performance, and safety, making them ideal for families, professionals, and anyone who values comfort and convenience.

Mazda is a brand that prides itself on building vehicles that are stylish, fun to drive, and packed with cutting-edge technology. When it comes to SUVs, Mazda takes this approach to the next level.

The Mazda CX-9 and CX-30 are both built to offer drivers a truly unique driving experience that is unmatched by other SUVs on the market.

When it comes to performance, Mazda SUVs are designed to be both powerful and agile. The available Skyactiv-G engine delivers plenty of power, while the Skyactiv-Drive transmission

provides smooth, responsive shifting. Mazda’s i-Activ AWD system is also available on both models, providing excellent traction and stability on a variety of road surfaces.

Mazda SUVs are known for their safety features. Both the CX-9 and CX-30 come with a suite of advanced safety technologies designed to keep you and your passengers safe on the road. Features like blind spot monitoring, lane departure warning, lane keep assist, and rear cross traffic alert are all available on these vehicles.

Overall, Mazda SUVs are a great choice for anyone looking for a stylish, fun-to-drive vehicle that is also packed with cutting-edge technology and advanced safety features. Whether you choose the CX-9 or the CX-30, you can be sure that you are get-

ting a top-quality SUV that will provide you with many years of driving pleasure.

Don’t forget to take advantage of the exclusive offer at Towell Auto Centre. An AAA roadside assistance package valid for the first three years from the date of retail purchase and an IINJAZ service package for five years or 100,000km (whichever comes first) for just an additional RO200 (plus VAT) with the purchase of a new Mazda model.

If you require more space, power, and safety features, the Mazda CX-9 is the way to go.

However, if you prioritise fuel economy, style, and agility, the Mazda CX-30 is the better choice.

Whichever option you choose, you can rest assured that you’ll be getting one of the best SUVs on the market today.



Financing offer from Meethaq gains popularity

The exclusive financing offer launched by Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has gained tremendous popularity among customers.

Customers can take advantage of the offer and enjoy the competitive profit rate on home finance, auto finance, personal goods finance, education finance, marriage finance and travel finance.

The competitive profit rate also applies to the transfer of existing financing facilities to Meethaq with the option of consolidating various financing facilities into one financing facility.

All customers irrespective of their salary or whether they are employed in the private or government sector can avail special rates on different financing products. This makes Meethaq’s offer unique, transparent as well

as cater to the needs of customers across all segments of the society.

To take advantage of this highly advantageous offer, customers are encouraged to apply as soon as possible, as the special profit rates will only be available until July 31 this year.

Both new and existing customers can apply for any of Meethaq’s financing solutions and benefit from swift processing as well as minimal documentation.

Financing options are available based on each customer’s unique needs, with up to 80 per cent financing available for home or auto financing. Hundred per cent financing is available for travel, marriage, education, and personal goods finance. Customers can submit their applications at any of

Meethaq’s 26 state-of-the-art branches across the sultanate.

Meethaq has established the largest Islamic network in Oman, consisting of 26 branches across the country. Meethaq also has a dedicated network of over 50 ATMs and CDMs, and provides free access to more than 800 ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country, allowing customers to conduct their banking transactions with ease.

Meethaq is committed to providing a world-class Islamic banking experience by launching products and services that comply with sharia’a principles as well as the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman.

Every Meethaq product goes through the process of sharia’a compliance certification by the Sharia’a Supervisory Board.

CC Energy joins Tejarah Talks on net zero emissions

Walter Simpson, managing director of CC Energy Development (CCED), the value-driven company delivering long-term growth to Oman’s hydrocarbon sector, took part in a panel discussion entitled ‘Oman’s Journey towards Net Zero: An Environment for Enterprise’.

The event was part of the Tejarah Talks platform, a series of discussions organised by Oman Business Forum in association with the Oman Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Tejarah Talks brings together experts and thought leaders from across different industries in Oman, and enables them to share ideas in areas related to Oman’s economy.

The recent session focused on the transition of Oman to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050 and its implications for corporations, including small and medium enterprises. The panel discussion was moderated by H H Sayyed Dr Adham



al Said who is the Co-Founder of The Firm for Business and Economic Consulting in Oman.

Walter Simpson, Managing Director of CC Energy Development said, “Our industry is committed to contributing to Oman’s journey towards a low carbon future and its transition to a net-zero economy by 2050. Through our gas-to-power project, CC Energy Development will be making a major step towards reaching zero emissions from gas flaring by 2027.”

He added, “We are committed to reducing our carbon footprint, using modern technologies

and optimising operations to achieve this important objective for Oman.”

CCED operates in Blocks 3 and 4 of Oman, exploring and producing oil and gas as a part of its commitment to the nation’s economic development and prosperity.

Through its gas-to-power project, the company started using its associated gas effectively by generating electricity to power its field production assets, such as wells and pumps. This will allow it to replace most of the diesel that is currently used for those purposes.

Indian School Bousher holds ‘safe driving, safe transport’ orientation programme

In an effort to raise awareness about safe transportation and driving, a special orientation session was organised by Indian School Bousher for its school-approved transport drivers and attendants. The session was held on the school premises on Thursday.

The lead resource person Zakaria bin Yahya bin Suleiman al Ramahi and his colleague Juma bin Rashid bin Mubarak al Washahi of Security and Safety Services Training Institute, Sultanate of Oman captivated the audience with their presentation and contextual reference during the session.

The Indian School Bousher Transport and HSE subcommit-



tee chairperson Dinesh M P, school principal Rakesh Singh Tomar and Sanjeev Sharma welcomed the guests and invitees.

During the session, the participants were briefed on a number of topics related to safe transportation and driving. These included the importance of

following traffic rules and regulations, as well as maintaining proper road etiquette. The participants were also advised on how to handle emergency situations, such as accidents, breakdowns, or weather-related problems.

The participants were encouraged to maintain a positive atti-

tude and to provide excellent customer service to the school’s students and their families.

The resource persons were lauded for the informative and useful session by the participants who would now share their experiences and insights with their peers.

The orientation session was a great success and served as a reminder of the importance of safety in transportation and driving, the school stated.

The management stressed its commitment to ensuring a safe and efficient transportation system for the students and vowed to provide ongoing support and training to the school-approved transport staff.

ISWK ‘empowers future leaders’ through Investiture Ceremony

With immense gratification and integrity, ISWK proudly invested its elected Student Council members and office bearers for the academic year 2023-2024 earlier this month.

Captain Harish Srinivasan, defence advisor at the Indian Embassy in Muscat, was the chief guest for the stately Investiture Ceremony.

Gargi Chugh, honorary president of the school management committee (SMC) of ISWK International, Rajesh Soneji, co-convenor and co-treasurer of the SMC, principal D N Rao, vice principals and parents were present in the school multi-purpose hall on this august occasion.

The chief guest was ushered in with elaborate fanfare. After the lighting of the ceremonial lamp by the chief guest and other

dignitaries, the school Western Music choir offered a heartfelt prayer song.

The Investiture Ceremony commenced with the presentation of badges to the members of the head council as well as the house office bearers by the chief guest who conferred the badges of both the senior as well as junior categories - Vardhan Sameer Dhat (senior head boy), Sienna Shibu (senior head girl), Johann Gladson (junior head boy), Sarah Khan (junior head girl), Sajad Ahmed Shaikh (senior deputy head boy), Aagna Bhavin Kothari (senior deputy head girl), Sreehari Prasanth (junior deputy head boy), Aishani Sudhakara Shetty (junior deputy head girl), Jamil Ahmed (boy sports coordinator senior), Jayavarsaa Sivakumar (girl sports coordinator



senior), Faaz Ahmed (boy sports coordinator junior), Tapasya Tilwani (girl sports coordinator junior), Ashwanth Jayakumar (boy cultural coordinator senior), Tarnjot Kaur (girl cultural coordi-

nator senior), Mithil Vekatesh (boy cultural coordinator junior), Fathima Sheikh (girl cultural coordinator junior), Vinayak Vinod Kumar (boy public relations coordinator), Harshini Tiruvottriyur

(girl public relations coordinator), Samuel Paul Seeralan (boy public relations coordinator junior) and Joshika Bellary Polapally (girl public relations coordinator junior).

The newly appointed Prefects of Classes 6 to 12 were invested by Rajesh Soneji, ISWK-SMC co-convenor and co-treasurer.

In his address to the elected student body, Captain Harish Srinivasan reminded them of their noteworthy status and the responsibility that they would be required to shoulder.

He emphasised on the need for young people to take on professional services with the Indian Armed Forces, as it offered each one an opportunity to do one’s bit for the nation and also gave officers a lifetime of experiences to cherish and feel proud of.

The chief guest’s inspiring speech was followed by the formal signing of the oath of office. In the presence of Captain Harish Srinivasan, Gargi Chugh and D N Rao, the head boy, head girl,

deputy head boy and deputy head girl of both the senior and junior categories ratified the oath as a symbol of acceptance of their duties and responsibilities vested upon them.

Donning their new roles as student leaders, committed to lead from the front, one could feel a new wave of enthusiasm surging within them.

To mark the end of the solemn proceedings, the school’s Hindustani choir captured the emotions of the student leaders in the words of a stimulating song, *Dil mere kuch sapne*.

The programme concluded with the rendition of the national anthem and everyone captured the mood of the day with an elaborate and vibrant photo-session.

Pentagon leaks suspect to be in jail pending trial

Jack Teixeira allegedly orchestrated the most damaging leak of US classified documents in a decade

Worcester, US - The US airman accused of leaking top-secret documents will remain in jail pending trial, a federal judge ruled on Friday, after prosecutors argued that he posed an ongoing risk to American national security.

Jack Teixeira - a 21-year-old Air National Guard IT specialist - allegedly orchestrated the most damaging leak of US classified documents in a decade, posting a trove of highly sensitive information in an online chat forum.

The documents, which soon spread across the internet, pointed to US concern over Ukraine's military capacity against invading Russian forces and showed Washington had apparently spied on allies Israel and South Korea, among other sensitive details.

Teixeira was brought in for the hearing - which was attended by his father and others - wearing

handcuffs and dressed in an orange jumpsuit.

The 'evidence supports detention', Magistrate Judge David Hennessy said, noting that 'foreign countries know he was disloyal to the United States', and that the defendant 'wasn't concerned about anyone else'.

Prosecutors had argued that Teixeira might still have access to classified documents and that 'hostile' nations could aid his escape if he was released from prison, also saying he had a history of making 'violent' statements.

Teixeira wrote on social media in November that he wanted to 'kill a ton of people' because it would be 'culling the weak minded', the prosecution wrote in a court document.

Repeated warnings

Prosecutors also said the airman sought advice from another user



US Department of Homeland Security officers patrol the federal court in Worcester, Massachusetts on Friday, where US airman Jack Teixeira was scheduled to appear (AFP)

about what type of rifle would be easy to operate from the back of an SUV, and that he searched mass shootings online.

They added that Teixeira owned 'a virtual arsenal of weapons, including bolt-action rifles, rifles, AR and AK-style weapons, and a bazooka', with some of the firearms 'just feet from his bed'.

Teixeira's defense team said their client no longer had access to classified material and that the government was exaggerating the threat he posed, arguing he should be released into his father's custody pending trial.

The airman was arrested last month following a week-long probe and charged with two counts that carry maximum prison sentences of 10 years and five years.

Prosecutors also filed three partially redacted US Air Force memoranda - dated between

September 2022 and February 2023 - this week that showed Teixeira received repeated warnings for misusing his access to classified information.

He was warned for taking notes on classified information, later potentially ignored a directive to stop 'deep diving into intelligence information', and then was seen 'viewing content that was not related to his primary duty and was related to the intelligence field', the documents say.

Despite the multiple warnings, Teixeira still held a top secret security clearance at the time of his arrest, according to an FBI affidavit. Teixeira is accused of the 'unauthorised retention and transmission of national defense information' and the 'unauthorised removal and retention of classified documents or material.'

AFP

Colombia's Petro retracts claim children found after plane crash



A forensic scientist and soldiers standing next to the wreckage of an aircraft that crashed in the Colombian Amazon forest, on Friday (AFP)

Bogotá, Colombia - Colombian President Gustavo Petro on Thursday retracted his claim that four Indigenous children missing for more than two weeks after an airplane crash in the Amazon had been found alive.

Writing on Twitter, Petro said he had deleted his tweet from Wednesday night in which he had announced the rescue of the four children, including an 11-month-old baby.

"I am sorry for what happened. The military forces and Indigenous communities will continue in their tireless search to give the country the news it is waiting for," he said.

More than 100 soldiers have been deployed with sniffer dogs to search for the minors who were traveling in an airplane that crashed on May 1, leaving three adults including the pilot and the children's mother dead.

Rescuers believe the children - who in addition to the 11-month-old are aged 13, nine and four - have been wandering through the jungle in the southern Caqueta department since the crash.

"At this time there is no other priority other than progressing with the search until finding them," added Petro. "The children's lives are the most important thing."

Petro's stunning announcement on Wednesday had been met with uncertainty as he gave no details about where or how the children had been rescued, nor how they had survived alone in the jungle.

"Joy for the country," he had declared. Amid widespread confusion, the military has not commented since Petro's announcement on Wednesday.

The children's grandfather, Fidencio Valencia said there was hope that they would be found

alive since 'they are used to being in the jungle'.

He said they might be hiding out of fear but he told a local television newscast that 'Indigenous energy' would help the rescuers locate them.

Signs of survival

The government's Institute of Family Welfare said that it had on Wednesday received 'information from the territory confirming contact with the four children'.

It said the report indicated that 'they had been found alive and are also in good health'.

The military forces and Indigenous communities will continue in their tireless search to give the country the news it is waiting for

GUSTAVO PETRO

However, the agency acknowledged that the military had not been able to 'establish official contact' due to bad weather and difficult terrain, and were continuing search and rescue operations.

Avianline Charters, owner of the crashed aircraft, had previously said that one of its pilots in the search area was told the children had been found and that they were being taken by boat downriver. But the company also said that there was no confirmation that the children were out of danger, and thunderstorms posed a risk to them reaching safety.

AFP

After SpaceX, NASA taps Bezos's Blue Origin to build Moon lander

Washington, US - Two years after awarding Elon Musk's SpaceX a contract to ferry astronauts to the surface of the Moon, NASA on Friday announced it had chosen Blue Origin, a rival space company founded by billionaire Jeff Bezos, to build a second lunar lander.

Blue Origin's lander was selected for the Artemis 5 mission, currently scheduled to take place in 2029. The company will first have to demonstrate it can safely land on the Moon without a crew.

Bezos, the founder and former CEO of Amazon, said on Twitter he was 'honored to be on this journey with @NASA to land astronauts on the Moon - this time to stay'.

The contract amounts to US\$3.4bn, but John Couluris, vice-president in charge of lunar transport at Blue Origin, said during a press conference that the company would itself contribute 'well north' of that amount to develop the craft. The Artemis programme marks NASA's return to the Moon after more than 50 years and is made up of several missions, each with increasing complexity.

In 2021, the US agency chose



NASA Administrator Bill Nelson announces Blue Origin's role in Artemis V Moon mission, at NASA Headquarters in Washington on Friday (AFP)

SpaceX to build a lander for Artemis 3, the first mission in the series to have actual astronauts set foot on the lunar surface.

The contract was worth US\$2.9bn, although SpaceX is supplementing that amount with its own funding. Blue Origin had also competed for the first contract, and filed an unsuccessful lawsuit against NASA when SpaceX was chosen as the sole lander provider.

The space agency had originally intended to offer two contracts, a practice commonly used to guard against the possibility one fails, but said it had been constrained by budget concerns.

NASA in 2022 also chose the SpaceX lander for its Artemis 4 mission, but at the same time requested submissions from other companies for the rest of the programme. "We want more competition. We want two landers," NASA boss Bill Nelson said on Friday. "It means that you have reliability. You have backups."

Blue Origin's lander, dubbed Blue Moon, is being developed with several partner companies, including Draper, Boeing, Astrobotic, Honeybee Robotics, and Lockheed Martin.

The latter will be responsible for developing a crucial element. Once in lunar orbit, Blue Moon

will need to be refueled before it can descend and collect the astronauts from the surface of the Moon. Therefore Lockheed Martin has to develop a kind of shuttle to refuel Blue Moon around the Moon.

Blue Origin plans to use its New Glenn rocket, which has never flown before, to launch both its lander and this refueling shuttle.

Artemis 4, scheduled for 2028, and Artemis 5 a year later will both land on the Moon, but will first pass through a new space station in lunar orbit, called Gateway, which has yet to be constructed.

Artemis astronauts will take off aboard NASA's Orion capsule, propelled to the Moon by the agency's new SLS mega-rocket.

Both these elements were tested uncrewed when Artemis 1 took place six months ago, and will be tested with crew during Artemis 2.

For Artemis 3, Orion will dock directly to SpaceX's lander. Two astronauts will then descend on the Moon for about a week, while two others will remain on board Orion.

AFP

12 parks closed due to wildfires in Canada

Montreal, Canada - Authorities in the western Canadian province of Alberta battling devastating wildfires have closed twelve local parks ahead of the long holiday weekend, fearing fresh flames, officials said on Friday.

Alberta has declared a state of emergency and asked for foreign aid with more than 800,000 hectares of land destroyed in fires and thousands of people evacuated since the beginning of the month.

On Friday, there were 94 active forest fires in the province, 26 of which were out of control, according to officials.

The situation was also dire in the neighbouring British Columbia with 22 out-of-control fires and dozens of evacuation orders issued.

All of Alberta's 12 parks will be closed, state officials announced.

AFP

Apathy, indifference: Greece's disillusioned voters

Patras, Greece - Greek elections have a reputation of being raucous affairs, with loud arguments at taverns or street protests - but the vibe is muted ahead of Sunday's polls, as voters doubt the main parties' ability to lift their economic woes.

Outgoing conservative Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of New Democracy and his Syriza party rival, leftist Alexis Tsipras, are vying for power in the country's most uncertain general election in a decade.

"Our lives will not change the next day, whoever wins," said Nikos Kalaitzidis, 32, who works at a gas station in Thessaloniki, the country's second largest city.

For Chrysa Papadimitriou, 43, there was just 'apathy and indifference among most voters this time'.

"You don't hear political discussions like in the past and most people avoid talking openly about who they will vote for," she said.

With the abstention rate already at 42 per cent in the 2019 election, analysts have warned that the number of people who



Supporters of the leftist Syriza party gather during the party's campaign rally in Patras, southern Greece, on Friday, ahead of Greece's general elections (AFP)

skip the polls may increase this time given the apparent lack of interest.

And the high chance that Sunday's polls will be inconclusive and require a second round because of new electoral rules, mean some may sit out the ballot given it seems unlikely to be the determining vote.

Any second round is likely to take place in July.

Noting the likelihood that a possible second ballot could boost abstention, the centre-right daily *Ta Nea* warned voters not to let that happen.

"Anyone who fails to vote does not have the right to an opinion on how the parties are

serving their public role," it said.

But optician shop owner Vasilis Kalyvas said that the feeling that little will change was at the root of the disinterest.

"Going by the conversations with people, they are disillusioned with both major parties," the 55-year-old told AFP from Greece's third largest city Patras.

"Greeks have no way out at the moment," he said. "I want a government that claims and supports the interests of the people and helps the economy grow. From what I see, this is not the case."

Empty promises?

Stavroula, 31, giving only her first name, said she will not make the trip to her hometown of Peloponnese to cast her vote.

"What's the point? The politicians coax us with promises that they won't meet," she said in Athens, accusing both Mitsotakis and Tsipras of doing 'nothing to improve the situation of the most precarious'. Retiree Matina Vassiliadou, 69, said that 'our lives have become very difficult because of inflation'.

"This is what worries me the most. Our pensions have dwindled over the years," she said, adding that what she is drawing monthly was insufficient to pay for bills, food and medication.

"What we hear on TV about increases in pensions is a joke," she charged.

AFP

Zelensky huddles with G7 as Ukraine wins access to F-16s

Hiroshima, Japan - President Volodymyr Zelensky made a landmark visit to Hiroshima for talks with G7 leaders on Saturday, after securing long-sought access to advanced US fighter jets for Ukraine's war effort.

Zelensky's surprise summit appearance - he had been expected to appear by video call - is his furthest foray from Kyiv since Russia's invasion began 15 months ago. He arrived significantly buoyed by what he called a 'historic' White House decision to allow Ukraine access to F-16 jets, among the most sophisticated materiel yet supplied by the West.

The group of seven rich democracies were huddled in Japan to discuss issues including the need for 'constructive and stable' relations with China, which the bloc accused on Saturday of 'economic coercion'.

But it was Zelensky's arrival, and debate about the future of the war in Ukraine, that has dominated the summit. On landing, Zelensky said the summit would bring 'increased cooperation for our victory', and he declared that 'today, peace will be closer'.

After a bloody winter of fighting that saw Russian gains in the eastern city of Bakhmut, Ukraine's forces have regrouped for a counteroffensive but they remain dependent on the flow of Western weaponry.

Military experts say the aircraft would be a significant upgrade from Ukraine's ageing Soviet-era fleet, offering greater ability to eventually strike targets in the air or on the ground.

They are also a potent symbol



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky shakes hands with France's President Emmanuel Macron during their bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G7 Leaders' Summit in Hiroshima on Saturday (AFP)

of Western support for Ukraine, forestalling any talk of waning interest as the conflict grinds on.

Mick Ryan, a strategist and retired Australian major general, called the decision 'very significant'. "F-16s have the sensors and weapon systems that are ei-

We are going to do everything we can to support Ukraine in its defence of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we are also going to proceed in a way that avoids World War III

JAKE SULLIVAN

ther equal to, or overmatch, Russian fighters," he told AFP, saying the jets would make life 'more difficult' for Russian missile-launching aircraft operating

in and around Ukraine.

'Deter and defend'

Until now, US President Joe Biden had effectively vetoed the transfer of US-made F-16s, with officials citing long pilot training times and the risk of escalating

the 'exigencies of the conflict'.

"We've reached a moment where it's time to look down the road and to say, 'What is Ukraine going to need... to be able to deter and defend against Russian aggression?'" He added that Ukraine had committed to not using US military equipment to hit targets inside Russia.

"We are going to do everything we can to support Ukraine in its defence of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we are also going to proceed in a way that avoids World War III," he said.

With the US veto lifted, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak quickly announced that Britain would 'work together with the USA and the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark to get Ukraine the combat air capability it needs'.

Zelensky's trip offers a chance to confer with allies, but perhaps more importantly to woo key unaligned powers also joining the summit, including India and Brazil. Photos posted online by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's staff showed the pair shaking hands and holding their first meeting since the invasion, which India has declined to condemn.

"There is an opportunity for Zelensky to engage with these non-Western actors, to try to bolster support, or at least weaken what may be seen as ambivalence towards the conflict," Ian Lesser, vice president of the German Marshall Fund think-tank, told AFP.

"And they do matter. They matter especially in terms of sanctions, of course," he added.

Zelensky also met separately with the Italian and British prime ministers, and talks with the French and US presidents are expected.

Ahead of Zelensky's arrival, G7 leaders issued a joint statement on Saturday denouncing efforts to 'weaponise' trade and supply chains, saying they would 'fail and face consequences' - a thinly veiled warning to China.

The bloc said it would also address vulnerabilities in supply chains for 'critical goods' like minerals, semiconductors and batteries.

"What we have done over 20 years with China, encouraging development, was right, but maybe we should have been more careful on critical material, supply chains and those elements," an EU official said.

AFP



People gather at a bus stop in Tehran on Saturday (AFP)

Condemnation as Iran hangs three linked to Amini protests

Paris, France - Iran on Friday executed three men convicted of killing security force members during protests triggered by Mahsa Amini's death last year, drawing condemnation from Western governments.

Majid Kazemi, Saleh Mirhashemi and Saeed Yaghoubi were found guilty of 'moharebeh' - or waging 'war against God' - for shooting dead three members of the security forces at a demonstration in the central city of Isfahan on November 16, the judiciary said on its Mizan Online news website.

Iran witnessed waves of nationwide protests following the September 16 death of 22-year-old Amini, an Iranian Kurd who had been arrested for an alleged breach of the Islamic republic's strict dress rules for women.

During the protests, which Tehran labelled as foreign-instigated 'riots', thousands of Iranians were arrested and hundreds killed, including dozens of security personnel.

Friday's hangings bring to seven the total number of Iranians executed in connection with the demonstrations.

The European Union condemned the executions 'in the strongest possible terms', foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement.

He called on Tehran to 'refrain from applying the death penalty and carrying out future executions', adding that authorities should abide by 'their obligations under international law' and respect 'the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly'.

Kazemi, Mirhashemi and Yaghoubi were arrested in November and sentenced to death in January.

They were also charged with membership of 'illegal groups with the intention of disrupting national security and collusion leading to crimes against internal security', Mizan said.

It noted 'evidence and documents in the case and the clear statements made by the accused' showed that 'the shootings carried out by these three people led to the martyrdom of three (members of the) security forces'.

AFP

Greece: Antiquities recovered from dealer

Athens, Greece - Greece said it has recovered hundreds of looted Neolithic to Byzantine artefacts including a second century bronze statue of Alexander the Great from a notorious British antiquities dealer after a 17-year legal battle.

The fight to repatriate the trove of 351 objects began in 2006 with authorities investigating the eponymous company of Robin Symes in the country and abroad, Greece's Culture Minister Lina Medoni said in a statement late on Friday.

The recovery came years after Italian and Swiss police in 2016 recovered a haul of archaeological artefacts stolen from Italy and stored by Symes, a key figure in the illegal antiquities trade with ties to Italian tomb raiders.

The Italian booty was found in a storage unit at the Geneva Freeport but Greece's culture ministry did not specify if its recovery was linked to the Italian haul. The extensive collection repatriated to Greece includes notable pieces such as a Neolithic-era statuette carved from white stone, dating back to the 4th millennium BC.

Other significant finds include an Early Cycladic figurine dating to between 3200 and 2700 BC, a damaged marble statue of an Archaic kore from 550-500 BC and an Archaic marble head of either a kore or a sphinx from 550-500 BC.

Greece has been fighting to repatriate looted artefacts from museums and private collections around the world.

AFP

Around 40 people killed in bloody week for Burkina Faso

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso - Around 40 people have been killed in a fresh wave of attacks in Burkina Faso, in areas where militant attacks are rife, sources said on Friday.

In the most recent violence, around 20 people were killed in a series of raids on villages in Burkina Faso's troubled north, security sources and local residents told AFP.

Armed men attacked three villages early on Thursday in the country's northern Yatenga province.

"Yesterday at around 5am (local and GMT), armed groups attacked the villages of Pelle, Zanna and Nongfaire", a local

resident said on Friday, giving a toll of 25 people killed.

There were 'many others wounded', the resident said.

Another resident said 'the assailants, who came on motorbikes, were chased by volunteers (civilian auxiliaries of the army) and soldiers'.

The attack was confirmed by a security source, who put the death toll at 'around 20', adding that search operations were underway to find the assailants.

The attackers 'were hit by air support after taking refuge in the Barga forest', said another security source.

"Several of them died."

Earlier on Friday, there were reports that another 20 people had been killed in separate attacks by suspected militants in eastern Burkina Faso this week.

Armed men on Monday raided the village of Kaongo in the southeastern province of Koulpelogo, killing at least 11 people including two women and children.

Two days later the neighbouring village of Bilguimouire was targeted, 'leaving around 10 dead', a local official said.

Insurgency

The attackers torched homes and stores in the two villages and made off with cattle, the official added.

Sahel state is struggling with a militant insurgency that swept in from neighbouring Mali in 2015.

More than 10,000 civilians, troops and police have died, according to NGO estimates, while at least two million people have fled their homes and more than a third of the country lies outside the government's control.

Anger within the military at the mounting toll triggered two coups last year.

On Friday, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said that Australian doctor Kenneth Elliott, 88, had been freed more than seven years

after he and his wife were snatched in Burkina by Al-Qaeda-linked militants.

The couple had run the sole medical clinic in Djibo, a town near the border with Mali, since 1972. Elliott's spouse Jocelyn was released three weeks after the abduction.

Her husband returned to Australia on Thursday night, according to the Australian government.

Wong's statement said that the government and Elliott's family had 'worked tirelessly' for his freedom. It gave no details about the circumstances of his release.

AFP

G7 calls for 'responsible' use of generative AI

Hiroshima, Japan - The world must urgently assess the impact of generative artificial intelligence, G7 leaders said on Saturday, announcing they will launch discussions this year on 'responsible' use of the technology.

A working group will be set up to tackle issues from copyright to disinformation, the seven leading economies said in a final communique released during a summit in Hiroshima, Japan.

Text generation tools such as ChatGPT, image creators and music composed using AI have sparked delight, alarm and legal battles as creators accuse them of scraping material without permission.

Governments worldwide are under pressure to move quickly to mitigate the risks, with the chief executive of ChatGPT's OpenAI telling US lawmakers



Leaders take part in the 'Outreach Session 6' meeting during the second day of the G7 Summit Leaders' Meeting in Hiroshima, Japan, on Saturday (AFP)

this week that regulating AI was essential.

"We recognise the need to immediately take stock of the opportunities and challenges of generative AI, which is increasingly prominent across countries and sectors," the G7 statement said.

"We task relevant ministers to establish the Hiroshima AI process, through a G7 working group, in an inclusive manner... for discussions on generative AI by the end of this year," it said.

"These discussions could include topics such as governance, safeguard of intellectual property rights including copyrights, promotion of transparency, response to foreign information manipulation, including disinformation, and responsible utilisation of these technologies."

The new working group will be organised in cooperation with the OECD group of developed countries and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), the statement added.

On Tuesday, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman testified before a US Senate panel and urged Congress to impose new rules on big tech. He insisted that in time, generative AI developed by his company would one day 'address some of humanity's biggest challenges, like climate change and curing cancer'.

However, 'we think that regulatory intervention by governments will be critical to mitigate the risks of increasingly powerful models', he said.

European Parliament lawmakers this month also took a first step towards EU-wide regulation of ChatGPT and other AI systems.

The text is to be put to the full parliament next month for adoption before negotiations with EU member states on a final law.

"While rapid technological change has been strengthening societies and economies, the international governance of new digital technologies has not necessarily kept pace," the G7 said.

For AI and other emerging technologies including immersive metaverses, 'the governance of the digital economy should continue to be updated in line with our shared democratic values', the group said.

Among others, these values include fairness, respect for privacy and 'protection from online harassment, hate and abuse', among others, it added.

AFP

INDIA

Karnataka: Congress government passes orders to implement promised guarantees

Bengaluru, Karnataka - The newly elected Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Saturday said that the first Cabinet meeting has issued orders for the implementation of five guarantees which were promised by the party before the elections.

The five 'main' guarantees are 200 units of free power to all households (Gruha Jyoti); Rs 2,000 monthly assistance to the woman head of every family (Gruha Lakshmi); 10kg of rice free to every member of a BPL household (Anna Bhagya); Rs 3,000 every month for unemployed graduate youth and Rs 1,500 for unemployed diploma holders (both in the age group of 18-25) for two years (Yuva Nidhi) and free travel for women in public transport buses (Uchita Prayana).

Addressing a press briefing after the first Cabinet meeting in

Vidhan Soudha, here, Siddaramaiah said: "Five guarantees in the manifesto were promised and the order for the implementation of those five guarantees was given after the first cabinet meeting. All will be in force after the next cabinet meeting which will be called within a week."

The Karnataka Legislative Assembly session is to be held on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, next week.

Also, hours after swearing-in as chief minister, Siddaramaiah lashed out at the previous Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government saying that the government functioning before was useless.

"Government which was ruling earlier was useless. They couldn't get us the share of taxes properly. The Centre has to give us Rs 5,495 crores as per the finance commission



(L-R) Senior Congress leaders D K Shivakumar, Rahul Gandhi and Siddaramaiah pose for pictures before the swearing in function in Bengaluru on Saturday (AFP)

recommendation."

Earlier in the day, as many as eight Congress MLAs were sworn in as ministers in the Karnataka Cabinet during the oath-taking ceremony in Bengaluru on Saturday.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's son Priyank

Kharge, party's MLAs G Parameshwara and MB Patil were among the eight MLAs.

The other MLAs who took oath included K H Muniyappa, K J George, Satish Jarkiholi, Ramalinga Reddy and B Z Zameer Ahmed Khan.

Top brass of the Congress party including the Gandhi family members Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi, party's national president Mallikarjun Kharge were present on the occasion. The Chief Ministers of the Congress-ruled states including Himachal CM Sukhvir Singh Sukhu, Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot, and Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel attended the event.

The party had also sent an invitation to numerous opposition parties and their leaders.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin, Bihar Chief Minister Ni-

tish Kumar and his Deputy Tejashwi Yadav, former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, Farooq Abdullah were also present during the swearing-in ceremony.

Other opposition leaders who were present included Sharad Pawar, and actor and Makkal Needhi Maiaam chief Kamal Haasan.

Ahead of the ceremony, Rahul Gandhi, Shivakumar and Siddaramaiah were seen holding each other's hands in the air as a show of strength and unity.

Congress bagged 135 seats in the May 10 elections to the 224-member Karnataka Assembly ousting the ruling BJP, which got 66 seats while the Janata Dal (Secular) secured 19 seats in the results declared on May 13.

ANI

Will do 'whatever we can' on Ukraine crisis: Modi

Hiroshima, Japan - India will do 'whatever we can' to resolve the Ukraine crisis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged on Saturday as he met President Volodymyr Zelensky for the first time since Russia's invasion.

"I understand your pain and the pain of Ukrainian citizens very well," Modi said, as the pair met on the sidelines of the Group of 7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan.

"I can assure you that to resolve this India and, me personally, will do whatever we can do," Modi said.

It was the pair's first in-person meeting since Russia's invasion began 15 months ago, which New Delhi has pointedly resisted criticising.

A post on Zelensky's Telegram account said he had 'thanked India for supporting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our country, in particular at the sites of international organisations'.

Zelensky also thanked Modi



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky shaking hands with India's PM Narendra Modi in Hiroshima, on Saturday (AFP)

for providing humanitarian aid to the war-torn country, and invited India to join the implementation of the 'peace formula' initiative devised by Ukraine. Zelensky arrived in Hiroshima on Saturday afternoon for a surprise in-person appearance after winning US approval for Ukraine to obtain advanced fighter jets.

He quickly embarked on a whirlwind of diplomatic pitstops with leaders from the major developed democracies in the G7,

as well as invited developing nations, including India.

Modi also thanked Zelensky for the help provided to Indian students after Russia's invasion, the Telegram post added.

The Ukrainian leader earlier held talks with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Britain's Rishi Sunak, who he also met days ago on a tour of European allies to drum up support for a planned spring offensive.

AFP

High security for G20 meet in Kashmir

Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir - Elite Indian commandos patrolled the streets of Srinagar on Friday ahead of a G20 tourism meeting next week, with China and Pakistan condemning holding the event in the disputed territory of Indian-administered Kashmir.

Muslim-majority Kashmir has been disputed between New Delhi and Islamabad, both of which claim it in full, since their independence 75 years ago. The Indian-controlled portion has been roiled for decades by an insurgency seeking independence or merger with Pakistan, with tens of thousands of civilians, soldiers and Kashmiri rebels killed in the conflict.

Police said security had been beefed up 'at vulnerable locations to avoid any chance of terrorist attack during the G20' meeting, the first diplomatic event in the territory since New Delhi revoked its limited autonomy and took direct control in 2019.

The three-day gathering starts on Monday at a sprawling, well-guarded venue on the shores of Dal Lake in Srinagar.



Indian paramilitary trooper commandoes conduct a special security drill at Dal Lake in Srinagar on Saturday (AFP)

Roads leading to the location have been freshly black-topped, and electricity poles lit up in the colours of India's national flag to show what officials say is 'normalcy and peace returning' to the region.

India has been promoting tourism in Kashmir and more than a million of its citizens visited last year. But no Chinese delegates will be attending the event. India and its northern neighbour are locked in a military standoff along their mostly undemarcated border in the Ladakh region. Beijing also claims the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in full as part

Non-G20 member Pakistan controls a smaller part of Kashmir and said holding the tourism meeting in the territory violated international law, UN Security Council resolutions and bilateral agreements.

Pakistan's foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said India was displaying its 'arrogance to the world' and that 'it shows their pettiness', triggering a sharp retort from New Delhi.

India accuses Pakistan of training and supporting militants in Kashmir, which Islamabad denies.

Hartosh Singh Bal, executive editor of Indian current affairs magazine The Caravan, said the choice of location was 'clearly an attempt to try and show that Kashmir is all normal'.

But he added that 'China and some other countries not going to the meet is not surprising'. 'If any Western democracies didn't attend that would send a different signal,' he said. 'India knows there will be no repercussions.'

Since India's 2019 constitutional changes, rebels in Kashmir have largely been crushed.

AFP

Russia's Wagner claims total control Bakhmut

Moscow, Russia - Russia's private army Wagner claimed on Saturday the total control of the east Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, the epicentre of fighting, as Kyiv said the battle was continuing but admitted the situation was 'critical'.

Bakhmut, a salt mining town that once had a population of 70,000 people, has been the scene of the longest and bloodiest battle in Moscow's more than year-long Ukraine offensive.

The fall to Russia of Bakhmut, where both Moscow and Kyiv are believed to have suffered huge losses, would have high symbolic value. If confirmed, Bakhmut's loss would allow Moscow to bring home a victory after a series of humiliating defeats. It would also come before a major counteroffensive that Kyiv has been preparing for months.

The announcement by Wagner came as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky took part in the G7 summit in Japan.

The mercenary group's boss Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed the



Ukrainian deminers use a mine trawl to clear a field of landmines laid by Russian troops near the city of Balakliya in the Kharkiv region on Friday (AFP)

city had fallen to his mercenaries in a video posted on Telegram, in which fighters held Russian flags on the backdrop of ruins.

"Today on May 20, around midday, Bakhmut was taken in its entirety," Prigozhin said in the video, adding that Wagner fighters would search the captured city before handing it over to the official Russian army.

"By May 25 we will completely examine (Bakhmut), create the necessary lines of defence and hand it to the military," Prigozhin said. "We ourselves will go into field camps."

Artillery sound could be heard in the background of Prigozhin's video. Ukraine, which earlier this month claimed successes in and around Bakhmut, said the fighting for the city was ongoing.

"Heavy fighting in Bakhmut.

'Bakhmut meat grinder'

Wagner has spearheaded the fight for Bakhmut and is believed to have suffered huge losses in the months-long storming of the city. "The operation to capture Bakhmut - the Bakhmut meat grinder - lasted 224 days," Prigozhin said, wearing a camouflage uniform.

Prigozhin, embroiled in an increasingly public fight with the official Russian army, said Moscow's losses would have been far smaller if it was not for incompetent generals.

He has long complained about Wagner not being given the appropriate amount of ammunition.

"There was only Wagner here (in Bakhmut)," he said in the video. "We fought not only the Ukrainian army here, we fought Russian bureaucracy."

He did not reveal how many Wagner fighters have died in Bakhmut, but said losses were 'five times higher' due to Russia's military leadership.

AFP

China lodges protest against G7 communique

Beijing, China - China on Saturday expressed 'strong dissatisfaction' with a communique issued by G7 leaders that took aim at Beijing on issues including the South China Sea, human rights and alleged interference in their democracies.

Leaders from the seven wealthy nations including US President Joe Biden have been attending a summit since Friday in the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The bloc issued a statement calling on China 'not to conduct interference activities' and expressed concerns about alleged human rights abuses in China, particularly in the far-western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang.

They also said G7 countries were 'gravely concerned' about territorial disputes in the South China Sea, indirectly accusing China of 'coercion'.

Beijing was also urged by the G7 to use its influence to

put pressure on Russia to end its invasion of Ukraine.

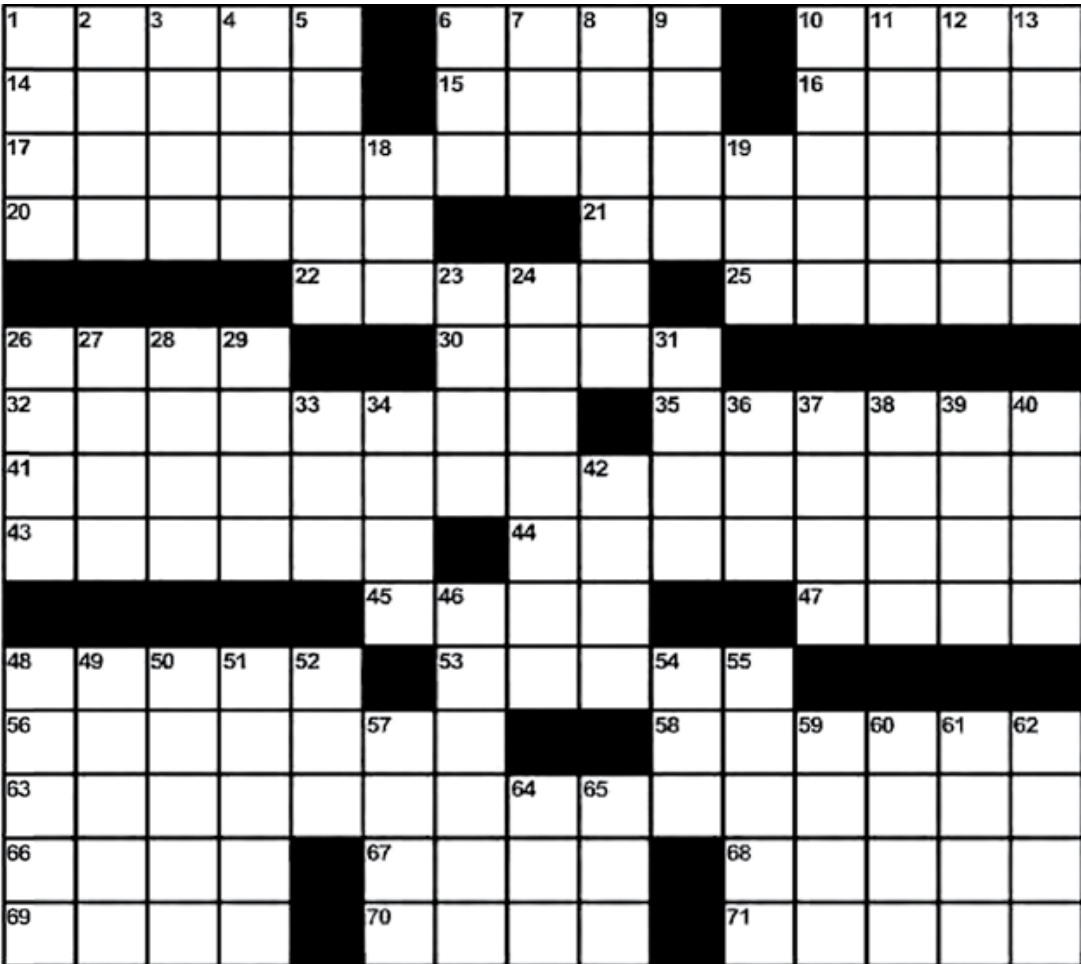
But China's foreign ministry hit back saying the G7's 'approach has no international credibility whatsoever'. "The G7 insisted on manipulating China-related issues, smearing and attacking China," a spokesman for the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"China expresses its strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition and has lodged an official protest with Japan, the host country of the summit, as well as other relevant parties."

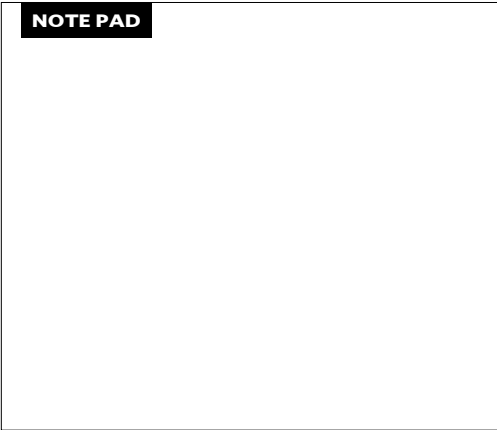
The G7 statement stressed 'the importance of peace and stability across Taiwan Strait'. "G7 trumpets that it wants to move towards a peaceful, stable and prosperous world. But in fact it is hindering peace, undermining regional stability and inhibiting the development of other countries," the spokesman said.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Mississippi River trans-port
 - 6) Bypass
 - 10) "Dancing Queen" quartet
 - 14) Tool carried by a Sherpa
 - 15) Baylor University town
 - 16) Auto import
 - 17) Risk a ticket while endangering others
 - 20) "What fools these mortals be" originator
 - 21) Admission requirements, sometimes
 - 22) Developmental phase
 - 25) Amherst campus, informally
 - 26) Quad building
 - 30) Wait in hiding
 - 32) Old typewriter brand
 - 35) Volcanic emissions
 - 41) Deliveries to 26-Across
 - 43) Andre of tennis fame
 - 44) Leave one country for another
 - 45) Become unhinged
 - 4 7) Kind of rug
 - 48) Be the life of the party
 - 53) Alaska on a map,
- sometimes
- 56) Run-down residence
 - 58) Unimportant stuff
 - 63) Like solar panels
 - 66) Romance novelist Roberts
 - 67) Obi-Wan portrayer
 - 68) Have a feeling
 - 69) Word with "ego" or "guilt"
 - 70) Bulk
 - 71) Plane reservations
- DOWN**
- 1) Contractors' offerings
 - 2) "God's Little "
 - 3) Jockey strap
 - 4) Was charitable
 - 5) Business bigwigs
 - 6) Be in debt to
 - 7) Non-PC?
 - 8) More likely to gross out
 - 9) Snitched
 - 10) Indian border state
 - 11) Iraqi port
 - 12) Comes out on top?
 - 13) Bottomless pit
 - 18) A mazing animal?
 - 19) Old coin worth five francs
 - 23) Chorus part
 - 24) Certain African inhabi-
- tant
- 26) L-_ (Parkinson's treatment)
 - 27) Designer for Jackie
 - 28) Kelly in the morning
 - 29) A wards for LeBron James
 - 31) Foreign Legion cap
 - 33) Wide shoe sizes
 - 34) Speaker of the Baseball Hall of Fame
 - 36) Lively dance
 - 37) Old Testament book
 - 38) Bigwig
 - 39) "Soap" family name
 - 40) On the ocean
 - 42) Mischievous moppets
 - 46) Bottle cap?
 - 48) "... you ashamed?"
 - 49) Plantation residence
 - 50) Where embryos develop
 - 51) Subway train convenience
 - 52) .0000001 joule
 - 54) Train schedule abbr.
 - 55) Bind, as a chicken for roasting
 - 57) Nursemaid in India
 - 59) "Brain-freeze" beverage
 - 60) _ del Mar, Chile
- 61) "Meet Me _ Louis"
- 62) " ... for children of all _"
- 64) Pregame coin flipper
- 65) Start of the fourth qtr.



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You could be shown some visions of what could be today, and you might not like what you see. But is it a problem of a bad reality or bad perception? Just because it doesn't look like things are going to turn out the way you want them to doesn't mean that you still can't be happy. Apply a more positive spin to the news you receive today. There is definitely a silver lining in this cloud. You just have to work a little harder to find it. Apply a new way of thinking to everything you see today.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Take a break from pushing yourself right now. You deserve it! Challenging yourself with more responsibilities at work might seem like a great way to get ahead, but it will really only increase your stress level at the moment. Starting a difficult conversation with a friend might seem like the way to resolve an issue, but today it could only make things more strained between you. Let the dust settle on any recent drama, and use today to regroup and recharge for the days ahead.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

The good news is that you are in the beginning stages of a remarkable self-transformation. The bad news is that you might be feeling confused about what you want to do as a result. You don't have a lack of options, but you do have a lack of interest in any of them. It might seem odd to start off a transformation with such ambivalence, but just hang in there. It's once you start to sort through your options that the real transformation begins.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. English artist Alison Lapper, MBE, who with her son also featured in a BBC documentary series "Child of our Time", has what rare medical condition?

A. Best Disease

B. Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva

C. Schnitzler Syndrome

D. Phocomelia

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your attitude toward other people is very positive right now, and it will help you win in any power struggle you encounter today, from who gets to hold the remote at home to who gets promoted to that plum position at work. By thinking the best of your opponents, you'll be able to get along iwth them and convince them to give you what you want! It's not trickery. It's just respect. Showing someone you respect them is the first step toward having them respect you.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Give yourself a modest challenge that offers huge rewards today, starting with your environment. Pick up around your home and find a new way to reorganize your stuff. Getting clutter out of the way is terrifically satisfying, and it's a task you don't really have to think about. Give your gray matter a rest while you give your home some sparkle. Ask a roommate or partner to help you out, and you'll benefit from their conversation as well as all their labor!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

If you think that you need to start making some lifestyle changes, then you do. When you feel the urge to mix things up, you can't continue with your normal routine and have any sense of growth or progress. But you can relax. These changes you want to make don't have to be huge adjustments. They just have to be significant enough to make a difference. Cutting back on fried foods or saving five more dollars every week is an example of the little things that can mean a lot.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Try to get away from the crowds today. Get off on your own and take a long walk outside. Let your thoughts wander, and you'll come to some extremely important realizations about yourself. This is a good time for some deep thoughts on some deep issues. Something in your life needs to be addressed, and you've been putting it off for way too long. Talking to others about it is a fine idea, but you already have all the right answers deep down inside of you.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You should know by now that only an intellectual connection can create a solid foundation for a real relationship, whether it's a romance, friendship, or business partnership. Sharing ideas and talking about controversial issues in order to understand someone better are not only interesting, they are healthy too. So steer clear of people who want to keep things shallow even though they want to see you more often. You need substance, not flash.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Someone is going to find you quite attractive today, although unfortunately, they might not be someone you find very attractive in return. Learn how to take a compliment and move on! There is no need to chat someone up if you have no genuine interest in them. In fact, it's not very nice. Leading someone on even if you're just trying not to hurt their feelings isn't the right way to handle it. When someone says something nice, thank them. That's the extent of your responsibility.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You might feel like you're banging your head against a wall today. Someone you're trying to get to know keeps on giving you the cold shoulder. While you're all charm and sunshine, they are aloof and standoffish. What gives? Don't take it personally. They might not have the time to deal with you right now. They might well be interested in giving you any time that they do have when they have it. Know when to say when and move on to people who are more receptive.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

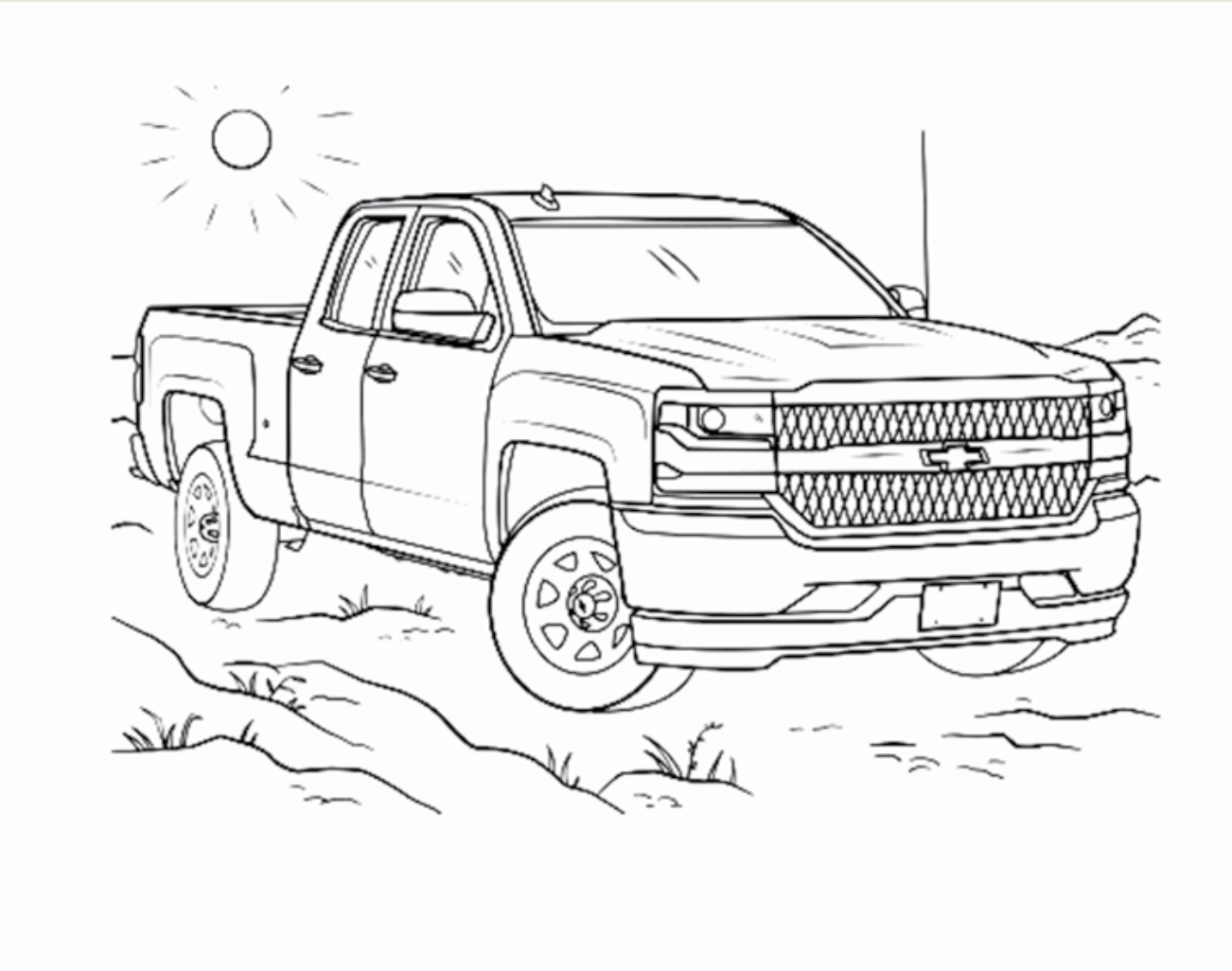
This is a day of conflicting ideas and opinions, which could create tension at home, but it could also create a sizzling hot connection in your social life. Nothing stirs up your emotions like a heated debate, and when you're having that heated debate with someone cute, the temperature is bound to climb! So don't shy away from disagreement. Even if it causes a sibling or family member to get cranky, at least they'll know how you truly feel.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Without even trying, you could be daydreaming about the future today. One word could send you off on a mental tangent full of ideas about where you want to live next, who you want to grow old with, or what kind of family you want to have. These revelations might feel like directives from your subconscious, but they are merely your imagination trying to work things out. What you think you want desperately today might sound silly to you tomorrow, so don't commit to anything.

Answers: 1.D 2.B 3.A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

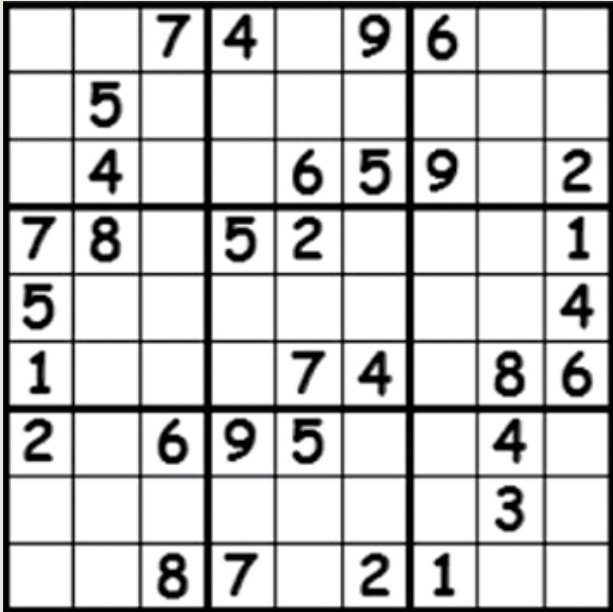


Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. 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



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



FOURMIDABLE FORCE

Ahly cruise to fourth straight CAF Champions League final

Johannesburg, South Africa - Hussein el Shahat scored to give Al Ahly of Egypt a 1-0 win over Esperance of Tunisia on Friday, and a fourth consecutive CAF Champions League final appearance.

The record 10-time title winners won the semi-final 4-0 on aggregate after building a 3-0 first-leg lead in Rades seven days ago.

It was the fourth consecutive season in the premier African club competition in which Ahly have won a semi-final by four

Maaloul quit after the heavy first-leg loss and caretaker replacement Anis Boussaidi struck a hopeful pre-match note, saying “nothing is impossible in football”.

But dreams of a stunning second-leg recovery by the Blood and Gold lasted just 22 minutes before El Shahat put Ahly ahead on the night at the Cairo International Stadium.

A brilliant pass from the halfway line by South African Percy Tau set El Shahat free and he fired the ball past goalkeeper

Al Ahly beat Wydad Casablanca of Morocco 5-1 in 2020, Esperance 4-0 the following year and Entente Setif of Algeria 6-2 in 2022. They will face Wydad or Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa in a two-leg final

goals overall.

The Cairo Red Devils beat Wydad Casablanca of Morocco 5-1 in 2020, Esperance 4-0 the following year and Entente Setif of Algeria 6-2 in 2022.

Ahly will face Wydad or Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa in a two-leg final on June 4 and 11 with the first leg in Cairo.

The Egyptian club have bitter memories of Sundowns this season at the group stage. After drawing 2-2 in Cairo, they suffered a humiliating 5-2 defeat in Pretoria.

Esperance coach Nabil

Mohamed Debchi from close range. After taking his Champions League goal tally to four for the season, El Shahat blazed over when well placed to score again soon after. The second half was a repetition of the first with Ahly dominating possession, creating numerous chances, but guilty of wild shooting.

Substitute Ahmed Abdel Kader seemed destined to score with two minutes remaining after being set up by slick one-touch passing, but his close-range shot flew embarrassingly high.

AFP



Ahly's Hussein el Shahat (L) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Esperance Sportive de Tunis in their CAF Champions League semi-final in Cairo on Friday (AFP)



Brentford's Yoane Wissa scores past Tottenham goal keeper Fraser Forster during their English Premier League match in London on Saturday (AFP)

Fans frustrated as troubled Spurs beaten at home by Brentford

London, United Kingdom - Tottenham's season to forget hit a new low with a 3-1 home defeat against Brentford on Saturday.

Ryan Mason's side took the lead through Harry Kane's 28th league goal this season, but a Bryan Mbeumo brace and Yoane Wissa's late strike left them floundering in seventh place.

Frustration has mounted throughout the final weeks of a troubled season for Tottenham and fans hung banners outside the stadium pointing the finger of blame at owners ENIC.

One banner changed the "E" in the 'ENIC OUT' slogan to a £ sign, while another had pictures of several of the club's departed managers, including this season's victims Antonio Conte and Cristian Stellini, labelling them as "innocent" while ENIC were described as "guilty".

Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy has taken the brunt of supporters' criticism and he reflected on an "immensely difficult season" in his programme notes for the final home match of the campaign.

"We made footballing decisions over recent seasons based

on ambition and a desire to bring success to our club and they have not delivered what we had hoped," Levy said.

Even when Kane opened the scoring in the eighth minute with a superb 25-yard free-kick that arrowed into the top corner, it was a bittersweet moment for Tottenham fans.

Kane surpassed Jimmy Greaves to become Tottenham's all-time record goalscorer this term, but that milestone moment could turn out to be his final contribution to the club.

The England captain failed in his attempt to engineer a move to Manchester United two years ago, but has recently been linked with Bayern Munich, Manchester United and Paris Saint Germain. There was a melancholy tinge to the chant "Harry Kane, he's one of our own" as fans hailed their hero despite his uncertain future.

In another sign of the angst at Tottenham's owners, fans sent black balloons floating down onto the pitch throughout the match while Levy sat stone-faced in the directors' box.

AFP

Ten Hag upbeat over new United deal for Rashford

London, United Kingdom - Erik ten Hag believes Manchester United and Marcus Rashford will "find each other" in the quest to secure a new Manchester United contract for the England forward.

Rashford has only one year left on his deal at the club he has represented since the age of seven.

The 25-year-old dismissed reports earlier this year he was demanding £500,000 (\$622,000, 576,000 euros) per week to remain at Old Trafford but a resolution does not appear to be on the horizon.

Ten Hag, however, is keeping his cool, with the United manager telling a pre-match press conference ahead of this weekend's game at Bournemouth: "I know (it is taking time), but I don't talk about the process.

"This is not important at the moment for me or Rashy. For him, it is to get more goals this



Erik ten Hag

season and he is playing a wonderful season and the team is playing a wonderful season.

"We have to get into the Champions League and focus on that. Marcus wants to stay and we want him to stay, so I think

we will find each other."

The uncertainty caused by the decision of the club's current owners, the US-based Glazer family, to launch a takeover process has added to the uncertainty surrounding the English gi-

ants' plans for the transfer window.

"We do our job in the background and we are working hard but, for now, it is about games, getting into the Champions League and the FA Cup," said Ten Hag.

"For me, it is about finance and that there is the money available to do the right things."

United have a grandstand finish to their season, with the club's final three games of the Premier League campaign determining if they will qualify for the Champions League before they face Manchester City in the first Manchester derby FA Cup final at Wembley.

They face Bournemouth on Saturday, with doubts over whether the unwell Rashford will make the trip to the south coast.

Eight of United's nine league defeats this season have come on the road.

Colombia's unique antidote to football hooliganism: dialogue

Medellin, Colombia - Alejandro Gallego's match ended in a coffin after the 25-year-old was one of three people killed during a knife fight between rival Atletico Nacional and Independiente Medellin football hooligans last month.

"It's the most absurd thing that can happen, they're killing kids over a club badge," his distraught father, William Gallego, told AFP after the funeral.

"Football is not about killing each other."

Hooliganism is a major problem in Colombia football: there have been 350 football-related deaths in the country, according to academic studies.

Despite calls to come down hard on the perpetrators, President Gustavo Petro has decided on an alternative policy: dialogue.

It is a tactic he has already



Fans of Junior team show their tattoos before their match against Pereira in Barranquilla, Colombia, last week (AFP)

employed with belligerent armed groups as part of his "total peace" plan to end six decades of conflict in the South American country.

Last month, the government organized the first ever meeting between the leaders of hooligan groups and authorities.

"We have to talk with them ... they can help us resolve" the situation, Interior Minister Luis

Fernando Velasco said during the meeting.

"Without their commitment, the problem worsens."

The government's approach to combating football hooliganism is at odds with that of Colombia's football federation, which wants to install metal barriers both between rival supporters and between fans and the pitch.

HISTORIC VICTORY



Oman's Abdullah al Rawahi in action at Jordan Rally

Abdullah Al Rawahi becomes first Omani ever to win Jordan Rally, Nasser Al Attiyah finishes second

Dead Sea (Jordan): Abdullah al Rawahi became the first Omani ever to win the Jordan Rally after a dramatic fightback by Nasser Saleh al Attiyah was thwarted by punctures on the closing stages of a pulsating Jordan Rally on Saturday.

Al Rawahi and local driver Ata al Hmoud had taken a lead of 2min 33.5sec into the final six special stages in the Dead Sea and Jordan Valley areas in their Škoda Fabia Evo. But Al Attiyah and Mathieu Baumel launched a full-scale fightback during the

morning and reduced the deficit to 1min 20sec at the midday service point.

The pendulum appeared to have swung in the Qatari's favour when the Oman Rally Team crew clocked out of service three minutes late and incurred a 30-second time penalty, reducing the deficit to 50 seconds. But Al Attiyah was forced to change a punctured tyre on the first test after the restart and then punctured again with Al Rawahi reaching the finish 7min 04.2sec clear of the struggling defending

The second day was difficult, actually starting first on the road. Nasser was trying to keep the pressure but we held on. Well done to my team. It's an amazing feeling

ABDULLAH AL RAWAHI

champion.

With the pressure off on the final stage, it enabled Al Rawahi to secure his third career MERC win and Al Hmoud became the first Jordanian to win his home rally since Amjad Farrah and

Khalid Zakaria prevailed on a dramatic final stage way back in 2004. Al Rawahi's third success drew him level with the late Björn Waldegård, Jean-Pierre Nasrallah and Abdullah Bakhshab in the regional Hall of Fame.

Al Rawahi said: "It's been a very tough weekend for us. The stages were really nice and we enjoyed them. We managed to win this rally. The second day was difficult, actually starting first on the road. Nasser was trying to keep the pressure but we held on. Well done to my team. They have worked really hard this weekend. It's an amazing feeling.

"When I started rallying my first rally was here in Jordan, so it's a big thing for me. I have been gaining so much experience against the champion. Every rally

we learn a lot, especially from the pressure we were in this weekend. We won the first rally and now this one. We will keep pushing and see what happens."

Al Attiyah added: "This is my favourite race but, this year, it was not easy. Day one and day two, we were struggling a little bit with the problems. Today we had two flat tyres in the same stage and we tried to manage three stages with punctures and we had only one spare. We made it happen. It was important to finish and we finished second. Well

done to Abdullah, he did an amazing race. Still, we are leading the championship and we look ahead to Lebanon. I am disappointed at one point but, on the other, I am happy to finish."

Meshari al Thefiri teamed up with Qatar's Nasser al Kuwari and were the class of the MERC2 field for the third successive event this season. The Kuwaiti rounded off the podium places and finished 6min 49.2sec clear of fourth-placed Jordanian Shaker Jweihan and his Omani co-driver Taha al Zadjali.

Rune rallies past Ruud to reach Rome final

Rome, Italy - Holger Rune fought from a set and a break down on Saturday to book a place in the Italian Open final with a 6-7 (2/7), 6-4, 6-2 defeat of fourth seed Casper Ruud.

The 20-year-old Dane established Scandinavian superiority as he overhauled the Norwegian who played the Roland Garros final a year ago against Rafael Nadal and has two semi-finals in Rome.

Rune will bid for the title on Sunday against the winner from Daniil Medvedev and Stefanos Tsitsipas, who play their semi-final later.

Ruud lost for the first time in five meetings with his rival, with all of their matches being played on clay.

Rune, who knocked out top seed Novak Djokovic in the quarter-finals, said that he relaxed when he thought all was lost on court. "When I was down, I told myself I had nothing to lose, he would probably win," he said.

"I told myself to play freely, play aggressive as it would likely be my last set.

"That was the key to the comeback - I'm super-happy."



Denmark's Holger Rune returns to Norway's Casper Ruud during their Rome Open semi-final match on Saturday (AFP)

Ruud needed 69 minutes to win a grinding first set with the Norwegian dominating the tiebreaker to take the early lead after failing to convert on three break points in the sixth game.

Rune, occasionally something of a loose cannon for his outbursts of temper, began to unravel a bit in the second set with Ruud holding his nerve as the deadlock continued.

The youngster lost serve to trail 2-3 and suddenly called for the physio, who rubbed his right shoulder for the three-minute medical timeout.

But that pause may have turned the match around, with Rune suddenly coming to life as he levelled at a set apiece and ran away with the third to advance in a light drizzle.

AFF

Sri Lanka cricket chiefs re-elected after term limits dropped

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's sports minister suspended controversial regulations on term limits on administrators and allowed the cricket board to re-elect its office bearers Saturday, avoiding a possible international ban.

Board officials said they and the minister reached a deal after reports Sri Lanka risked suspension by the International Cricket Council (ICC) over alleged political interference.

"The minister agreed not to invoke regulations he gazetted in December," Sri Lanka Cricket Secretary Mohan de Silva told AFP, adding a court action against the politician had been withdrawn.

Sri Lanka Cricket is the crisis-hit country's richest sporting body but has been embroiled in controversy since the South Asian nation won the World Cup in 1996.

Suspended Halep charged with second doping breach

Paris, France - Former world number one Simona Halep has been charged with a second breach of anti-doping rules, the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) confirmed on Friday.

Romanian Halep has been provisionally suspended since October 2022 for testing positive for the banned substance roxadustat, which stimulates the production of red blood cells, at the US Open in August last year.

On Friday, the ITIA said the two-time Grand Slam winner has been further charged "relating to irregularities in her athlete biological passport".

The athlete biological passport programme monitors biological data over time to identify potential doping violations.

On Friday, Halep said on Instagram that she felt "helpless facing such harassment" and denies the charges, suggesting she has been "a victim of a contamination".

"I have lived the worst nightmare I have ever gone through in my life," she said.

"Not only has my name been soiled in the worst possible way, but I am facing a constant deter-



Simona Halep

mination from the ITIA, for a reason that I cannot understand, to prove my guilt while I haven't ever thought of taking an illicit substance."

Halep said she hoped to have the chance to prove her innocence at a hearing scheduled for the end of May.

The ITIA said it was continuing discussions with an independent tribunal and Halep's representatives.

Nicole Sapstead, the ITIA's senior director for anti-doping, said: "We understand that today's announcement adds complexity to an already high-profile situation.

"From the outset of this process - and indeed any other at the ITIA - we have remained committed to engaging with Ms Halep in an empathetic, efficient, and timely manner."

Halep, 31, said after her positive test last October that she would "fight until the end" to clear her name.

"Knowingly, I have not taken any banned substance," the Romanian star told tennismajors.com in an interview published last month.

"I am a big supporter of clean sports and have always been against doping. I had no clue at the beginning about where this substance came from."

Halep won the French Open in 2018 and Wimbledon the following year.

She had climbed back into the world's top 10 before she was suspended having dropped out of the top 20 in 2020 following injury problems.

AFF

Scheffler, Hovland and Connors share lead at PGA Championship

Rochester, United States - Scottie Scheffler, Viktor Hovland and Corey Connors delivered clutch birdies and grinded out par saves to share the lead after Friday's second round of the PGA Championship as rivals stumbled at rainy Oak Hill.

Second-ranked American Scheffler, last year's Masters champion, and Canada's Connors, chasing his first major title, each fired two-under par 68 to finish 36 holes level at the top on

five-under 135. "Felt like I grinded it out pretty well," Scheffler said. "Didn't hit as many fairways as I would hope to but to shoot two-under was good, solid golf."

Connors, who won his second PGA Tour title at last month's Texas Open, worked magic with his putter when needed.

"Very pleased," Connors said. "The conditions were tricky out there, faced some wind, some rain. I made a bunch of key putts to keep momentum going, and

that was really the key to the day."

Norway's 11th-ranked Hovland, also seeking a first major crown, sank a five-foot birdie putt at the 18th hole to shoot 67 and make it three at the top.

"The score has been great but the way I've plodded my way around here, very pleased with that," he said. "I was trying to give myself the most stress-free pars and a couple birdie looks as well."

Bryson DeChambeau, the 2020 US Open champion, closed with a bogey to share fourth with fellow American Justin Suh on 137.

"It has been a few years, but it doesn't mean I don't know how to do it," DeChambeau said of winning. "I'm definitely trending in the right direction finally."

Four-time major winner Brooks Koepka and England's Callum Tarren were on 138 and England's Justin Rose and

Canadian Taylor Pendrith on 139 as only nine players stood under par.

Scheffler, who would return to world number one with a victory, had two sets of back-to-back birdies but closed with a bogey.

"I was just trying to grind," he said. "I'm in a good position going into the weekend."

Connors consistently made putts from nine to 12 feet for pars and birdies.

AFF



Scottie Scheffler of the United States plays his shot from the fourth tee in the PGA Championship at Oak Hill Country Club on Friday (AFP)



RINKU FIREWORKS IN VAIN AS LUCKNOW BEAT KOLKATA TO BOOK PLAYOFF BERTH



Rinku Singh of Kolkata Knight Riders plays a shot during their IPL match against Lucknow Super Giants on Saturday. Despite Rinku Singh making an unbeaten 67 off just 33 balls, Lucknow defeated Kolkata by 1 run to book their berth in the playoff. For Lucknow, Ravi Bishnoi took two wickets conceding just 23 runs. Earlier, Nicholas Pooran scored a quickfire 58 off 30 balls to help them make 176 for 8.

TODAYS MATCHES

MATCH 69

2 PM

MUMBAI INDIANS

SUNRISERS HYDERABAD

MATCH 70

6 PM

ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE

GUJARAT TITANS

Hetmyer, Jaiswal dump Curran’s Punjab out of IPL

Dharamsala, India - Shimron Hetmyer and Yashasvi Jaiswal starred as Rajasthan Royals dumped Punjab Kings out of the IPL on Friday, capping a poor season for the league’s most expensive ever player Sam Curran. The nail-biting four-wicket in Dharamsala win gave Rajasthan, last season’s runners-up, hope of qualifying for the knockout phase although their fate depends on other matches this weekend. Curran, who cost Punjab a hefty \$2.23 million, fell one run short of what would have been only his second 50 of the tournament as Punjab put on 187-5 with Navdeep Saini taking 3-40 for Rajasthan. This was after Punjab were in trouble at 50-4 after 6.3 overs when Saini sent Liam Livingstone’s off stump flying, the English big-hitter managing just nine and captain Shikhar Dhawan 17. Curran’s valiant 49 came off 31 balls with four fours and two sixes included vital partnerships with Jitesh Sharma (44) and Shahrulkh Khan (41) that rescued Punjab’s innings. In reply for the Royals, Curran’s England teammate Jos Buttler fell for his latest duck of his lacklustre season. But Jaiswal, the IPL’s second-highest run scorer this year behind Faf du Plessis, and who last week hit a 13-ball 50, continued in his stellar form with yet another half-century, off 36 balls. Rajasthan captain Sanju Samson departed for two to Rahul Chahar but rock-solid Devdutt Padikkal made 51 off 30.

REIGN OF SUPER KINGS

Conway, Gaikwad power Chennai into IPL play-offs

New Delhi, India - Devon New Zealand’s Devon Conway and Ruturaj Gaikwad smashed half-centuries to fire Chennai Super Kings into the IPL play-offs with a thumping 77-run win over Delhi Capitals on Saturday. The left-handed Conway (87) and Gaikwad (79) put on a blazing opening stand of 141 to steer Chennai to a mammoth 223-3 after electing to bat first in Delhi. Skipper David Warner hit a valiant 86 but Chennai kept down Delhi, who are coached by Ricky Ponting, to 146-9 and book their spot in the top four. They join holders and table-toppers Gujarat Titans, who are assured of a top-two finish. Four-time winners Chennai have finished the group stage with eight wins and can stay as the second-ranked team in the table, depending on the day’s second result between Kolkata



Devon Conway (R) and Ruturaj Gaikwad of Chennai Super Kings run between the wickets during their match against Delhi Capitals on Saturday (AFP)

Delhi, who were the first team to get eliminated from the play-off race, bowed out with nine losses and five wins. Batsmen set up victory for Chennai after Gaikwad and Conway, in his 52-ball blitz, got cracking on the opposition bowlers with fours and sixes. Chetan Sakariya sent back Gaikwad, who hit seven sixes in his 50-ball knock, but Conway kept up the charge in another attacking partnership of 54 with Shivam Dube, who hit 22. Dube’s wicket raised the noise as Dhoni walked in with thunderous applause and stood unbeaten with Ravindra Jadeja, who hit a seven-ball 20. Delhi were never in the chase as Warner played a lone hand in his attempt to drive the teams’ reply in his 58-ball knock but got little support from the other end. Pace spearhead Deepak Chahar took three wickets while Sri Lankan duo of Matheesha Pathirana (fast bowler) and Maheesh Theekshana (off-spinner) took two each. AFP

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SPACE SYMPHONY

COSMIC CYCLES

US 'SPACE SYMPHONY' PUTS STUNNING NASA IMAGES TO MUSIC

It could be the ultimate blend of art and science - a new seven-suite 'space symphony' inspired and illustrated by NASA's latest mind-boggling images.

The world premiere outside Washington last week of 'Cosmic Cycles' showcased vivid imagery compiled by the US space agency alongside the first-ever public performance of the music. Henry Dehlinger, the symphony's American composer, describes it as 'almost like a total artwork'.

"It's not just music, it's not just visuals - it's not a score for a film either," the 56-year-old told AFP before the concert. "It's more of an immersive experience that encapsulates both visuals and sound."

A similar effort was undertaken over a century ago by English composer Gustav Holst - but when he wrote his famous ode to 'The Planets', much in astronomy remained only theoretical.

Since then, humans have walked on the Moon, sent roving research labs to Mars and probed across the solar system with powerful telescopes allowing us to peer billions of light-years away. The images from that research, compiled by NASA producers into seven short films, served as the inspiration for Dehlinger.

"I had to almost pinch myself and remind myself that this isn't pretend - this is the real deal. Not science fiction, it's the actual science," he said.

Piotr Gajewski, music director and conductor of the National Philharmonic, explained that the idea for the project came after previous work with NASA on visuals to go with a double-billing of Claude Debussy's 'La Mer' (The Sea) and Holst's 'The Planets'.

For their next collaboration, 64-year-old Gajewski said he suggested to NASA that we turn the tables on them.

"Rather than them getting a piece of music and putting pictures to it, that they start by putting short videos together... of their very, very best work."

For Wade Sisler, executive producer



In front of an NASA image projected on a screen, National Philharmonic Music Director and Conductor Piotr Gajewski rehearses "Cosmic Cycles, A Space Symphony" by composer Henry Dehlinger, at Capital One Hall in Arlington, Virginia

at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, the challenge was worth the effort. "It's a journey unlike one that I have ever helped anyone take," Sisler, 64, told AFP.

Like Van Gogh paintings

The seven-part piece begins at the heart of our solar system - the Sun - with shots of its swirling and gurgling surface, and explosions of particles out to the planets. The next two movements focus on NASA studies of our

In addition to two performances at venues outside Washington, NASA has released the videos to its YouTube page with a synthesised version of Dehlinger's soundtrack.

A great mystery

To hammer home the equal importance of the music and video, conductor Gajewski explained, they decided not to aim for exact synchronisation, but to be more 'fluid'.

"We really wanted people to be able to



It's not just music, it's not just visuals - it's not a score for a film either. It's more of an immersive experience that encapsulates both visuals and sound

HENRY DEHLINGER

home planet, from a global perspective and then through Earth photographs taken by astronauts in orbit.

Apart from photos and videos, interspersed throughout the seven films are a mesmerising collection of data visualisations created by NASA, Sisler explained.

Data on ocean currents, for example, look like Van Gogh paintings when you put them in motion. The colours are beautiful, you see patterns that you never realized before.

A fourth segment on the Moon is followed by profiles of each planet - including a focus on images of the Martian surface taken by NASA rovers. Jupiter, a 'regal subject', according to Dehlinger, is introduced by roaring chimes and horns.

The symphony also takes a detailed look at recent experiments on asteroids before a big finale of nebulae, black holes and other galactic phenomena.

experience the music, the performers themselves, and also the science in a balanced portfolio," Sisler added.

Knowing the images and missions were real, Sisler said, elicits a stronger audience response in the digital age, when "you can conjure up anything through AI, or digital effects."

"People are interested in real results. Like, 'Wow, we really went to that asteroid. Wow, we're really bringing it back here to Earth,'" he said, referring to the daring OSIRIS-REx sample retrieval mission.

That awe-inspiring factor made the images perfect companions to orchestral pieces, Gajewski said.

"What is it that all of a sudden makes us emotionally weak when we hear one kind of music, or proud when we hear different kinds?" he asked. "It's all a great mystery, and of course space is the other great mystery."

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EGYPT'S CRAFTS



Egyptian luxury brands are harnessing traditional craftsmanship, from jewellery design to carpet weaving, to bring the country's ancient cultural riches to the world

Experts in the sector of traditional crafts in Egypt say the global appeal of Arab and Islamic designs from other countries shows Egypt could do more to promote its rich, millennia-old artistic heritage.

One pioneer has been master jeweller Azza Fahmy, whose signature Islamic art-inspired pieces have graced the world's rich and famous including US pop star Rihanna and Jordan's Queen Rania.

Fahmy, who started off in an Old Cairo workshop about 50 years ago, said, "My focus has been on designs that resonate with Egyptian identity."

Artists and artisans in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country, draw from a history that spans ancient Pharaonic times, the Mamluk, Ottoman and modern eras.

"We are lucky to be able to draw on 6,000 years of history," said textile designer Goya Gallagher, founder of Cairo-based Malaika Linens, which makes high-end household pieces.

"The main challenge is making sure our pieces are timeless, that they're very well made and always hand-made," she said at the company workshop on the western outskirts of Cairo.

Myriad challenges

While Egypt boasts some business success stories, many more luxury goods makers say they labour against myriad odds to eke out a market both locally and internationally.

In the era of global mass production, Egypt's once expansive pool of skilled artisans has shrunk, with many young people turning their backs on family skills passed down through the ages.

As businesses struggle to fill the talent gap, they also face the headwinds of a painful economic crisis that has tanked the local currency and restricted raw material imports.

The state's efforts to support the handicrafts sector, meanwhile, have been limited and sporadic, says the United Nations Indus-



Cloths are designed at the Malaika Linens factory in the 6th of October industrial zone, southwest of Egypt's capital



Sheets are fabricated at the Malaika Linens factory

trial Development Organisation.

Culture consultant Dina Hafez agreed that Egypt offers little in the way of formalised arts and crafts training.

"The training of artisans is still essentially based on informal education and networks of apprenticeship," said Hafez. "The sector lacks any structure. We need a real ecosystem. But for the moment, it's all based on personal initiatives."

She said Egypt could learn from Turkey and Morocco, "where the opportunities and obstacles look a lot like Egypt", but which had managed to launch "their designs onto the international scene".

Initiatives

Still, change is afoot. Fahmy, the jewellery designer, said there is always space in the market for works made by skilled artisans and "good designers with creative minds and quality education". Many designers hope to benefit from government initiatives to draw in investment and tourism revenue from its ancient wonders.

At the Grand Egyptian Museum at the foot of the Giza pyramids, Egyptian luxury stores enjoy pride of place. Although its official opening has been long delayed, the museum offers limited tours and events, and the shops already 'showcase the best of Egyptian crafts', said the owner of one, Mohamed al Kahhal.

In Cairo's historic centre, linen company Malaika trains women from marginalised backgrounds in embroidery and sells the wares to its customers and to other fashion and textile brands.

Carpet maker Hend al Kahhal works in the same spirit, of bringing Egyptian identity to global frontiers. Standing on the factory roof, where wool and silk creations hung out to dry, Kahhal said the family business works with designers to give a contemporary touch to Pharaonic and Mamluk motifs.

The Egyptian Handicrafts Export Council, under the trade and industry ministry, has long been working to showcase such Egyptian creations internationally.

AFP



My focus has been on designs that resonate with Egyptian identity

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