

THURSDAY, APRIL 13, 2023

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RO3bn investment in tourism sector by 2025

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The tourism sector is witnessing a significant growth with 363 projects, worth RO2.290bn, either established or to be developed by 2025.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism revealed the figures on Wednesday stating that it expects investments in the tourism sector to reach RO3bn by 2025 by attracting additional investments worth RO700mn. 'There are indications of the possibility of exceeding the target early,' it stated.

H E Salem bin Mohammad al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, said that the

tourism sector is one of the sectors that can help achieve economic diversification and direct investments to maximise the potential of the sultanate as a leading tourism destination.

He informed that investment in the tourism sector also works in developing the economy of the governorates, through projects that keep pace with the comparative advantages of each governorate, in addition to the benefit of these projects to local communities and small and medium enterprises.

Integrated tourism complexes

H E Mahrouqi pointed out that integrated tourism complexes form



the bulk of investments in the tourism sector. "Twelve integrated tourism complexes with an investment value of RO3.9bn are currently being implemented, of which RO1.07bn will be invested in the 2021-2025 period." These complexes include the

Al Mouj project, Barr al Jissah Resort (the port district development), Mandarin Oriental Residences, Diar Ras al Hadd Resort, Salalah Beach Resort, Yiti Sustainable City, Phase Two of Mirbat Tourism Project, Phase One A of Jebel Sifah, Blue City

Project, The Orient and the Palm Resort project.

Preparations are also underway for another package of integrated tourism complexes to be located in the governorates of Muscat, Musandam and South Sharqiyah, of an estimated value

of RO2.5bn.

H E Mahrouqi also revealed that a few qualitative and multi-use projects - total investment value of RO262mn - are under development, including the Oman Botanic Garden, the Village Project and the Salalah Gardens (The Nargil Farm) project.

Also, a number of projects are currently under plans at Halaniyat and Dimaniyat Islands with an estimated investment cost of RO137mn by 2025.

Hotel projects

Regarding investments in the hotel industry, the minister informed that 127 new hotel projects with an investment of RO340mn are under implement-

ation, including 14 hotel projects - with an investment of more than RO5mn per project - totalling about RO238mn in investments.

In addition, 113 hotels - with an investment of less than RO5mn per project - are being implemented at a cost of RO102mn, of which 15 projects are being implemented on government land and 98 on private land.

The sector saw development of 124 hotels between 2021 to 2022 with a total investment of RO139mn, including the Avani Muscat Hotel, DusitD2 Naseem Resort Jabal Akhdar, Intercity Hotel Muscat and Jumeirah Muscat Bay.

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SAYYID SHIHAB RECEIVES ITALIAN AMBASSADOR



H H Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Al Murtafaa Garrison H E Pierluigi D'Elia, Ambassador of Italy to Oman, on Wednesday. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed bilateral relations and exchanged views on various matters of mutual interest. H H Sayyid Shihab wished the ambassador success in carrying out his duties as his country's ambassador to Oman (ONA)

Iran delegation arrives in Saudi amid thaw between regional powers

Tehran, Iran - An Iranian delegation arrived in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, Tehran said, to pave the way for reopening diplomatic missions as the Gulf rivals prepare to normalise relations, seven years after an acrimonious split.

The announcement came just days after a Saudi delegation made a similar visit to Iran's capital, following a historic meeting in China between the two governments' foreign ministers who vowed to bring stability to the turbulent region.

"In accordance with the implementation of the agreement be-

tween Iran and Saudi Arabia on the resumption of diplomatic activities... the Iranian technical delegation arrived in Riyadh at midday Wednesday and was welcomed by Saudi officials," said Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani.

"The Iranian delegation will take the necessary steps to reopen the embassy in Riyadh and the consulate general in Jeddah as well as the activities of Iran's permanent representative in the (Jeddah-based) Organisation of Islamic Cooperation," he said in a statement.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi has been invited to Saudi Arabia, according to Tehran. It would be the first trip by an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2012 travelled to Mecca where he attended a regional meeting.

The flurry of diplomatic activity follows last month's landmark, Chinese-brokered announcement that Iran and Saudi Arabia, who have backed opposing sides of conflicts in the Middle East, would work towards resuming ties.

Riyadh broke off relations in 2016 after Iranian protesters at-

tacked Saudi diplomatic missions following the execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al Nimr - one in a series of flashpoints between the long-time foes.

Since the March 10 announcement, the two countries' foreign ministers have met in China and a Saudi technical delegation met Iran's chief of protocol in Tehran last week, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

The Saudi delegation, which arrived in Tehran on Saturday, is due to fly on to Iran's second city Mashhad on Thursday.

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(Supplied photo)

Iftar held to support Fak Kurbah prisoner release initiative

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani Lawyers' Association (OLA), which supervises the Fak Kurbah initiative, held a mass iftar under the patronage of H E Rashid al Shamsi, Undersecretary of Ministry of Social Development, with participation of several government and private institutions and businessmen at Grand Hyatt Muscat on Tuesday.

Dr Muhammad bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, Chairman of OLA and supervisor of Fak Kurbah, expressed his gratitude to all participants, including individuals, groups and institutions, praising the cohesion and solidarity of the Omani society and appreciating the generous support for the initiative.

He also thanked the companies and institutions that announced their contributions to the initiative during the iftar, including Bank Muscat, Asyad Group, Omantel and its employees, Ooredoo, Bank Nizwa, OQ, Oman International Hospital and its ad-

ministrative and medical staff, Al Rahma Association for Motherhood and Childhood, Dar al Atta'a, Civil Aviation Club, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company, Sound Center and Gulf College.

"This support stems from their deep belief in the importance of community solidarity and that people deserve a second chance to build a new life," Zadjali said.

During the event, a video was presented to narrate the story of the initiative since its inception in 2012.

The iftar event reflected Fak Kurbah's partnership with key stakeholders to support the release of those who have been behind bars due to civil, commercial, Sharia and labour cases, a press release stated.

Since 2012, Fak Kurbah has secured the release of 4,969 prisoners, while contributing to the promotion of social solidarity among community members and institutional partnership and social responsibility among institutions.

'Surely He does not like the wasteful'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Food wastage is a long-standing problem that pricks the conscience of many, especially in the month of Ramadan. It has prompted volunteers and experts to call on people to donate their excess food.

According to the 2021 Food Waste Index Report, households in Oman waste 470,322 tonnes of food every year. The wastage per person is estimated to be 95kg.

As part of its ongoing commitment to spread awareness among community members, *Muscat Daily* spoke with a few volunteers and experts working to curb food wastage.

Jassim al Hashmi, director of operations and support services at Oman Food Bank, said, "We need to develop better food habits, especially in Ramadan. The solution lies in smart ways of dealing with food waste. We should buy only what we want and in actual quantities rather than shop randomly."

He urged people to buy only the food needed to reduce waste, make children aware about food preservation, and cook food according to the needs of the family, rather than being extravagant.

"For those who want to donate large



(Supplied photos)

quantities of excess food, they can contact us at 95770600 or 93559909," he said.

Turkiya Suleiman Abdulrahim al Zadjali, head of the charity Ata Taawon, urged people to prepare only two meals - iftar and suhoor - during Ramadan to prevent wastage. "Donate the excess by calling us on 99479832. We work around the clock to collect food."

Ata Taawon distributed more than 7,000 meals among needy families and expatriate workers during Ramadan

last year and is targeting 8,000 meals this year.

"In July 2021, our team launched a van to collect excess food that is safe and edible from weddings, events, restaurants and companies. This food is distributed among needy families. Food unfit for human consumption is given to animals," Turkiya informed.

Emphasising the significance of volunteerism, she said, "People should also understand that volunteering can be in any form and rendered anywhere. And according to our religion, we should not waste food, not even in small quantities."

Fawzi Abu Hadid, imam of a mosque, said that Ramadan is the month of worship and Islam calls for moderation, not extravagance. "Ramadan is an opportunity to get rid of bad habits such as compulsive shopping and eating."

Quoting the Quran, Hadid said, "Dress properly whenever you are at worship. Eat and drink, but do not waste. Surely He does not like the wasteful."

He added, "People should give leftover food to any voluntary team to distribute among the needy or feed the animals. Don't throw it in trash."



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2,176 donate blood in 20 days: DBBS

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Department of Blood Banks Services (DBBS) received 2,176 donors in the first 20 days of Ramadan, according to the Ministry of Health.

A statement issued by DBBS said, "We received 2,176 blood donors and 133 platelet donors so far."

According to DBBS, the Blood Bank in Bausher will require more than 2,700 blood donors and 260

platelet donors during Ramadan.

'Donors can come to DBBS Bausher between 7.30pm and 11.30pm,' it stated.

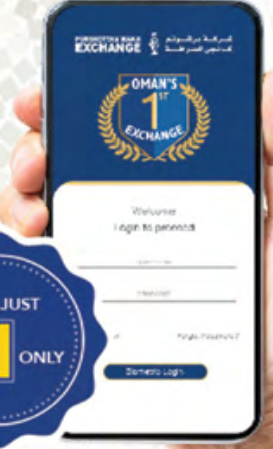
DBBS is also encouraging non-fasting blood donors to donate - during the day. 'Those not fasting can come during the day between 8am and 12.30pm,' the statement said.

The Central Blood Bank will organise two blood donation campaigns on Wednesday - at Ali al Shehane Mosque in Al Hail and Al Mamoura Mosque in Mabela from 8pm to 11pm.



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Nizwa student startup recycles marble waste



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Restoon, a ten-member student startup from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Nizwa, has recycled marble waste into environmentally friendly construction material.

The project, developed by Abdul Rahman al Kharousi, Amani Salim al Tobi, Sarah Abdullah al Adawi, Al Azhar al Qasimi, Ahmed al Qasabi, Reem al Omari, Azza Abdulaziz al Rahbi, Maryam al Sulaymani, Ahlam Muhammad al Subhi and Al Zahraa Ibrahim al Hadrami, produced bricks and cement from marble waste.

“We came up with the idea after pondering over the best way to recycle marble waste, which impacts our environment significantly as it is difficult to get rid of,” said Reem. “The product will help in reducing environment pollution, as well as revive local industry.”

Currently working on transforming the graduation project into a commercial one, the team’s challenges include funding, unavailability of specialised equipment and laboratories in the sultanate to conduct experiments of this nature.

In order to make Restoon a commercially viable project, the team is now focusing on increasing the volume of production and diversifying products.

“We need good marketing to reach the largest segment of consumers inside and outside the sultanate. We are also seeking a patent from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion,” Reem informed.

She hopes the culture of innovation is encouraged to develop in the sultanate. “This can be done by focusing on innovative ideas and creativity of young people, supporting them through specialised and intensive workshops, and creating platforms and centres that facilitate the work of innovation companies, besides framing industry-friendly legal procedures.”

Reem emphasised the need of a good team and idea - one that solves a problem or serves the community - for any startup to succeed.

She attributed the support of The Research Council and the team members’ families for their success far.

Tourist arrivals rise 156.7% to 321,031

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman’s tourism sector received a shot in the arm with the onset of the winter season. Tourist numbers continued to grow registering a 156.7 per cent increase to 321,031 in February, compared to the same period in 2022, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

With 36,896 visitors arriving from the UAE, the Emirates was the largest source market of tourists to Oman in February. The UAE was followed by visitors from India (16,211), Germany (5,406), France (5,206), the UK (4,989), Yemen (4,958), China (1,412) and Italy (1,051).

According to the ministry, there are sufficient indicators



signalling the recovery of the tourism sector in the sultanate.

Following the rise in tourist arrivals, revenues of 3- to 5-star hotels increased 68 per cent to RO49.4mn till the end of February this year, compared to RO29.42mn in the same period in 2022.

According to the latest figures of National Centre for Statistics and Information, the number of guests in star hotels registered an increase of 37.4 per cent to 357,810 till February 2023, compared to 260,450 in February 2022, while occupancy rate was 61.5 per cent, compared to 44.8 per cent during same period last year.

ures of National Centre for Statistics and Information, the number of guests in star hotels registered an increase of 37.4 per cent to 357,810 till February 2023, compared to 260,450 in February 2022, while occupancy rate was 61.5 per cent, compared to 44.8 per cent during same period last year.

OPAZ signs agreement to boost local added value in special economic zones

Muscat - The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) signed a co-operation programme on Wednesday with the Industrial Innovation Academy aimed at strengthening cooperation between OPAZ and the academy.

Through the programme, both parties seek to boost the local added value in special economic, free and industrial zones affiliated with OPAZ.

Additionally, they intend to empower the zones with various programmes, which the academy will conduct along with other endeavours. These programmes will allow OPAZ and the academy to capitalise on their competences, improve the efficiency of national cadres, and empower existing industries in the different zones.

The cooperation programme was signed by Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of OPAZ, and Dr Ayman bin Abdullah al Fudaili, CEO of Industrial Innovation Academy.

The cooperation programme stipulates that OPAZ and the

academy will implement ‘Rabt Programme’, which aims to link local products with government tenders and procurement process in the zones. This programme will serve to create a database of products and services of the companies operating in the zones and will be linked to the government tenders and procurement, so such products are given a preference. Companies that are awarded the tenders are obliged to purchase and supply their projects with local products and industries.



Pact signed to incubate graduation projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), represented by the Industrial Innovation Academy, have signed a cooperation programme to incubate top student graduation projects and transform these into startups.

The agreement was inked by H E Dr Saif Abdullah al Hadabi, Undersecretary for Research and

Innovation, and Dr Ayman bin Abdullah al Fudaili, CEO of Industrial Innovation Academy.

The agreement covers managing and conducting research and projects in accordance with the agreed upon action plan, in addition to supervising and evaluating winning projects. The incubation period extends from one year to three years.

H E Hadabi explained the ministry seeks to empower Omani youth in the knowledge economy through this programme.

RO3bn investment in tourism sector by 2025

Continued from Page 01
Development of domestic tourism

The ministry informed that 24 domestic tourism development projects are being implemented by the governorates at a cost of RO16.6mn, while work is underway on 14 projects to develop and invest in heritage sites and historical monuments at a cost of RO13.8mn.

Eight projects to renovate museums and private heritage houses, at a cost of RO17,000, are currently being undertaken, besides six projects - worth RO45,000 - to establish exhibition halls in castles and forts.

Preparations are also underway to invest RO1.884mn in 34 historical landmarks to facilitate opportunities for small and medium enterprises.

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TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Oman Tourism Development Company (OMRAN Group) would like to invite competent and experienced companies to participate in the following Tenders:

Tender No.	14/2023	17/2023
Tender Title	Hospitality Leadership Development Programme - LIFT	Subscription of Office365 and Azure AD
Tender Submission Closing Date	4.5.2023	4.5.2023
Tender Process Details	Please visit: www.omran.om/tenders/	

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Pakistan	749.80
Bangladesh	276.21
Philippines	143.03
Sri Lanka	830.05

BRIEFS

EY halts plan to split audit, advisory firms

British financial services giant EY said it was stopping a project to split its audit and advisory units after opposition from its US branch, according to an AFP report.

The move, agreed in September, aimed to accelerate growth and avoid conflicts of interest but required the approval of EY's 13,000 worldwide partners.

EY's global management said in a note that the company's US executive committee "decided not to move forward" with its plan, dubbed "Project Everest".

"Given the strategic importance of the US member firm to Project Everest, we are stopping work on the project," it said.

EY's global executive said it remained "committed to moving forward with creating two world-class organizations that further advance audit quality, independence and client choice".

Oman to raise RO75mn via development bonds issue

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's government is planning to raise RO75mn through this year's first issuance of government development bonds. The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced the new issue of government development bonds on Wednesday.

The size of the new government development bonds issue stands at RO75mn with a maturity period of five years. The bonds will carry a coupon rate of 5.25 per cent annually, the CBO said in a statement.

The issue will be open for subscription from April 16 to May 1, 2023, while the auction will be held on May 2, 2023. The issue settlement date will be on May 4, 2023. Interest on the new bonds will be paid semi-annually on November 4 and May 4, every year until the maturity date on May 4, 2028.

Investors may apply for these bonds through the competitive bidding process only and may submit bids through commercial licensed banks operating in Oman.

Furthermore, investors with applications of RO1mn and more may submit their bids directly to the CBO, at their own discretion, after getting them endorsed from their banks. The prospectus



Bonds issue will be open for subscription from April 16 till May 1, 2023, while the auction will be held on May 2, 2023. It will carry a coupon rate of 5.25% annually

and application forms for government development bonds issue can be obtained through the CBO official website.

The government development bonds are direct and unconditional obligations of the

Stock Exchange (MSX).

The details of the bonds allotted will be recorded in the register maintained by Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (MCD). Therefore, investors must provide the same bank account details registered with MCD in order to ensure the smooth processing of their bids and the receipt of the coupon payments and principal amount on their scheduled dates.

The 68th government development bonds issue is offered to all investors, residents and non-residents.



Ahlibank board rejects BankDhofar merger offer

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The board of directors of Ahlibank has decided not to accept the proposal from BankDhofar to explore the merger between two banks.

On Monday, the board of directors of BankDhofar submitted a non-binding offer to the board of directors of Ahlibank to explore the possibility of a merger deal between two banks.

'With reference to our previous disclosure on Tuesday regarding the receipt of a non-binding offer from BankDhofar for a potential merger, we would like to inform that the board of directors has studied the proposal and decided not to

accept it,' Ahlibank said in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

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

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

The merger of BankDhofar and Ahlibank would have created a larger lender with approximately RO7.4bn assets.

9 crowdfunding firms have been licensed so far: CMA

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) announced that it has provided licenses to nine companies till the end of March 2023 to carry out crowdfunding activities in Oman.

The nine crowdfunding platforms that were licensed by the CMA are: Ethis Investment Platform, Beehive Financial Technology, New Sphere, Ithbar, Alwadiaa for Commercial Operations, Rawafid Finance, Smart Group for Finance, Mamun Financial Technologies and Sharek Investment.

As per the CMA, as many as 21 companies have received financing so far since the establishment of crowdfunding platforms in Oman. Total financing volume of nearly RO2mn was



provided by Ethis Investment and Beehive Financial Technology at the end of 2022.

Through the launch of crowdfunding platforms, the CMA aims to expand financing options in the market, facilitate access to financing and find alternatives that cope with the technological revolution in the global capital markets.

Crowdfunding platforms are considered as a breakthrough in the financial sector, as they are

dependent on innovative financing types and provide four financing options: donations, product, equity or investment note.

During 2022, the CMA launched the mechanism for financing initiatives and projects through crowdfunding platforms which, in their turn, enabled project owners to present their projects through such platforms to get the required financing. This translates the CMA's plan to enhance the role of the capital market as an instrument for financing projects in all their volumes and types.

Additionally, such platforms will enable small and medium enterprises in particular and other projects in general to get their required financing from a wider base of national and foreign investors.

Sohar Freezone incentives provide ideal environment for business growth

Sohar - Continuing to drive growth for new and expanding local and international businesses, Sohar Freezone has extended its competitive rates on General Trade License (GTL), allowing businesses from around the world to base themselves within the complex at a reduced rate for up to three years.

Companies can save up to 50 per cent on the regular rates and begin trading immediately by using Sohar Freezone's electronic portal to secure all required permits through the on-site one-stop.

Sohar Freezone is targeting further growth in 2023 and has extended its competitive rates for new and renewing tenants to encourage trading in an already rapidly expanding Sohar Port and Freezone.

Businesses seeking to relocate can also access a complete



working solution through Corporate Parks, Sohar Freezone's commercial office partner, which offers a reduction of between 15 per cent and 40 per cent in office rental rates for up to three years to help their operations thrive.

Investors can also enjoy zero per cent personal income tax, zero per cent import and re-export duties and a corporate tax holiday of up to 25 years, with no minimum capital requirement.

Meanwhile, the partnership with

Corporate Parks offers businesses access to meeting room space with high-speed internet and utilities included for one competitive annual fee.

The success stories emerging from Sohar Freezone have highlighted its unique value as a rapidly growing business hub. Companies from diverse sectors such as automotive and metals, polymers and chemicals have all benefited from freezone's strategic position and access to raw

materials.

As one of the fastest-growing ports in the world, Sohar Port and Freezone continues to leverage on its strategic location and enhance its services, positioning itself as a key logistics hub within the region and across the world boasting container, liquids, and bulk terminals.

A powerful combination of the expertise of Asyad Group and the Port of Rotterdam, Sohar Port and Freezone is earmarked as one of the sultanate's mega-projects, home to logistics, petrochemicals, and metal clusters, as well as the region's first dedicated agro terminal.

Today, after 17 years of operation, it serves as the main gateway for import and export in Oman, contributing 2.1 per cent of the country's GDP and almost 26,000 direct and indirect employment opportunities.

COMMENTARY

A future-oriented hydrogen partnership between Korea and Oman

The recent report by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change of the UN raised the alarm of a crucial need to transition from hydrocarbon energy sources to clean energy sources. A hydrogen economy has become an increasingly important collective focus in the global efforts to reduce carbon emissions. Hydrogen fuel would contribute to the diversification of energy sources and accordingly to the improvement of energy security.

Indeed, green hydrogen is progressively attracting international attentions as a 'game changer' in this regard. It is our shared perception that green hydrogen represents one of the solutions and common visions for our future generations.

Oman's commitment to transitioning from hydrocarbons to green energy as per the innovative Oman Vision 2040, and its pledge to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 are encouraging steps towards a more sus-

tainable future. Oman's dedicated political leadership, renewable energy potentials, and geostrategic location make it one of the ideal drivers for leading the way in the green hydrogen industry. I found out that there was a broad-based appreciation by the stakeholders at the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman 2022 for the commitment and strategy of the Omani government.

Korea has a significant stake in the development of a green hydrogen economy. Korea and Oman, with their long-standing energy cooperation, are well positioned to partner in the mutual transition towards the development of the hydrogen industry.

Korea determines to contribute to the development of the hydrogen economy and the green hydrogen industry. Korea is committed to the goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. As such, Korea attaches a high priority to building its hydrogen sector.

Korea's firm commitment to this goal is embedded in the overarching governance to usher in the hydrogen economy.

It launched its Hydrogen Economy Roadmap in 2019. In 2020, it enacted the world's first Hydrogen Law (Hydrogen Economy Promotion and Hy-



KIEJOO KIM
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA TO OMAN

drogen Safety Management Law). To translate the roadmap into feasible strategies, the Korean government's Hydrogen Economy Committee chaired by the Prime Minister as per the Hydrogen Law announced the comprehensive plan encapsulated in 3-Up strategy, namely Scale up, Build

up and Level up in November 2022.

First, 'Scaling up' strategy intends to promote clean hydrogen ecosystem by establishing a supply chain and creating stable demand for hydrogen. According to this plan, clean hydrogen power generation will account for 7.15 per cent of national output by 2036. In

implementing this strategy, the Korean government announced, in March 2023, the creation of the world's first auction market for hydrogen power generation that will open in the first half of 2023. Hydrogen power generation market will have auctioning of 1,300GWh per year from 2025. Clean

hydrogen power generation market will open early next year and will have auctioning of 3,500GWh from 2027. The buyers of hydrogen power generation will purchase 1,300GWh in 2025 to 14,700GWh in 2028. The development of the hydrogen-driven mobility is also incrementally under way. By 2030, it is anticipated that the number of hydrogen-driven buses and trucks will increase to 30,000.

Second, 'Building up' aims at establishing a framework for distribution network and utilizing clean hydrogen.

The plan includes building the world's largest liquefied hydrogen plant that will produce 40,000 tonnes per year, expanding hydrogen recharging stations nationwide and constructing hydrogen pipelines in the central-western provinces in Korea, to name just a few.

Third, 'Leveling up' seeks to advance technological innovation in such core areas as electrolysis, liquefied hydrogen carrier vessels, hydrogen

recharging stations, fuel cell mobility and power generation as well as hydrogen turbines. One of the targets is to build ammonia carrier ships by 2026 and liquefied hydrogen carrier ships by 2029.

The partnership between Korea and Oman offers a strong foundation for collaboration in the green hydrogen economy. Korea's technological progress in the renewable energy industry and the firm commitment to achieve sustainable energy transition would enable Korea to pursue even stronger partnership in the green hydrogen industry with Oman. I sincerely look forward to the potential benefits of this partnership, not just for Korea and Oman, but for the global effort to achieve a more sustainable future.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Muscat Daily or Apex Media Publication

IMF lowers 2023 global growth forecasts

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund slightly lowered its outlook for the global economy on Tuesday, while predicting that most countries will avoid a recession this year despite economic worries and geopolitical strains.

Concerns over high inflation, rising geopolitical tensions and financial stability hang over the updated forecasts, with the impact of war in Ukraine continuing to dampen growth and drive up consumer prices in many countries.

Persistent economic concerns could overshadow plans by the IMF and World Bank to promote an ambitious reform and fundraising agenda at this year's spring meetings.

In its World Economic Outlook (WEO) report, the IMF predicts the global economy will grow by 2.8 per cent this year and three per cent in 2024, a decline of 0.1 percentage point from its January forecasts.

The IMF's expectations for the United States were slightly rosier: the world's largest economy is expected to grow by 1.6 per cent in 2023, marginally higher than previously predicted.

"The global economy remains on track for a gradual recovery from the pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine," IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas told a press conference Tuesday.

He added that "the massive and synchronized tightening of monetary policy by most central banks" had begun to bring inflation



IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas speaks at a press conference in Washington, DC on Tuesday

tion lower.

But serious risks relating to financial stability have emerged, he said, referring to banking turmoil unleashed last month after the dramatic collapse of Californian lender Silicon Valley Bank.

Advanced economies drag down growth

The overall picture painted by the WEO is gloomy, with global growth forecast to slow in both the short and medium terms.

Close to 90 per cent of advanced economies will experience slowing growth this year, while Asia's emerging markets are expected to see a substantial rise in economic output – with India and China predicted to account for half of all growth, IMF

chief Kristalina Georgieva said last week.

Low-income countries, meanwhile, are expected to suffer a double shock from higher borrowing costs due to high interest rates and a decline in demand for their exports, Georgieva said. This could worsen poverty and hunger.

The IMF expects global inflation to slow to seven per cent this year, down from 8.7 per cent last year, according to the WEO. It is then expected to fall to 4.9 per cent in 2024.

Both 2023 and 2024 inflation forecasts were revised upwards and remain significantly above the two per cent target set by the US Federal Reserve and other central banks, suggesting policymakers have a long way to go before

inflation is under control.

But almost all advanced economies are expected to avoid a recession this year and next.

Alongside growth in the United States, the Euro area is also forecast to expand by 0.8 per cent this year, and 1.4 per cent next year – led by Spain, which will see 1.5 per cent growth in 2023 and two per cent growth in 2024.

But the area's biggest economy, Germany, is now expected to contract by 0.1 per cent this year, joining the United Kingdom, the only other G7 country expected to enter recession in 2023. The picture is more positive among emerging market economies, with China forecast to grow by 5.2 per cent this year. But growth is predicted to slow

IMF warns inflation could stay high until 2025

Washington, US – The underlying drivers of historically-high global inflation could persist until 2025, the International Monetary Fund's chief economist told AFP on Tuesday.

Prices around the world have surged since the rapid reopening of the global economy after the Covid-19 pandemic. Inflation was further fueled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, which caused commodity prices to spike.

"Inflation is still with us," Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said in an interview in Washington, shortly after the IMF raised its forecast for inflation this year to seven per cent.

Despite an aggressive, concerted, campaign by central banks to slow price increases by raising interest rates, inflation in many countries remain well above the two per cent target set by the US Federal Reserve



serve and others.

"Core inflation in particular has not started to come down significantly back towards the target," Gourinchas said, referring to a measure that strips out volatile food and energy prices.

"It probably won't be until the end of 2024, maybe into 2025," he added.

The persistence of core inflation means that central banks may have to keep their interest rates higher for longer, he said.

Such a move would put additional strains on a financial sector already rocked by the

dramatic collapse of Californian lender Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) last month.

Gourinchas said "very forceful intervention" by the Fed, Swiss National Bank and others had helped to tackle the immediate challenges unleashed by SVB's failure, but warned that "pockets" of potential challenges remained.

"We're in a situation where there is elevated levels of nervousness in the market," he said.

An area of concern is the real estate sector, in part due to the slow post-pandemic return to offices in many cities around the world.

Gourinchas warned that there may be other financial institutions like SVB that are over-exposed to interest rate risks, which could cause problems if rates stay high while central banks fight inflation.

AFP

No evidence yet of credit crunch after US banking turmoil: Yellen

Washington, US – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday that she has not seen evidence of a contraction in credit, despite fears that households and firms could have a tougher time borrowing after recent banking sector turmoil.

Her comments come as central bankers, finance ministers and other participants gather in Washington for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's spring meetings this week, where global growth and debt restructuring feature among key topics on the agenda.

While the IMF warned in a report released Tuesday that chances of a "hard landing" for the world economy have risen on the back of financial sector stress, Yellen told reporters: "I've not really seen evidence at this stage suggesting a contraction in credit."

But she acknowledged that this is a possibility, while stress-



Janet Yellen

ing that the US banking system remains resilient.

She said she is not anticipating a downturn in the economy even if that remains a risk.

Yellen added in a speech that there remains "considerable room for improvement" in the global debt restructuring process.

The World Bank has warned of an especially tough outlook for the poorest economies as global growth slows while countries

grapple with heavy debt burdens and weak investment.

And this week, ministers from both creditor and debtor countries, as well as representatives of private creditors will convene for a global sovereign debt roundtable.

Yellen said she looks forward to "robust discussion on improvements to the Common Framework process for low-income countries and the debt treatment process more broadly."

Yellen noted China's willingness to provide specific assurances in Sri Lanka's case recently "as a positive sign," with Beijing's moves enabling the IMF to proceed with a financial support and economic reform program.

She still hopes to visit China at "the appropriate time" as well, given that President Joe Biden has emphasized the importance of opening up and maintaining communication channels.

Meanwhile, the United States remains "vigilant" in the face of risks to the economy, she said, as countries continue tackling fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine while recovering from the pandemic.

"In some countries, including the United States, there have been recent pressures on our banking systems," she added.

"I've been in close communication with my counterparts over the past few weeks on these developments and I look forward to continuing that dialogue this week," she said.

On Washington's pursuit of "friend-shoring," or deepening economic ties with trusted partners, Yellen pushing back on the idea that this process would cause fragmentation.

Saying such arguments are "not valid," she defended the process as an approach to dealing with supply chain threats.

AFP

Biden admin unveils tough emissions rules to speed electric auto shift

New York, US – President Joe Biden's administration unveiled new proposed auto emissions rules Wednesday, aiming to accelerate the electric vehicle transition with a target of two-thirds of the new US car market by 2032.

The proposed rules set aggressively low standards for emissions of greenhouse gases and criteria pollutants, which is expected to lead to further manufacturing and marketing of EVs amid already considerable investments announced by US and foreign carmakers.

The head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Michael Regan, described the measure as the "strongest ever federal pollution standards for cars and trucks," saying his department's new policy would "accelerate the ongoing transition to a clean vehicles future."

The proposal – which will next be open to a public comment period – is the latest in a series of steps under Biden, a Democrat, to help put EVs on track for mass adoption.

The rules do not explicitly mandate greater EV manufacturing, but the tough emissions targets are expected to hasten a transition as automakers turn to EVs as the only viable way to remain in compliance.

Past US tailpipe rules have led carmakers to employ lightweight materials, or greater use of aerodynamically efficient designs to save energy -- but have been the subject of heated political debate.

The EPA under Biden's Republican predecessor, Donald Trump, moved to roll back auto emission regulations, resulting in several long lawsuits which created uncertainty for manufacturers.

Electric vehicles accounted for 5.8 per cent of the US market for new vehicles in 2022, up from 3.2 per cent in 2021, according to Cox Automotive.

However, efforts championed



US President Joe Biden

by Biden, including US\$7.5bn to finance a national EV charging network and myriad tax incentive policies in his signature Inflation Reduction Act, have dovetailed with major EV investment announcements by General Motors, Ford and others.

Even so, targeting 67 per cent penetration in less than a decade might seem unrealistic.

But White House environmental advisor Ali Zaidi said expert forecasts have underestimated the progress towards EV investment since Biden took office in January 2021. He noted that GM has targeted 2035 to go all-electric.

"The automakers have strategies and now have the technologies and an infrastructure and a supply chain to achieve this," Zaidi said at a briefing with journalists.

"If you look at the history that's been written over the last two and a half years, that's a really good predictor for the incredible foundation on which this draws and reinforces."

Winds of politics

The proposed regulations, which cover cars manufactured between 2027 and 2032, are based on "advances in clean car technology to further reduce both climate pollution and smog- and soot-forming emissions," according to a fact sheet.

The measure is expected to

lead to greater use of filters to reduce gasoline particulate matter emissions in conventional internal combustion engine autos.

Manish Bapna, president of the National Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, praised the proposal.

"Done right, these will put the US on the path to end pollution from vehicle tailpipes – while also slashing our dependence on oil, creating good domestic jobs, and saving consumers money on fuel," Bapna said.

Arthur Wheaton, a transportation industry expert at Cornell University, said the standards are a tool to lead the auto industry towards a more environmental path, but flagged challenges in realizing the aim of the policy.

For one, while Biden has unveiled meaningful policies to address climate change, history shows that "as you get a change in president or presidential party, then the targets can dramatically switch," Wheaton said.

"It is extremely difficult to do long-term planning for a trillion dollar industry if you don't know what's going to happen, say two years from now, in the next election," he added.

Moreover, the EV build-out requires amassing key raw materials like lithium and nickel, with manufacturers around the globe competing for supplies.

AFP

Elon Musk says 'many mistakes' made since Twitter takeover

San Francisco, US – Twitter boss Elon Musk said running the social media network has been "quite a rollercoaster" and acknowledged "many mistakes" along the way, six months after he bought the company for US\$44bn.

In a live interview with the BBC after agreeing to a last-minute invitation for the "spontaneity" of it, Musk appeared to tacitly acknowledge that one of those errors was the decision to label the broadcaster's account "government-funded media".

He said he would change the designation on the BBC's Twitter handle after the broadcaster objected.

"We want it as truthful and



Elon Musk

accurate as possible – we're adjusting the label to 'publicly funded'," Musk said.

Britain's national broadcaster is predominantly funded by an annual license fee set by the government but paid by individual

households.

The labeling spat follows an earlier controversy over a similar move involving US radio network NPR, which Twitter briefly branded "state-affiliated", the same way it styles government-run Chinese and Russian platforms.

NPR stopped tweeting in protest.

Twitter now tags NPR, which has nearly 9 million followers, "government-funded media", and applied the same label to the BBC's account.

Musk has expressed deep disdain for news media for years and recently installed an automatic response of a poop emoji to emails sent to the site's main

media address.

Speaking with the BBC late on Tuesday, he also addressed Twitter's controversial move to strip the New York Times of its blue verified check mark after the company refused to pay to keep it.

From April 20, any legacy verified accounts on Twitter – which were verified as authentic under the company's old ownership – will have to pay to subscribe to Twitter Blue.

One of the reasons for this, Musk said, was that he does not want Twitter to boost "some anointed class of journalists" who determine what constitutes news.

AFP



Bank Nizwa launches Sadaqah, Zakat campaign with charity organisations

As the pioneer Islamic bank in Oman, Bank Nizwa has keenly advocated sharia'a-compliant financial solutions while consistently spreading the Islamic values of generosity and benevolence.

In accordance with the same and with the commencement of the holy month of Ramadan, the bank has joined hands with Oman Charity Organisation, Imam Jabir bin Zaid Foundation and Dar Al Atta'a to further its philanthropic efforts.

In an endeavour to enhance the Islamic banking ecosystem, individuals, can leverage the bank's payment channel via the app or website to make payments toward their Sadaqah and Zakat commitments.

Moreover individuals can also capitalise on the bank's collaborations to directly transfer contributions to one or more of the

charity organisations as part of Sadaqah.

"At Bank Nizwa, our focus will continue to be on making Islamic banking more convenient, responsive, and dynamic," said H H Sayyida Wisam bint Jaifar bin Salim al Said, Head of marketing and Corporate communications at Bank Nizwa.

Commenting on the bank's collaboration, she pointed out that "our collaboration with leading charitable organisations as well as our open, transparent and direct payment channels have made it even easier for individuals to confidently fulfil their Sadaqah and Zakat obligations during the holy month of Ramadan".

As an Islamic bank, she informed that the bank places "the utmost importance on humanitarian work and community welfare, and our ongoing initiatives

MPES, Gradient join hands for wastewater treatment

Muscat Projects and Environmental Services LLC, Oman's leading water and wastewater treatment and maintenance company, has entered into a strategic partnership agreement with Gradient International Overseas Pte, a global leader in the field of industrial wastewater treatment.

Through this partnership, the companies aim to leverage the increasing global demand for wastewater treatment services, a press release said.

Gradient was founded in 2013 by Anurag Bajpai and Prakash Govindan, PhD holders in mechanical engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, USA.

Their objective was to offer a waste water treatment through sustainable and cost-effective methods. What began as a start-up is now counted among the world's leading companies offering the most innovative and cutting edge solutions to water scarcity challenges posed by industrialisation, population growth and climate change.

Gradient's global headquarters is in Boston, USA. The com-



E M Badhrudeen



Prakash Govindan

pany's global innovation centre in Singapore and it has offices in 14 countries.

One of the earliest entrepreneurs in Oman, MPES, is the brainchild of E M Badhrudeen. Founded in 2008, as a one-man company, this venture grew into a 400-employee business establishment with 14 strong years of stellar performance as the nation's leading wastewater treatment firms.

The company's greatest strength is its workforce of experienced engineers, supervisors, technicians, sales and marketing professionals and plant operators.

The company is engaged in the design, installation, commis-

sioning, maintenance and operation of sewage treatment plants.

MPES is also a service provider to public sector organisations such as Haya Water, Royal Oman Police, PDO and many private organisations.

Speaking about the new strategic partnership, MPES managing director E M Badhrudeen said, "We hope that through cooperation with Gradient, we can expand our field of operation to West Asian countries."

He added that the future activities of the company will contribute Oman's efforts to combat global warming and to adopt environmentally friendly initiatives in key sectors in the sultanate.

'Deal of the Day' surprises from Ooredoo to continue until end of Ramadan

Ooredoo Oman, the sultanate's customer-friendly communications provider, has come back with its 'Deal of the Day' offering their Hala prepaid customers a chance to get exciting daily surprises just by subscribing or topping up their prepaid credit.

'Ooredoo realises that Ramadan is a time of huge generosity, which is why the Deal of the Day for Hala prepaid customers is back,'

the company said in a statement, adding that the deal would continue until the end of Ramadan.

The rewards will include either free data, free credit, or free local or international minutes to certain destinations.

'All of these daily perks will increase, and perhaps even double, the value of selected plans,' it added.

'Deal of the Day' is one of Ooredoo's most popular

ways of celebrating the holy month with its customers by making it easier for them to share special moments with family and friends.

'Getting access to the daily rewards couldn't be easier. Just use the Ooredoo App or dial *555*888# and check in every day to explore and select the offers, then recharge or subscribe to increase value', the company informed.



Unimoni Exchange, Instant Cash host community iftar with KMCC

Unimoni Exchange along with Instant Cash, joined hands with Muscat KMCC Central Committee (Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre) to organise a community iftar at the Sunni Centre Madrasa in Ruwi on Friday.

"The Grand Community Iftar brought over 2000 people together, in a single venue, to break their fast," said a press release.

H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, addressed the attendees as the guest of honour.

Dr Sivakumar Manickam, chairman of the Indian School

Board of Directors; Boban M P, CEO Unimoni Oman and officials of Unimoni and Instant Cash were among the other dignitaries in the grand community iftar.

"For us, it is an opportunity to come together and celebrate shared values of compassion, kindness, and community. We hope that this event will create a deeper understanding of Ramadan among people," said the Unimoni Exchange CEO.

Commenting on the event, Sultan al Mahmoud, CEO of Instant Cash, said, "As a brand, we have always believed in giving

ahlibank offers aid to charitable organisations during Ramadan



Rejoicing the spirit of Ramadan and with a determination to make a meaningful impact on the local community, ahlibank has offered aid to multiple charitable organisations, as a gesture of respect and in recognition of the fundamental values of Ramadan in-line with its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) endeavours.

Ramadan is a time for introspection, devotion, and charitable giving.

"This is a moment for demon-

strating compassion for those who are less fortunate. In keeping with the same, the bank sees it as an opportunity to support the less fortunate in the community," a statement from the bank said.

To provide food boxes to families in need, it has partnered with neighbourhood associations and charitable trusts authorised by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD).

Commenting on the initiative, Muneer al Balushi, AGM- Head

of Retail Distribution at ahlibank, said, "We are pleased to continue our annual practice of giving back to the community during the holy month of Ramadan.

This initiative aligns with our core values and reflects our commitment to supporting the society, we believe in engaging with the community and reaching different wilayats to support our fellow citizens and make a meaningful impact on their lives."

ahlibank considers social responsibility as a fundamental aspect of its business strategy and has incorporated it into its plans to enhance the community's well-being through several programmes that aim to enrich the lives of people all across Oman.

The bank has introduced several initiatives to aid society and believes that such programs not only promote social responsibility but also play a crucial role in developing a sustainable future for Oman.

Myanmar confirms deadly air strike as global outcry mounts

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar's ruling junta has confirmed that it carried out an air strike on a village in which dozens of people were reported killed, drawing condemnation from the United Nations and Western powers.

UN rights chief Volker Turk said he was 'horrified' by the deadly air strike, whose victims he said included schoolchildren performing dances, with the global body calling for those responsible to be brought to justice.

The death toll from the Tuesday morning strike on the remote Kanbalu township in the central Sagaing region remains unclear, with at least 50 fatalities and dozens of injuries reported by BBC Burmese, The Irrawaddy and Radio Free Asia, as well as by a witness contacted by AFP.

Myanmar's military has cracked down on dissent following a February 2021 coup that toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government, with the ensuing unrest leaving more than 3,200 people dead, according to a local monitoring group.

Tuesday's strike saw military aircraft strafe Pazi Gyi village, where scores of locals had gathered to mark the opening of a local defence force office connected to junta opponents, a witness told AFP.

One fighter jet and a helicopter were involved in the attack, a security source told AFP.

The junta confirmed on Wednesday it had 'launched limited air strikes' after receiving a tip-off from locals about the event.

It did not say how many were killed but insisted the military had tried to minimise harm to civilians.

"We heard that more people were killed because of big explosions from weapons and ammunition... displayed at the opening event," a junta statement said.

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun late on Tuesday said some



Map of Myanmar, locating Kanbalu Township in the Sagaing region where dozens of people were killed in a military junta air strike on Tuesday (AFP)

of the dead were anti-coup fighters in uniform, though 'there could be some people with civil-

the fiercest resistance to the military's rule, with intense fighting raging there for months.

"As the people of Myanmar celebrate their New Year, the EU is deeply shocked by reports of the latest atrocity committed by the military regime in Sagaing, taking the lives of dozens of innocent civilians," EU foreign affairs spokesperson Nabila Massrali said. While not confirming a toll, the UN said several civilians were killed, with Turk accusing Myanmar's military of once again disregarding 'clear legal obligations... to protect civilians in the conduct of hostilities'.

A rescuer connected to a People's Defence Force group told AFP that children were among the dead. After recovering bodies and transporting survivors to safety, he estimated the death

toll could be as high as 100.

'Reprehensible'

UN chief Antonio Guterres condemned the attack and reiterated his call 'for the military to end the campaign of violence against the Myanmar population throughout the country', according to a statement from his spokesperson.

Washington also denounced the 'reprehensible' attack.

"We strongly condemn the regime's air strikes and urge the regime to cease the violence," US State Department Counselor Derek Chollet tweeted.

Human Rights Watch Asia division deputy director Phil Robertson said the strike was likely to have a chilling effect across Myanmar society.

"I think this will cause greater fear amongst the people," he told AFP. "I think in the future, communities will be reluctant to hold a... mass gathering of any sort, recognising that they could be bombed, they could be attacked."

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Myanmar conflict tracker, the military has carried out 689 air and drone strike attacks since the coup. Rights groups have called for the international community to further restrict Myanmar's access to aviation fuel in the wake of the attack.

But Bangkok-based security analyst Anthony Davis told AFP that demand was 'divorced from reality'.

"Russia is a firm ally of the junta and one of the world's largest oil exporters. Do we seriously believe Moscow will sit and watch the Myanmar Air Force being slowly grounded for a lack of aviation fuel?" he said.

Myanmar's National Unity Government, a shadow body dominated by former lawmakers from ousted civilian leader Suu Kyi's party, called the strike a 'heinous act'.

AFP



This file photo shows Orthodox Christians gathering with lit candles around the Edicule at Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre church on April 23, 2022 (AFP)

Jerusalem church slams Israel's 'heavy-handed' Easter restrictions

Jerusalem - The Greek Orthodox Church on Wednesday slammed Israel's 'heavy-handed restrictions' on its upcoming Easter celebrations in Jerusalem, urging Christians to attend in spite of police curbs.

In an escalating row over attendance numbers at the Holy Fire ceremony on Saturday in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - where Christians believe Jesus's tomb lies - the church said negotiations with police had failed.

"After many attempts made in goodwill, we are not able to coordinate with the Israeli authorities as they are enforcing unreasonable restrictions," said Father Mattheos Siopis from the Greek Orthodox Church. "These heavy-handed restrictions will limit access to... the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and to the Holy Light ceremony," he told journalists.

The annual Holy Fire ceremony, during which priests bring a flame from the tomb which they believe sparks miraculously each year, marks the most important event in the Orthodox calendar.

In the past some 10,000 worshippers clutching candles would fill the church, with many more crowding into the surrounding alleys of the Old City, before the flame was flown to Orthodox communities internationally.

"The ceremony has been faithfully taking place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for nearly 2,000 years," said Siopis.

The sacred site lies in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem and the country's police force has for the second consecutive year told church leaders that access must be considerably restricted.

Limiting church attendance to 1,800 people including clergy from the various Orthodox denominations is a necessary safety precaution, police said on Wednesday. "I want to emphasise that our main concern is the safety of the pilgrimage that are coming to the Old City. The numbers were provided by the safety engineer," who assessed the church, said Yoram Segal from the Jerusalem district police.

"We understand the feeling, the religious feelings of people that want to participate in this Holy Light ceremony. But unfortunately not everyone can enter the church because of the safety regulation," he added.

Segal said the ceremony will be broadcast on screens in the Old City and that the force is 'doing our best' to ensure the flame can travel onwards to Christian communities beyond Jerusalem.

AFP

Syria to reopen Tunisia embassy

Damascus, Syria - War-torn Syria will reopen its diplomatic mission in Tunisia and appoint an ambassador there, Damascus and Tunis said in a joint statement on Wednesday after more than a decade of strained ties.

Syria's decision followed a similar move by Tunis on April 3, when Tunisian President Kais Saied instructed his foreign minister to begin procedures to appoint an ambassador to Damascus.

"In response to the initiative of the President of the Tunisian Republic... the Syrian government... decided to reopen the Syrian embassy in Tunisia, and to appoint an ambassador soon," Syria's official news agency SANA said quoting the statement.

Tunisia's Saied had said last month he planned to restore diplomatic relations with Syria.

It was the latest example of Arab outreach to the internationally isolated government in Damascus that has gathered pace since Syria and Turkey were hit by a devastating earthquake in February.

Since the quake, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has received calls and aid from Arab leaders, momentum analysts say he could leverage to bolster regional support.

AFP

New Israeli spyware targets journalists, politicians: Watchdog

Washington, US - New Israeli-made spyware resembling the notorious Pegasus programme has been used to target journalists and opposition politicians in several countries, a Canadian watchdog said on Tuesday.

The spyware and related exploit or hacking software was created by the little-known firm QuaDream Ltd, which was established by a former Israeli

military official and veterans of NSO Group, the creator of Pegasus, according to Citizen Lab. Citizen Lab, which studies the abuse of digital technologies, said it identified at least five people targeted by QuaDream spyware and exploits in North America, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

"Victims include journalists, political opposition figures, and

an NGO worker," it said, saying it would not identify them at the moment. Spyware like Pegasus has been widely used by governments and other actors to spy on opponents, media and activists.

The programmes can be placed on computers and cellphones by phishing communications and backdoor exploits, and can survey and transmit information on the phone back to

an operator without the user's knowledge.

The White House said in late March that Pegasus has been used by governments 'to facilitate repression and enable human rights abuses'.

Citizen Lab said that, one placed on a user's phone or computer, QuaDream's spyware can record audio from a phone call, record external sounds from a device's micro-

phone, take pictures from cameras, and search the device's files, all without the user's knowledge.

The spyware can also generate its own two-factor authentication codes to enable continual access to the device owner's cloud accounts.

The spyware includes a self-destruct feature to hide its previous presence once it is no longer used, Citizen Lab said.

Citizen Lab identified servers in 10 countries that received data from victims' devices, including Israel, Singapore, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates and Bulgaria.

QuaDream has marketed its spyware and services to government clients including Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Ghana, Indonesia and Morocco, Citizen Lab said.

AFP

Gold rush, migrant influx stoke strains in Niger desert town

Arlit, Niger - The short dusty street in Arlit, a mining town in northern Niger, is a sad and seedy place.

Faces of young women, many of them from Nigeria, appear in the cracks of doorways, offering their bodies in exchange for money.

Prostitution is discreetly flourishing here, a once-quiet town that has been turned upside-down by a population influx.

A major cause is a gold rush that has sucked in fortune seekers from southern Niger and the country's neighbours.

But there is also a buildup of migrants from across West Africa, who pass through this crossroads town on their desperate trek to Europe.

The inflow is creating economic and social strains in a remote and conservative region



This file photo shows women walking along a street in Arlit, in the Agadez region of Niger, on March 30 (AFP)

whose culture prides itself on welcoming strangers.

"Cohabitation with non-Muslims is a bit difficult, especially with these 'free women'," said

Issa, a trader, using the local term for sex workers. "It's giving the neighbourhood a bad name."

Nadya, a prostitute in her thirties with two children, said, "We

don't have any problems with people here."

She added, "I do it for them - I really need the money."

Arlit lies in harsh terrain a cou-

ple of hundred kilometres (around 120 miles) from Algeria's southern border, between the Sahara and the eastern rim of the Air mountains.

The gold rush has helped cause the population of towns in the Agadez region, which includes Arlit, to double in a decade, officials estimate.

Migrants

But there is also a huge transient population of West African migrants desperate to get to Europe to start a new life.

Many are in Arlit on their way to the Algerian border, some 200km (120 miles) away - and many are stranded in the town after being sent back by Algeria.

A Togolese couple, Ickbal and Yasmine, queued for help at a centre set up by the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM).

"We have nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat, it's very difficult," said Ickbal, a student.

"I have been asking for food for my fiancée from our Nigerian brothers. They are very kind, but we can't do this all the time."

"We don't have the additional money to cope with the extra needs in terms of sanitation or schooling - it goes beyond our budget," said Arlit's mayor, Abdourahmane Mouali.

"But the migrants are there and we have to deal with the situation, if only from a humanitarian point of view."

In 2015, Niger approved a law based on the 2000 Palermo Convention on human trafficking, criminalising support for illegal border crossings and for unauthorised stays on its territory.

AFP

Macron praised in China for Taiwan comments

His suggestion that Europe not ‘follow’ US policy on Taiwan is being hailed as a ‘brilliant decision’

Beijing, China - Emmanuel Macron's unexpected suggestion that Europe not 'follow' US policy on Taiwan is being hailed as a 'brilliant decision' this week in China, where state news outlets and social media users are lauding his independence.

The French president sowed confusion across the international community - and left Western allies bristling - after calling for 'strategic autonomy' on Taiwan following last week's trip to China, where he met with President Xi Jinping.

The 45-year-old Macron enjoyed a rockstar reception during his three-day visit, including being mobbed by selfie-chasing students in the southern city of Guangzhou, and local media has covered his subsequent comments widely, focusing on the phrase 'strategic autonomy'.

An opinion piece published Monday by the Chinese Communist Party-run *Global Times* said the comments were 'clearly the result of Macron's long-term observation and reflection' and represented a path that was 'relatively objective, rational and in line with Europe's own interests'.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron speak as they visit the garden of the residence of the Governor of Guangdong, on April 7 (AFP)

Some people want to construct a false Europe in public opinion, masking true European voices and interests," the article added.

Chen Weihua, Brussels bureau chief for state-run *China Daily*, wrote on Twitter that 'Macron's words about EU strategic autonomy and resisting a new Cold War and decoupling will also prove to be a brilliant decision'.

Beijing, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory to one day be taken back, has long sought to break Western resolve on the thorny issue.

And Macron's recent words on distancing Europe from

Washington on the subject of Taiwan suggest China's efforts might be having some success.

"Daring to talk openly about autonomy," commented a user of social media site Weibo under a news article on Macron, 'Europe has progressed'.

'Brilliant decision'

While the reputations of most Western leaders in China have suffered in recent years, Macron enjoys a largely favourable public image - an attitude made evident by the hordes of students in Guangzhou.

Europe's arrogance and inaction for many years have led to extreme strategic passivity, being pulled along by the US."

Beijing also on Wednesday praised Macron's remarks, saying it was 'not surprised' by the negative reaction from some in the West.

"Some countries do not want to see other nations become independent and self-reliant, and instead always want to coerce other countries into obeying their will," foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told a regular briefing.

pered by more sober voices contending that geopolitical realities necessitate that France and Europe remain largely aligned with the United States.

Hu Xijin, a prominent political commentator and former editor-in-chief of the *Global Times*, wrote Monday on Weibo that - despite Macron's rosy comments - it was 'unrealistic' for China to think France would side with it in future confrontations with Washington.

Europe and the United States 'have shared values and are bound together by NATO', wrote Hu.

"But we can firmly believe that as long as China treats European countries reasonably and fairly while the US forces them to oppose China, conflicts between their strategic interests will rise to the surface."

Other online commentators were more cynical about the reasoning behind Macron's comments. "What's the use?" wrote one Weibo user. "He'll say one thing when he comes here to earn economic benefits, then do another when he gets the money. It's been like this for decades."

AFP

Some countries do not want to see other nations become independent and self-reliant, and instead always want to coerce other countries into obeying their will

WANG WENBIN



A simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas on Tuesday (AFP)

NASA unveils 'Mars' habitat for experiments on Earth for a year

Houston, US - Four small rooms, a gym and a lot of red sand - NASA unveiled on Tuesday its new Mars-simulation habitat, in which volunteers will live for a year at a time to test what life will be like on future missions to Earth's neighbour.

The facility, created for three planned experiments called the Crew Health and Performance Exploration Analog (CHAPEA), is located at the US space agency's massive research base in Houston, Texas.

Four volunteers will begin the first trial this summer, during which NASA plans to monitor their physical and mental health to better understand humans' fortitude for such a long isolation.

With that data, NASA will better understand astronauts' 'resource use' on Mars, said Grace Douglas, lead researcher on the CHAPEA experiments.

"We can really start to understand how we're supporting them with what we're providing them, and that's going to be really important information to making those critical resource decisions," she said on a press tour of the habitat.

Such a distant mission comes with 'very strict mass limitations', she added.

The volunteers will live inside a 1,700 square-foot (160 sqm) home, dubbed 'Mars Dune Alpha', which includes two bathrooms, a vertical farm to grow salad, a room dedicated to medical care, an area for relaxing and several workstations.

An airlock leads to an 'out-

door' reconstruction of the Martian environment - though still located inside the hangar.

Several pieces of equipment astronauts would likely use are scattered around the red sand-covered floor, including a weather station, a brick-making machine and a small greenhouse.

There is also a treadmill on which the make-believe astronauts will walk suspended from straps to simulate the red planet's lesser gravity.

"We really can't have them just walking around in circles for six hours," joked Suzanne Bell, head of NASA's Behavioural Health and Performance Laboratory. Four volunteers will use the treadmill to simulate long trips outside to collect samples, gathering data or building infrastructure, she said.

The members of the first experiment team have yet to be named, but the agency stated that selection 'will follow standard NASA criteria for astronaut candidate applicants', with a heavy emphasis on backgrounds in science, technology, engineering and math.

Researchers will regularly test the crew's response to stressful situations, such as restricting water availability or equipment failures.

The habitat has another special feature: it was 3D-printed.

"That is one of the technologies that NASA is looking at as a potential to build habitat on other planetary or lunar surfaces," Douglas said.

AFP

Ex-teen idol alleges sex abuse by Japan music mogul

Tokyo, Japan - A former teen idol on Wednesday said he was repeatedly sexually assaulted by Johnny Kitagawa, the founder of Japan's biggest boyband empire, in a rare public allegation against the late mogul.

The talent agency Johnny and Associates, which was established by Kitagawa and has dominated the country's showbiz industry for decades, did not respond to multiple requests for comment from AFP.

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, which hosted a press conference by the accuser, Kauan Okamoto, said the company also failed to respond to its invitations to comment.

Kitagawa died of a stroke aged 87 in 2019, having engi-



Japanese-Brazilian singer Kauan Okamoto holds a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo on Wednesday (AFP)

neered the birth of J-pop megagroups including SMAP, TOKIO and Arashi, who amassed adoring fans across Asia.

His young recruits were known collectively as 'Johnny's

Jrs', and flocked to Kitagawa in the hopes of making it big in the lucrative J-pop industry.

Japanese-Brazilian singer Okamoto said he was molested by Kitagawa '15 to 20' times dur-

Quake-prone Bucharest in Romania trembles over unsteady buildings

Bucharest, Romania - Many people in Bucharest still have terrible memories of the earthquake that shook Romania on March 4, 1977, killing 1,500 and injuring 11,000 others.

Images of the devastation in Turkey and Syria have revived old fears in the EU's most earthquake-prone capital, which experts say remains completely unprepared for big tremors.

"We are very vulnerable," said Matei Sumbasacu, founder of the Re:Rise group that is pushing to make the city more earthquake safe. "We didn't solve this problem, we didn't treat it seriously for decades and we're not ready for it, it's as simple as that," said the 34-year-old engineer.

Bucharest is close to the Vrancea earthquake zone, which experts say is capable of producing shocks as high as 8.1 on the Richter scale, worse even than the Turkey quake.

Five earthquakes since 1802 have been worse than magnitude 7.5. Yet many buildings damaged by the 1977 quake, which was registered at 7.2, are still being used, with other rickety blocks covered in protective nets or draped with tarpaulins.

2,500 dangerous blocks

The city has deemed some 2,500



An interbellic block of flats with a red sign indicating that the building has been classified as seismic risk class I is seen in Bucharest on March 18 (AFP)

buildings dangerous, according to Bucharest town hall official Razvan Munteanu.

These include 368 at very high risk, which have a red plaque fixed to the outside walls.

But because of the colossal costs, only 32 have been consolidated to date from public funds, Munteanu told AFP.

While the pace of reinforcement work has picked up a little in recent years under Mayor Nicusor Dan, it remains very slow - with only two projects underway in the city.

Work to consolidate 100 more

buildings should soon start after a long and bureaucratic process.

"You have to consult the inhabitants, do the feasibility studies, identify the solutions, and find the companies that will carry out the work," Munteanu said.

Next to a large Bucharest park, work on a 100-apartment block from the late 1930s, which bears the red warning plaque, is scheduled to begin next year.

Building administrator Ioan Boinegri, 76, said some residents, especially older ones, are reluctant to move.

"They don't know (yet) where

they are going to be relocated... The inhabitants' greatest fear is that they won't be able to come back," Boinegri told AFP.

Cosmetic repairs

After the 1977 disaster, the then communist regime just carried out cosmetic repairs to facades to save money, according to Sumbasacu.

He recently accessed transcripts which showed dictator Nicolae Ceausescu ordering a halt to reinforcement works a few months after the earthquake.

To reassure the population, Ceausescu put out lots of false information, leaving an 'inheritance of seismic mythology, stories to help us sleep at night in our unsafe houses', Sumbasacu said. The 7.8-magnitude quake and aftershocks that struck southeastern Turkey and northern Syria in February killing more than 50,000 people, reawakened dormant fears.

Major tremors in south-west Romania, shortly afterwards caused panic in the region, which usually doesn't suffer from earthquakes. "There's a growing realisation that something needs to be done," Sumbasacu said, warning a new big earthquake in Bucharest could be more deadly than the 1977 one.

AFP

US spying: S Korea opposition seeks probe

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea's opposition urged the government on Wednesday to investigate alleged espionage by the United States after leaked documents appeared to show Washington spying on its key Asian ally.

A trove of highly sensitive US intelligence that has emerged online included revelations that Washington had been spying on President Yoon Suk Yeol's national security advisors as part of an effort to secure arms supplies for Ukraine.

Seoul sought to downplay the importance of the leaked documents on Tuesday, with Yoon's office claiming 'a significant number' of the documents were fake.

"The government must get to the bottom of eavesdropping allegations and if they are found to be true, it must get an official apology and guarantee that it won't do it again from the US," Lee Jae-myung, head of the opposition Democratic party, said on Wednesday.

AFP

Biden under political fire in North Ireland

Joe Biden urged political compromise in Northern Ireland, but faced criticism from pro-UK hardliners

Belfast, UK - US President Joe Biden urged political compromise in Northern Ireland on Wednesday, using a brief visit to promote the benefits of enduring peace and investment, but faced heated criticism from pro-UK hardliners.

"I hope the (Northern Ireland) Executive and Assembly will soon be restored," Biden said in a speech at Ulster University, urging feuding political leaders to restore power-sharing government which has been suspended since February last year.

Biden touted the 'unlimited possibilities' for investment and growth offered in the UK-ruled territory, 25 years on from a historic peace deal brokered by the US government.

But peace and stability must always be guarded, he added, saying the January 6, 2021, riot at Congress in Washington had proved that in every generation, 'democracy needs champions'.

The Irish-American president met Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who declared the UK's relationship with the US was 'in great shape'. Biden also greeted local political leaders ahead of his speech.

He said on Tuesday that the priority for his trip - which includes three days in his ancestral homeland, the Republic of Ireland - was 'to keep the peace' in Northern Ireland.

But senior figures in the pro-UK Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is under pressure to resume local power-sharing, were strikingly undiplomatic about the president.

Sammy Wilson, a DUP mem-



US President Joe Biden reacts as he meets with Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in Belfast on Wednesday, as part of a four day trip to Northern Ireland (AFP)

The president has been very actively engaged throughout his career, dating back to when he was a senator, in the peace process in Northern Ireland

AMANDA SLOAT

ber of the UK parliament in Westminster, branded Biden 'anti-British', accusing America's second Catholic president of having 'made his antipathy towards Protestants in particular very well known'.

Another DUP lawmaker, Nigel

Dodds, suggested any mediation efforts would prove futile.

"Pressure from an American administration which is so transparently pro-nationalist constitutes no pressure on us at all," he told the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper.

'Part of my soul'

Devolved government in Belfast is a key plank of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, but it collapsed 14 months ago over the DUP's opposition to post-Brexit trade arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Despite Britain and the European Union agreeing to overhaul them earlier this year, the party is yet to back the new trading terms and allow the restoration of Belfast's Stormont legislature.

Nonetheless, Biden's visit marked the 'tremendous progress' since the accords

largely ended armed conflict between pro-Irish and pro-British militants in April 1998, the White House said.

Biden's defenders note that his delegation includes Joe Kennedy III, a scion of the Irish-American Kennedy clan, who was appointed special envoy for economic affairs in Northern Ireland. He will remain in Belfast for several days.

"I think the track record of the president shows that he's not anti-British," Amanda Sloat, National Security Council Senior Director for Europe, told reporters

on Wednesday.

"The president has been very actively engaged throughout his career, dating back to when he was a senator, in the peace process in Northern Ireland."

Less than 24 hours after arriving in Northern Ireland, Biden was heading on to Ireland, which he says is 'part of my soul', paying visits to the hometowns of his 19th-century ancestors.

Pipe bombs

Sectarian violence remains a concern north of the border, with Britain's MI5 security agency el-

evating its terrorism threat level for the territory ahead of Biden's visit.

On Monday, masked youths pelted police vehicles with petrol bombs during an illegal march by hardline nationalists in Londonderry, which is also known as Derry.

Police in Northern Ireland on Tuesday said that four suspected pipe bombs had been retrieved from a cemetery in the Creggan area of the city.

"All of these devices were located in the same area where clothes worn by participants in (Monday's) unnotified Easter parade were removed under the cover of umbrellas and burnt," officers said.

Biden brushed off any security concerns and saw up close how much redevelopment has transformed Belfast since 1998.

The five-star hotel in Belfast where he stayed only opened in 2018.

Before 1998, the only place for visiting dignitaries to stay was the nearby Europa, which was attacked so often by the Irish Republican Army paramilitary group that it became known as the most bombed hotel in Europe.

Deirdre Heenan, professor of social policy at Ulster University, told AFP that DUP hardliners were 'uncomfortable with how he (Biden) wears his Irishness on his sleeve'.

But she added: "We cannot afford to turn our back on such an engaged advocate for a small place, and one who has just appointed an economic envoy."

AFP

4 soldiers dead in shooting at Indian military base

New Delhi, India - Four soldiers were shot dead on Wednesday in a pre-dawn incident at a military base in northern India, an army statement said.

The incident was reported around 4:35am (1105 GMT) at the Bathinda military station in Punjab, a northern state where tensions have been high over the local resurgence of a separatist movement.

"The area continues to be sealed off and joint investigations with Punjab Police are being co-ordinated to establish the facts of the case," the army statement said.

Bathinda's top police official G.S. Khurana told broadcaster NDTV that the incident did not appear to be a terror attack.

State police and India's defence ministry did not respond to AFP requests for comment.

AFP

Ukraine asks India for aid in first dialogue since Russian invasion

New Delhi, India - A Ukrainian minister ended a visit to India on Wednesday after appealing for humanitarian aid and diplomatic backing from New Delhi, which has avoided condemning Russia's invasion of its European neighbour.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has walked a tightrope between India's increased security cooperation with Western countries and its reliance on Moscow for defence and oil imports. Emine Dzhaparova, Kyiv's first deputy foreign minister, met her Indian counterpart this week in the first face-to-face talks between the two countries since the conflict began last year.

Dzhaparova requested medicines and medical equipment and passed along a letter from



Ukraine's First Deputy Foreign Minister Emine Dzhaparova speaks during a talk in New Delhi on Tuesday (ANI)

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed to Modi, a statement from India's foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

"Ms Dzhaparova, during her visit, highlighted Ukraine's de-

sire to build a stronger and closer relationship with India," it said. Dzhaparova told a think tank in New Delhi on Tuesday she believed India could play a greater role in ending the war.

"We welcome any effort that is directed at resolving the war," she told the audience, urging India to use this year's G20 presidency to draw attention to the conflict. India has stopped short of publicly denouncing the invasion but Modi told Russian President Vladimir Putin last year this was 'not a time for war', comments seen as a rebuke to Moscow.

India's long-standing security ties with Russia have put New Delhi in an awkward diplomatic position and, while it has called for an end to hostilities in Ukraine, it has refused to condemn the invasion outright.

India is also snapping up discounted crude from Russia, resisting Western pressure to freeze out Moscow.

AFP

Taliban say ban on Afghan women working for UN 'an internal issue'

Kabul, Afghanistan - A ban on Afghan women working for the United Nations was an internal issue, the country's Taliban authorities said on Wednesday, adding that the decision 'should be respected by all sides'.

Taliban authorities triggered international outrage earlier this month after extending a December ban on Afghan women working for non-governmental organisations to the UN.

"The Islamic Emirate does not want to create obstacles for the United Nations," Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Rather, it wants to make it clear that this is an internal issue of Afghanistan which does not create a problem for anyone and should be respected by all sides."

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

The UN said on Tuesday the ban was forcing it to make an 'appalling choice' on whether to continue operations in Afghanistan.

The world body said it cannot comply with the ban as it was 'unlawful under international law, including the UN Charter'.

Mujahid, however, said there was no 'discrimination' in the decision.

"On the contrary, consider-

ing the religious and cultural interests, we are committed to all the rights of our people.'

The increasing curbs on women are reminiscent of the Taliban's first government between 1996 and 2001, when the UN said they were responsible for repeated human rights violations - particularly against girls and women.

Since the ban was announced, the UN has ordered all its Afghan staff - men and

The world body said on Tuesday that it cannot comply with the ban as it was unlawful under the UN Charter

women - not to report to work until further notice.

Taliban authorities justified the December ban on the grounds they had received 'serious complaints' that women were not observing the group's interpretation of Islamic dress codes.

Several NGOs suspended operations in the country in protest, piling further misery on Afghanistan's citizens - half of whom face hunger, according to aid agencies. Mujahid said Afghans had the 'capacity to stand on their own feet', but the country's problems were caused by sanctions and restrictions on the financial and banking system.

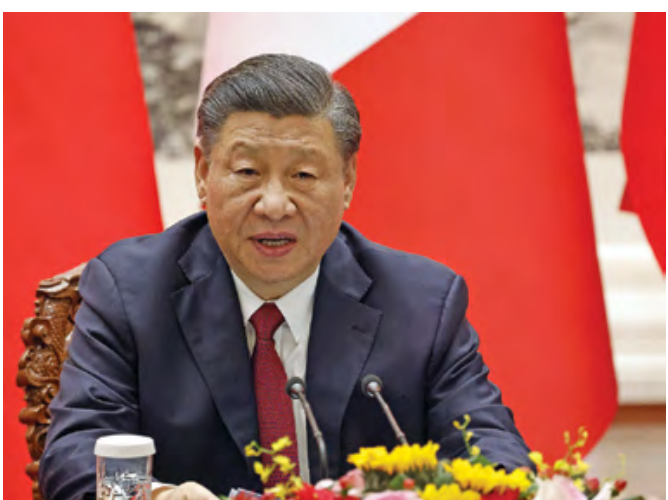
AFP

'China must strengthen training for actual combat'

Beijing, China - China's President Xi Jinping called on the country's armed forces to 'strengthen military training oriented towards actual combat', state media reported on Wednesday, after Beijing conducted military drills intended to intimidate Taiwan.

Xi's comments, made on a naval inspection trip on Tuesday, come amid heightened tension in the region after the show of force by Beijing, which sees self-ruled Taiwan as its territory.

China on Monday concluded three days of military drills launched in response to a visit last week by Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen to the United States, where she met a bipartisan group of lawmakers and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.



Xi Jinping said the military must resolutely defend China's territorial sovereignty and maritime interests (AFP)

Xi on Tuesday told the People's Liberation Army's Southern Theatre Command Navy that the

military must 'resolutely defend China's territorial sovereignty and maritime interests, and

strive to protect overall peripheral stability', state broadcaster CCTV reported.

Beijing has also criticised a plan for US forces to use a growing number of bases in the Philippines, including one near Taiwan.

The United States and the Philippines are holding their largest-ever joint military drills this week, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken committing to 'standing with the Philippines against any intimidation or coercion, including in the South China Sea'.

Xi added Tuesday that China must be 'innovative in its concepts and methods of combat'.

China and Taiwan split following a civil war in 1949.

Beijing views the democratic island as part of its territory and has vowed to take it one day, stepping up its rhetoric and military activity around the island in recent years.

The PLA simulated targeted strikes and a blockade of Taiwan during its recent three-day 'Joint Sword' exercise.

Taiwan's defence ministry said it continued to detect Chinese warships and aircraft around the island even after drills officially concluded.

Beijing warned this week that Taiwanese independence and cross-strait peace were 'mutually exclusive', blaming Taipei and unnamed 'foreign forces' supporting it for the tensions.

AFP

OCT RUWI CHAMPIONS

Wasim Al Balushi-led team win All Omani T20 tournament, OCT Mabela finish runners up

Muscat - OCT Ruwi emerged champions of the All Omani T20 tournament at Oman Cricket Academy on Tuesday.

The tournament, held during the holy month of Ramadan, was played in a round-robin format between eight All Omani teams.

OCT Ruwi, led by Wasim Al Balushi, remained unbeaten. OCT Mabela, led by Asif Al Balushi finished as runners up after winning five of their six games, losing only to the champions in the league stage.

OCT captain Wasim Al Balushi was delighted with the triumph. "We have always believed in ourselves and that I think is our team's strength. We have claimed Runners Up for the A Division and came with a lot of confidence behind our back. I am proud of the way we played throughout the tournament. I laud all the teams for composing such teams that have kept the



OCT Ruwi, who won the All Omani T20 tournament, and runners up OCT Mabela

tournament competing as ever and challenging at all stages, said Wasim Al Balushi.

"We would also thank Oman

Cricket and its board for organising such a fantastic extravaganza. We aspire to have more locals taking up Cricket and to

represent Oman at the highest level in the sport," he added.

Paul Sheridan , Vice Chairman - Oman Cricket and Younis



Sakhi, Board Advisor - Oman Cricket were present at the closing ceremony of the tournament and handed the trophies.

Zubair Ali Akbar Al Balushi bagged the Best Batsman award with 243 runs. Haythim Bahar Ali picked up 14 wickets to claim

the Best Bowler trophy.

Zubair Ali Akbar Al Balushi was also adjudged the Player of the Tournament.

Inter close in on Champions League semis with solid win at Benfica

Lisbon, Portugal - Inter Milan put one foot into the Champions League semi-finals with a comfortable 2-0 win at Benfica on Tuesday, with Nicolo Barella and Romelu Lukaku netting in Lisbon.

The Italians, three-time winners, took a commanding quarter-final first leg lead at the Estadio da Luz, inflicting Benfica's first defeat in the competition.

After an even first half, Barella headed home from Alessandro Bastoni's cross and substitute Romelu Lukaku netted the second from the penalty spot late on.

Roger Schmidt's Benfica, aiming to reach the semi-finals for the first time since 1990, were not able to put a glove on the visitors, who controlled the pace of the game.

Despite Inter's poor form, they conjured a patient, professional display when they needed it most.

Having scored two goals in their previous five games across all competitions, they managed the same tally in Lisbon with clinical finishing.

"It's been one of our best games this season," Inter midfielder Henrikh Mkhitaryan told



Inter Milan's Romelu Lukaku (3R) celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Benfica in their UEFA Champions League match in Lisbon on Tuesday (AFP)

British broadcaster BT Sport.

"We were dominating all over the pitch. We were doubling up and were everywhere, helping each other and we got (rewarded) for it. We've done a great job.

"But it's still not over, we still have to face them in a week and we know it's not going to be easy."

Neither side was able to create clear chances in a tight opening

period. The closest Benfica came was Andre Onana blocking a Rafa Silva drive after Federico Dimarco accidentally headed the ball into his path in the box.

Inter Milan defender Francesco Acerbi hammered over from 30 yards at the other end.

The Italians had the opportunity to hit the hosts on the break after half an hour, but Lautaro Martinez played a poor pass

which was blocked, with 37-year-old target man Edin Dzeko alone in space.

Alex Grimaldo smashed an effort wide from distance, with Benfica frustrated and unable to get striker Goncalo Ramos involved.

With Inter pressing high up the pitch, the Eagles could not hit their flowing best, or anything close to it.

AFP

Turkey only rival to UK and Ireland Euro 2028 bid

Paris, France - Turkey is the only rival to the UK and Ireland candidacy to host the 2028 European Championship, UEFA announced on Wednesday after receiving final bids from interested countries.

European football's governing body said that Turkey would go up against the joint bid from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to host Euro 2028 and that Turkey is also a candidate to host Euro 2032. Italy is the only other bidder for the hosting rights to the 2032 tournament.

"In the forthcoming months, the UEFA administration will evaluate each of the bids, with the UEFA Executive Committee to vote on who has won the right to host both editions in October," the body said in a statement.

The British and Irish joint bid for Euro 2028 is the favourite after the countries abandoned plans to run for the

2030 World Cup.

Wembley, the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, Newcastle's St James' Park, Birmingham's Villa Park and Everton's new stadium in Liverpool would host matches in England, as would Manchester City's Etihad Stadium.

The Principality Stadium in Cardiff, Hampden Park in Glasgow, Dublin's Lansdowne Road and Casement Park in Belfast are the other venues being proposed in the bid.

The English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and Irish football associations said in a joint statement: "High-capacity, world-famous football grounds and state-of-the-art new venues will provide the platform for the biggest and most commercially successful UEFA EURO ever -- making us a low risk, high reward host."

The bid carries the slogan "Football for all, football for good, football for the future."

AFP



Michael Jordan's sneakers

Michael Jordan sneakers fetch auction record \$2.2 mn

New York, United States - A pair of sneakers worn by NBA superstar Michael Jordan sold for \$2.2 million on Tuesday, setting a record price at auction for game-worn sports footwear, Sotheby's announced.

The basketball great wore the "Bred" Air Jordan 13s during Game 2 of the 1998 NBA Finals on the way to his sixth and last NBA championship title.

The online sale cements Jordan's position as the most valuable athlete at auctions for sportswear memorabilia.

It broke his own record of \$1.5 million for sneakers, set in September 2021.

Last year, one of his jerseys sold for \$10.1 million, the most ever paid at auction for any game-worn collectibles.

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تاريخ تقديم الطلب : 06/03/2023

اسم طالب التسجيل : المحمول للمناولة العالمية
تصنيف : 39 خدمات النقل ، نقل الرسائل أو البضائع تغليف ، البضائع تغليف السلع ، تخزين البضائع
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TODAYS MATCH

MATCH 18

6 PM

PUNJAB KINGS

GUJARAT TITANS

Shastri frustrated with Indian quicks' recurring injuries

Mumbai, India - Ravi Shastri feels the frequent and recurring injuries to senior Indian bowlers is "unreal", "ridiculous" and "frustrating".

Shastri's comments came while discussing the latest injury to **Deepak Chahar**, who bowled just one over before pulling out of Chennai Super Kings' IPL match against Mumbai Indians after picking up a left hamstring injury.

"Let's put it this way: there are quite a few in the last three or four years who are permanent residents of the NCA," Shastri said on ESPNcricinfo's T20 Time:Out show ahead of Super Kings's home match against Rajasthan Royals on Wednesday. "Soon, they'll get a resident permit there to walk in any time they want, which is not a good thing at all. It's unreal."

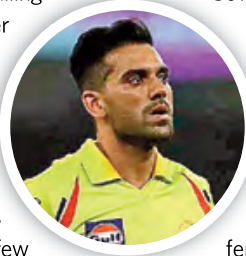
This was the second time in the last five months Chahar has had to leave a game without finishing his four overs because of hamstring problems.

In the second ODI against Bangladesh in Mirpur last December, Chahar pulled out after bowling three overs.

He then returned to the BCCI's National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru, his base for the majority of 2022 after he suffered a Grade 3 quadriceps tear last February.

Chahar is not the only Indian quick to have been sidelined for long periods because of recurring injuries: Jasprit Bumrah, Navdeep Saini, Kuldeep Sen, Mohsin Khan and Yash Dayal have all been out of action for varying stretches of late.

ESPNcricinfo



RAJASTHAN KEEP CALM UNDER DHONI PRESSURE TO MOVE TO THE TOP

MATCH 17

Yuzvendra Chahal (L) had plenty to celebrate in Rajasthan Royals' three-run victory against Chennai Super Kings on Wednesday. Chahal and Ravichandran Ashwin made life extremely difficult for Chennai batters and after the dismissal of Devon Conway for 50 they lost their way a bit against the menacing bowling attack of Rajasthan, for whom the spin twins took two wickets each. Though MS Dhoni and Ravindra Jadeja took the attack to Rajasthan towards the end of the match, it was Sanju Samson and Co who had the last laugh. The win helped Rajasthan move to the top of the table with six points.

WHERE IS THE REAL WARNER?

Sluggish Australian opener under fire in IPL after Delhi lose again

New Delhi, India - David Warner is under fire in the Indian Premier League after the Australian's Delhi Capitals lost for a fourth time in as many matches and sit bottom of the pile.

The opening batsman and skipper has hit three half-centuries in this year's edition of the Twenty20 tournament but his runs have come at a sluggish strike rate of 114.83.

At his explosive best, the 36-year-old left-hander is a match-winner. He boasts a strike rate of 141.30 in his 99 T20 innings for Australia.

But he cannot get going in this year's IPL and his snail-paced 51 runs off 47 deliveries in Tuesday's last-ball loss to the Mumbai Indians did little to quell concerns about his decline.



Delhi Capital's David Warner walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal in the match against Mumbai Indians at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi on Tuesday (AFP)

The once-destructive Australian appears laboured, even nervous.

"Even in the last couple of games, when he has been trying to hit, it's not been coming off," deputy skipper Axar Patel told reporters after the agonising defeat to five-time champions Mumbai.

"As a batsman, I don't know what he is thinking at that moment."

Warner's innings got a boost in a 67-run sixth-wicket stand with Axar, who smashed a 25-ball 54, but Delhi were all out for 172 and their opponents went on to win by six wickets.

Delhi are bottom of the 10 teams in the IPL and the only side yet to win a match.

Axar said that Warner has spoken to Ricky Ponting and Shane Watson, two Australian

greats on Delhi's coaching staff, as he bids to get firing again.

He has also been counselled by former Indian Test captain Sourav Ganguly, Delhi's director of cricket. "The conversation about his strike rate also came up. They looked at his videos and he's working on it," said Axar.

Pundits have been scathing in their assessment of Warner's struggles.

"I feel it is time that we tell him in English now so that Warner listens to it and feels hurt," former India opener Virender Sehwag told Cricbuzz after the weekend's 57-run loss to Rajasthan Royals.

Warner made 65 in 55 balls before Delhi went down tamely in their chase of 200 in Guwahati.

"David, if you are listening, please play well... If you cannot do that, do not come and play in the IPL," said Sehwag.

Renowned commentator Harsha Bhogle responded to Tuesday's knock from the veteran opener by lamenting how difficult it was to watch "the great David Warner struggle".

AFP

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BAYERN PUT TO THE SWORD

Haaland hits 45 as Man City make mark against the Germans

Manchester, United Kingdom - Erling Haaland scored his 45th goal of the season as Manchester City took a commanding 3-0 lead over Bayern Munich from their Champions League quarter-final, first leg on Tuesday.

Rodri and Bernardo Silva were also on target for the English champions, who took a giant stride towards finally conquering Europe for the first time.

Victory was sweet for City boss Pep Guardiola as he came up against his former club for the first time since leaving Bayern for Manchester in 2016, but he warned that the job is not yet done.

"I've been three years there and I know in Europe this team is special. To knockout these type of teams you have to make two good games not just one," said Guardiola.

"I know exactly what we have to do there, They are capable to score one, two, three goals. We have to do our game with huge personality."

City also partially settled a Champions League score with Bayern boss Thomas Tuchel, who beat Guardiola's men to lift the trophy as Chelsea manager in the 2021 final.

Tuchel was appointed less



Manchester City's Erling Haaland scores against Bayern Munich in their UEFA Champions League match at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester on Tuesday (AFP)

than three weeks ago by the German champions with one eye on this tie and he believed his side deserved more.

"I try to not allow my players to focus on the result because it is not the deserved result, it does not tell the story of this match," said Tuchel. "I've seen so many good things that I refuse to just focus on the result. You may say 'that's not Bayern' but I was very

proud on the sideline, we were courageous and showed the right character."

City fought off interest from Bayern among other European giants to win the race to sign Haaland a year ago for nights like this and the Norwegian played his part in a clinical performance.

Haaland uncharacteristically fluffed his lines with the first big chance of the game when his

weak shot was straight at Yann Sommer.

At the other end, City were grateful to a brilliant block from Ruben Dias to prevent Jamal Musiala putting Bayern in front.

Rodri then showed the forwards how it is done as the Spaniard took aim from long range on his weaker left foot and curled a sumptuous shot into the top corner on 27 minutes.

City turn the screw

Bayern picked up Sommer in the January window as an emergency measure after Manuel Neuer's season was ended by a skiing accident.

The Swiss international proved the value of that move with a number of vital saves to keep Bayern in the tie, starting with an outstretched leg to deny Ilkay Gundogan.

But Bayern were made to regret not making their bright start to the second period count.

Leroy Sane twice came close to haunting his former club with powerful efforts that were beaten away by Ederson before Matthijs de Ligt and Kingsley Coman had headers from close range blocked by desperate City defending.

Instead, City turned the screw



To knockout these type of teams you have to make two good games not just one

PEP GUARDIOLA

in the final quarter to take a potentially decisive lead to Bavaria next week.

Haaland showed there is more to his game than goals with a perfectly weighted cross for Silva to head in City's second 20 minutes from time.

Sommer then produced a fine stop low to his left to turn Julian Alvarez's shot to safety.

But City were not to be denied their third and Haaland his goal as he stretched out a telescopic right leg to turn John Stones' knockdown beyond Sommer.

Alvarez fired another effort inches wide and Sommer needed finger tips to turn over Rodri's header as City went in search of a final flourish.

But Bayern will need one of the Champions League's all-time great comebacks in eight days' time if City are to be denied a third consecutive semi-final.

AFP

Tuchel's Bayern to 'keep going' after Man City demolition

Berlin, Germany - Bayern Munich manager Thomas Tuchel held hope of a miracle comeback after his side's 3-0 loss to Manchester City on Tuesday in the Champions League quarter final, first leg.

Bayern host Man City in next Wednesday's return leg and despite the thrashing Tuchel said the outing at the Etihad Stadium was "fun".

"Today I felt a bit of a shock with how much I'm in love with my team," Tuchel told Amazon Prime.

"It was a lot of fun today. How we did it, we were strong, we were emotional, we were clever."

The loss was Bayern's worst in the Champions League since 2017, when they were hammered 3-0 by Paris Saint-Germain.

In April 2014, they lost 4-0 to Real Madrid.

Tuchel was coaching his fourth match - and first Champions League game - in the Bayern dugout, having been brought in to replace Julian Nagelsmann during the international break.



Bayern Munich coach Thomas Tuchel gestures on the touchline during their match against Manchester City

"I saw a great performance until the 60th minute... We are missing a bit of form and a bit of trust," Tuchel said.

"You need a bit of luck in games like this, a deflection, something like that which would have changed the momentum."

Tuchel, who won the Champions League in 2021 as coach of Chelsea against a Pep Guardiola-led Manchester City, said his side "needed to first digest it... but football is football."

"I know it sounds a bit silly, but I really think we deserved a result

today. We'll keep going."

Tuchel said Bayern could do little about City's first goal, which "came from less than half a chance."

"He (Rodri) scored from his wrong foot and from well outside the goal."

Man United visit offers Europa League kings Sevilla redemption

Barcelona, Spain - Visiting Manchester United might seem a nightmare cup draw but for Europa League royalty Sevilla, a trip to hallowed turf like Old Trafford on Thursday provides a welcome break from reality.

The Andalucians, led by Jose Luis Mendilibar - their third coach of the season - have been mired in a relegation scrap in La Liga, but find themselves on more familiar ground in Europe.

Record six-time Europa League champions, Sevilla's players are more accustomed to battling for silverware than survival, and have shown signs of improvement under Mendilibar. That give them some hope of overcoming Erik ten Hag's three-time European Cup winners in the last eight, which would earn redemption with supporters after a year to forget.

"I'm convinced that, in Europe, Sevilla are respected more than in La Liga, because of what they have done in the Europa League, with a lot of titles quite recently," said Mendilibar in March after



Luis Mendilibar

taking over from Jorge Sampaoli.

"In Manchester they will feel they are favourites, but with respect for Sevilla."

Behind Sevilla, Inter Milan, Liverpool, Juventus and Atletico Madid have each won the trophy three times, while Manchester United lifted it once, in 2017.

Despite holding their own against such esteemed company on the continent, domestically Sevilla have fallen and are currently 13th, five points above the bottom three.

"(We're doing) quite well in European competition, unlike the national league, sadly," said veteran midfielder Ivan Rakitic told UEFA.

"But we know Sevilla's overall history in Europe."

Sevilla's struggle started when the club's poor financial state forced them to sell key defenders Jules Kounde and Diego Carlos to Barcelona and Aston Villa respectively, ripping in half one of the continent's sturdiest backlines.

Vela at the double as LAFC cruise into Champions League semis

Los Angeles, United States - Carlos Vela scored twice as Los Angeles FC cruised into the semi-finals of the CONCACAF Champions League on Tuesday with a 3-0 victory over the Vancouver Whitecaps.

The Major League Soccer champions had all but assured themselves of a place in the last four after a ruthless 3-0 first-leg win in Vancouver last week.

And any Canadian hopes of a second-leg miracle in California on Tuesday were snuffed out

rapidly by Steve Cherundolo's in-form Los Angeles side.

Vela opened the scoring after just eight minutes, burying a penalty to put LAFC 4-0 up on aggregate after Gabon international Denis Bouanga was brought down in the area.

Barcelona-born Ilie Sanchez set up Vela's second just after the half-hour mark, picking the LAFC captain out with a superb pass from midfield that split the Vancouver defense.

Vela controlled on his chest



Carlos Vela

Los Angeles could face old rivals Philadelphia Union in the semi-finals, who they beat in last year's MLS Cup final to win the domestic championship

and then rifled in a low finish to make it 2-0 on the night, 5-0 overall.

Ecuador international Jose Cifuentes put the seal on the win with a spectacular long-range strike in the 65th minute.

Los Angeles could face old ri-

vals Philadelphia Union in the semi-finals, who they beat in last year's MLS Cup final to win the domestic championship.

Philadelphia lead Mexico's Atlas 1-0 after last week's home first leg. Union face a challenging trip to Mexico on Wednes-

day for the second leg.

On the other side of the draw on Tuesday, Mexico's Leon suffered an upset 2-1 defeat to Haitian side Violette but still progressed comfortably to the last four, winning 6-2 on aggregate. Leon had put themselves on pole position to advance after thrashing the Haitians 5-0 in the first leg last week. Leon will face either fellow Mexican side Tigres UANL or Motagua from Honduras in the last four.

AFP

cook-up

Britain
finding a
soft spot for
homemade
cheese

Brie & Camembert



Stacey Hedges, owner and founder of the Hampshire Cheese Company carries boxes of Tunworth cheese to an awaiting delivery van

“I never thought it would be as big as this,” says Stacey Hedges of her booming French-style cheese business, as another lorryload leaves the green Hampshire countryside for some of Britain’s finest restaurants. Former chef Hedges founded the Hampshire Cheese Company in 2005 and started producing Tunworth, a Camembert-style handmade cheese. She is one of the dozens of entrepreneurs who have gone into cheese-making across England, Scotland and Wales.

As a result, the country now produces a wider variety of soft cheeses alongside traditional British hard cheeses such as Stilton and Cheddar. France, the “country of a thousand cheeses”, is often a source of inspiration.

Nine employees work in Hedges’s creamery near Basingstoke in England’s southern Hampshire region, making about 7,000 cheeses a week, and up to 12,000 during the Christmas season.

Her website even carries a quote from celebrity French chef Raymond Blanc, who describes Tunworth as ‘the best Camembert in the world!’

While a provocative remark for Blanc’s countrymen, it is undeniable that the cheese has made its mark on menus and shelves across Britain.

In the Basingstoke factory, there is not a machine in sight. Everything is done by hand, from the handling of the milk - delivered by

a neighbouring farm - to the packaging in a round wooden box imported from France.

As well as Tunworth, the Hampshire Cheese Company also makes the softer Winslade, which Hedges likens to Vacherin.

The 61-year-old got help from French experts to advise her on the manufacturing process.

“In this country we have Stilton and Cheddar. But we don’t have the knowledge for soft cheese,” Hedges explained.

Her success has inspired other Brits.

Cheese every day!

“It’s a very exciting time to be in the industry,” said Bronwen Percival, technical manager at Neal’s Yard Dairy, which has four shops in London selling almost exclusively British cheese.

“There are new people coming out all the time with a real entrepreneurial spirit,” she added.

“We sell mozzarella from Italy, but if somebody (British) arrives on the scene making a beautiful mozzarella, as good as the one we currently sell, we might decide to switch.”

This has already happened with homegrown varieties of Brie and Camembert, as the UK dairy industry continues to adapt from the shock of deregulation in the 1990s.

Prior to then, a state marketing board regulated the production and distribution of milk, setting a floor under prices for other dairy products.

After the board was abolished and the price of milk plummeted, dairy



Production manager and cheesemaker Charlotte Spruce pours curd into moulds to make Tunworth cheese in the production room of the Hampshire Cheese Company

producers were under pressure to add value through other products.

They responded with soft cheeses, which proved a hit with consumers.

“The key thing is people want to know where the food they eat is from and support local producers,” said Tracey Colley from the Academy of Cheese, which runs tasting courses and events such as the British Cheese Weekend. The pandemic has also helped, she added.

“When people stayed at home, cheese became a treat for some.”

But it’s still a long way from mass consumption.

“Everyone has Cheddar in their fridge,” but other cheeses remain fairly niche, said Colley.

“What we’re trying to change with the Academy is to get people in the same mindset as in France: eat cheese every day!”

Prices of artisanal cheese remain a challenge to wider adoption, often coming in at around £10 (US\$12.50 approx) for a single cheese.

Exports are one outlet. Ironically, France is one of Neal’s Yard Dairy’s top foreign markets.

Hedges sells her Tunworth in Hong Kong, the United States, Belgium, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

But she draws the line at trying to break into the home of Camembert.

“Do you think the French would buy British Camembert?” she joked. AFP



A PURE PLEASURE.



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take a break

IN TOWN

A GLIMPSE OF RAMADAN’S THIRD WEEK



People celebrate brotherhood and unity during iftars in various parts of Muscat, including the one at Clock Tower (top/left) in Ruwi



BBF OMAN IFTAR



People at an iftar gathering organised by British Business Forum Oman at Invest Oman Lounge

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Roughly when was the Hampton Court Maze created?
- A. 2000
B. 1800
C. 1900
D. 1700
02. What is a mermaid’s purse?
- A. A walrus’ genitalia
B. A species of seaweed
C. A type of jellyfish
D. The casing that surrounds the egg or eggs of a shark, skate or chimaera
03. In geology, what are nappe formations?
- A. A complex fold system of shifted sheets of rock
B. Breaks or faults in otherwise continuous sheets of rock
C. Abrupt changes in level
D. Tablerocks

Answers: 1.D 2.D 3.A

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

E	S	S	A
A	L	S	Qu
U	R	S	I
E	B	L	A

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

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The universe is amplifying your charm level right now, and many people are intrigued by what you have to offer! This doesn't necessarily apply to your romantic life. It might mean that you're getting more positive attention at work or school. This really counts, and you need to be aware of the increase in the positive attention you're getting.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Today, if you're feeling stressed out at any point, don't fret. Your imagination will rescue you! Just close your eyes and try to pretend you're drifting along a quiet, lazy stream on a sunny day. Relax and just go with the flow. Don't worry about where you end up. Part of the stress you're feeling could be self-imposed.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Instead of trying to plan out every minute of your busy day today, why not just let things unfold naturally? That way, you'll find more surprises along the way. Making a schedule is usually a helpful thing to do, but it can also narrow your focus too much and keep you from seeing things that could illuminate your thought process.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Because your social energy has been getting more unpredictable lately, your domestic bliss might be challenged. The people you live with aren't trying to annoy you, but inevitably they're starting to now. The best plan is to get your distance from them so you can control just how much interaction you have.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

It's a great (if unexpected) day for a date. And by date, that doesn't necessarily mean romance. You can date your friends and you can even date yourself! In fact, treating yourself to a lovely time is a wonderful way to give yourself the love you deserve. After all, no one knows how to please you better than you.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

There could be one or two people who cause you to have some minor setbacks in a project today. If that happens, you can rely on your charm and empathy to nullify the negative effects. It will be possible to disarm folks and get them on your side if you see things from their perspective. This is not a day to take no for an answer. It's a day to listen to someone's arguments and then educate them about what you know to be a better way.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Flirting isn't always the most admirable way to get what you want in life, but today it will certainly be the most effective! As long as you aren't making promises to someone that you won't ever keep, there's absolutely nothing wrong with putting a smile on their face in order to make them amenable to what you want to do or have.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

An elusive person is suddenly a lot more approachable today, so take the opportunity to strike up a conversation and get to know them better. They will probably turn out to be very different than you thought they would be, which will serve as yet another example proving that you can't judge a book by its cover. Giving others the benefit of the doubt is a habit you should get into more often.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Try to mix things up a little today. Don't behave the way that other people expect you to. See what happens when you act out of character. If you're usually shy in a new social situation, unleash your inner performer and see what it's like to be the centre of attention.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Put a little bit more effort into planning today. If you want your latest project to go as well as possible, then you have to put in the work that it requires. Sure, it's not always fun or exciting to book rooms, research information, or compare different options meticulously, but it will be well worth the trouble.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Getting involved with something or someone from a different cultural is a great idea today. Even if you just dine at a restaurant that serves foreign food, you should do something that involves interaction with people from a culture that is very different from yours. It's a good time for you to explore customs, foods, music, and philosophies that vary from what you have known all your life.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

There's no particular direction you need to head in right now, which is simultaneously frightening and exciting. So how do you decide where to go from here? The process of picking a path doesn't always have to be based on logic or facts. This time, move according to your whims. Curious about how wine is made? Interested in worldwide politics? Spend time reading news sites from other countries. Go explore!

entertainment

'It was a nightmare'

Dakota Johnson once reacted to the 'Global News' of losing her teeth gap after using retainer

Dakota Johnson, who became an overnight sensation after her performance in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, is a versatile actress. Apart from her acting skills, her beauty, grace and fashion skills are also admired by millions and millions of her fans. However, over the years, we have seen a transformation in Dakota's look and, to be precise, her teeth transformation. Yes, that's right. Keep scrolling to read more.

Dakota had a gap between her two front teeth which got closed in 2019, and since then, she is not happy with the transformation and is trying to restore how it was earlier.

In an interview with *InStyle* magazine, the *Persuasion* actress talked about how irritated she is with the transformation. Dakota Johnson shared, "The whole thing was a nightmare for me, honestly. I was so upset because I've had the gap my whole life. But when I had a retainer on the back of my teeth taken off, it closed by itself."

Going further in the conversation, Dakota Johnson mentioned how her teeth transformation had created a stir in the media and was highly publicised. She shared that the media started to cover her teeth story being her signature feature and mentioned that it 'was so shocking to me because of the actual global news that we should be talking about'.

"But, anyway, now I have a retainer, and I'm trying to get my gap back," Dakota had added.



ANIL KAPOOR CALLS JEREMY RENNER TOUGHEST AVENGER



Bollywood actor Anil Kapoor has praised Hollywood star and his 'dearest friend' Jeremy Renner and said that he is 'absolutely indestructible'.

Renner, who got severely injured in a snow plough accident on New Year's, appeared on a chat show for the very first time after the tragic incident. Anil Kapoor, who will be seen sharing screen space with Renner in the upcoming series *Remnants*, took to Twitter to praise the *Hawkeye* star after his appearance on the chat show. Jeremy Renner had tweeted about his Jimmy Kimmel Live appearance, that has reached support from his fans all around the globe.

HENRY CAVILL'S LOVE FOR BECOMING JAMES BOND WAS SO hardcore

Henry Cavill is one of the most desired men on the planet, as he has a massive fan following. Thanks to the role of *Superman*, he became more famous and became one of the most favourite superhero actors in the fandom. Upon his exit as *Superman*, the rumours were high that the actor was in the running to play James Bond for the Bond franchise. While there was no confirmation about the same, he once revealed that he brought a Limited Edition '007' Aston Martin that cost around US\$295,000. Henry Cavill recalled an incident where he visited a top-end Jersey garage with his father to treat himself. He initially had his eyes on an Audi R8 supercar, but his father was browsing in the 'really expensive' part of the showroom. At first, Henry Cavill's father didn't believe he would get that car. Still, it was too much for the Superman actor's ego as he walked away with a limited edition Aston Martin DBS Superleggera OHMSS Edition.



HOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: HONOR AMONG THIEVES**
Genre: Adventure/Fantasy
Starring: Chris Pine, Michelle Rodriguez, Regé-Jean Page, Justice Smith, Sofia Lillis

Contemporary in its approach



Even if not played, almost everyone born to the Internet and pop culture knows what *Dungeons & Dragons* is. A game that has defined childhood for multiple generations in the west and found itself in the public conscious across recently because of Netflix's *Stranger Things*. Remember that game Mike, Dustin, Will, and the gang play? So when Paramount decides to make a movie out of it and take *Honour Among Thieves* as their theme, there is an entire fandom looking at them.

Written by John Francis Daley & Jonathan Goldstein, *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* knows what legacy it is representing, and that everyone is not Craig Mazin to crack the depth of a material that finds its roots in a game. Add to the fact that it is set up in a landscape that directly shares similarities with a cult as big as *Game Of Thrones*. So the smartest thing that the makers do is to make this one into a comedy that is true to the core but also very contemporary in its approach.

The idea takes cues from the game where a father (Edgin, Chris) has to not just save his daughter but also his entire town from the wizard who wants to eat it up, literally and metaphorically. The movie makes his quest the central conflict and shapes an entire story around it. But it is a severe subject because, at one point, Edgin even says he is a robber who robbed his daughter of her father. But to balance this seriousness, there is enough irreverence at play here. It is a fine line to walk.

Rating ★★★★★

COMING SOON

EVIL DEAD RISE



Moving the action out of the woods and into the city, *Evil Dead Rise* tells a twisted tale of two estranged sisters, played by Sutherland and Sullivan, whose reunion is cut short by the rise of flesh-possessing demons, thrusting them into a primal battle for survival as they face the most nightmarish version of family imaginable.

Genre: Horror

Starring: Lily Sullivan, Morgan Davies, Gabrielle Echols, Neil Fisher Language: English
Releasing on: 20 April 2023

A man is killed in his house, and the police catch the potential murderer only to realise he has an exact look-alike roaming around. Begins the game to find out who the real killer is and how can these two men look exactly similar.

Second *Whodunit* this month after *Gaslight*, and the genre only keeps getting some lazy addition because it is that tricky to crack. How often have you come across stories that reveal the killer in the first frame and then shape the entire narrative to find his motivation? *Gumraah*, and addition to mediocre entries in the genre, is one such movie that thinks of itself as an intelligent movie but soon entangles itself in the same plan it hatches to confuse the audience.

Story by Magizh Thirumeni and screenplay by Aseem Arora, *Gumraah*



BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: **GUMRAAH**
Genre: Thriller
Starring: Aditya Roy Kapur, Mrunal Thakur, Ronit Roy, Mohit Anand, Deepak Kalra

Attention to detail gone for a toss



is a way too simple tale of murder told even more simply only to make it pseudo-complex by the end. There is an inconsequential man being murdered, a killer is dressed in the most 'Killer' outfit ever, and he conveniently escapes because he is very smart. The following week, cops capture the murdered after a very CID level interrogation and create a mess for themselves when two looking men stand in front of them.

To complicate this tale, Vardhan Ketkar with Aseem adds layers that are supremely inconsequential to the story.

A hammy, Ronit Roy, hates one of Aditya Roy Kapurs, Arjun, because he helped his daughter elope. While this is a very convenient reason, it doesn't serve much to the main story. Talking of convenience, it is the favourite word of this product that only looks for route that are easy. Proofs just appear out of nowhere very easily with no efforts taken; everyone is at the right place at the right time. Also, how doesn't neither of the two Adityas have anyone look for them when the police has literally kidnapped them? Forget family, no family,

doesn't one of them own an entire agency? Aren't his employees worried? Credit where it's due; the final reveal portion does make for decent pulpy content but also standalone. There is no connect between it to the main story. The entire narrative that jumps from one setup to another lacks the glue to bind it all supremely. It looks like short episodes with no connect to each other. Songs are thrown to take things ahead, but they take it nowhere.

Also, the art department has a lot to answer. Blood, if left in the air, turns brown because it has iron and air has oxygen, the reaction changes colour. The blood here looks like a lipstick stain. You will see. Attention to detail gone for a toss.

Rating ★★★★★

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