



MUSCAT NIGHTS UNFOLDS SURPRISES AFTER A GLITTERING START

Muscat Nights 2023 kicked off in a glittering ceremony at the Qurum Natural Park on Thursday. Focused on youth, the festival will take the visitors on a journey full of surprises, making use of high-tech machinery and virtual reality to produce shows so as to educate the young generation on national identity and heritage. Special drone and light shows are planned for every Thursday and Friday at 9pm in Qurum and on Mondays in Naseem Park (Photo V K Shafeer)

Under-17 constitute 44% of Omani population

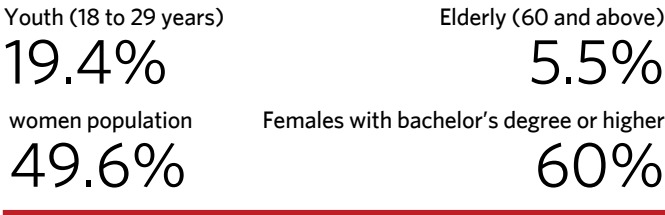
Our Correspondent Muscat

The population of Omani children, in the age group of 0-17 years, increased by 16 per cent between 2017 to 2021. This resulted in the group's population to go up to 1,221,751, constituting 44 per cent of the total Omani population of 2,804,117 until the end of 2021.

The highest percentage of children was registered in the governorate of North Batinah, which is 44 per cent of the total number of Omani children, according to the Special Categories Bulletin for the year 2022 issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The bulletin stated that the number of Omani youth, in the age group of 18 to 29 years, was 544,983, representing 19.4 per cent of the total Omani population. Fifty-one per cent of the youth are male and 60 per cent of them are employed in the private, household and civil sectors.

The statistics reveal that the number of Omani elderly - 60 years and above - increased from 149,824 in 2017 to 154,405 in 2021, constituting 5.5 per cent of the Omani population.



While the total number of Omani women by the end of 2021 was 1,391,609, representing 49.6 per cent of the Omani pop-

ulation. As for the age-related fertility rates for Omani females, it decreased from 4 births per 1,000 women of childbearing age

(15-49 years) in 2017 to 3.4 births per 1,000 women in 2021.

The bulletin showed that 60 per cent of the holders of a bachelor's degree or higher are females, while the illiteracy rate for Omani females decreased to 6.3 per cent in 2021, from 6.8 per cent in 2017.

The number of persons with disabilities reached 42,613 in 2021, constituting 1.5 per cent of Omanis, of whom 61 per cent were males. The highest percentage of persons with disabilities was concentrated in the governorate of North Batinah (22 per cent), followed by Muscat (16 per cent), Dakhiliyah (13.9 per cent), while the lowest percentage was in Al Wusta (0.6 per cent).

The statistics show that 57 per cent of persons with disabilities were the result of congenital causes, while 17.6 per cent were from birth.

There were 72,675 people in 2021 who benefited from social security scheme, constituting 2.6 per cent of the total Omani population, which is a decrease of 8.6 per cent from 2017.

North Batinah has highest cases of social security beneficiaries, which is 26 per cent of the total beneficiary cases.

Muscat 3rd most expensive city in ME for international schools

Our Correspondent Muscat

Muscat is the third most expensive city among eight in the Middle East for international schools.

Dubai-Sharjah-Ajman has retained its title as the most expensive location in the Middle East for international schooling, with a median price of US\$10,891 per year. Doha follows closely behind with a median price of US\$10,591 - a difference of just US\$300 per year. Muscat is third with a median price of US\$8,726 and a range extending from US\$1,195 to US\$21,426.

So far, Doha is the only competition Dubai-Sharjah-Ajman has, with costs at least 20 per cent lower in other cities in the Middle East, according to a re-

|                        |          |
|------------------------|----------|
| Dubai-Sharjah-Ajman    | \$10,891 |
| Doha                   | \$10,591 |
| Muscat                 | \$8,726  |
| Abu Dhabi              | \$8,724  |
| Kuwait City            | \$8,655  |
| Riyadh                 | \$8,513  |
| Manama                 | \$6,904  |
| Istanbul               | \$6,885  |
| *Median price per year |          |

widest range of costs - US\$1,004 to US\$24,912 for Bahrain and US\$2,100 to US\$36,570 for Istanbul. The remaining cities included in the research for the Middle East are Abu Dhabi, Kuwait City and Riyadh. All have costs that are very similar to each other, with median prices ranging from US\$8,513 in Riyadh to US\$8,724 in Abu Dhabi.

'Parts of the Middle East are considered affluent or luxurious destinations globally, so you may expect the cost of international schools in the region to reflect this. However, when compared with other regions around the world, particularly Asia and Europe, the cost of international education in the Middle East is significantly lower,' stated the report.



Oman coach Branko Ivankovic proud of players



Indian artist uses coffee to express his creativity

Jabal Shams freezes at -2.3°C

Our Correspondent Muscat

Northeasterly winds sweeping across the sultanate brought the mercury down in several governorates with Jabal Shams recording the lowest temperature of the year, so far, at -2.3°C in the early hours of Saturday.

The highest peak in the sultanate experienced sub-zero temperatures for the first time this year, the minimum so far was 0°C, recorded on January 14.

The second coldest place in the sultanate was Saiq at 4.7°C, followed by Mazyunah (7°C), Thumrait (7.9°C) and Maqshin (8°C).

In Muscat, temperature in Seeb is expected to be a mini-



mum of 17°C and a high of 25°C, while in Amerat it will be around a high of 23°C and a low of 14°C.

The Directorate General of Meteorology expects clear to partly cloudy skies over the Musandam governorate and the coastal areas of the Sea of Oman

and parts of Al Hajar Mountains with chances of isolated rains. 'There are chances of late night to early morning low clouds or fog over parts of the governorates of North Batinah, Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah,' it stated in its forecast for Sunday.

مدائن

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Tender Announcement

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following Tender:

| Tender Number    | Tender Name                                                                                                       | Last date of buying | Date of submission    | Type of work                               | Register Degree | Fee (R.O) |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| 1/2023/PEIE/HQ-1 | Surveying geographical locations using drone technology in industrial cities and Development of Madayn's GIS Data | 05-02-2023          | 02-03-2023 (12:00 PM) | Companies Specialized In The Field Of Work | First And Above | 150       |

Tender Documents can be obtained from Accounts Department in KOM (4) Floor No (4) at Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) (Tel: 24449679/24449634) during official working hours, against non-refundable fee as mentioned above.

Offers must be submitted in a closed envelopes sealed with red wax. The tender number and name shall be written on the top of the envelope containing the offer. Nothing should be written on the exterior of the envelope to display the identity of the tenderer.

Offers should be addressed to, The Chairman of Procurements Committee, Madayn, Post Box No. 2, Postal Code 124, Rusayl, Sultanate of Oman.

The completed Offer Document must be deposited in the Tender Box at Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM 1)

The Tenderer should enclose Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the Tender value validity for (90) days, and addressed to The Chairman of Internal tender Committee..

For any Inquiries: [Tenders@madayn.om](mailto:Tenders@madayn.om)

Madayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

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in

# Adventurer traverses 550km Tropic of Cancer

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

It is arguably the first time someone in Oman has taken on the mantle to criss-cross the passage of Tropic of Cancer in the sultanate.

The Tropic of Cancer is the line of latitude that runs around the Earth at approximately 23.5° north of the equator. It is the northernmost point on Earth where the sun comes exactly overhead at local noon time.

In Oman, the line passes through Sunainah in Buraimi, Ibri, Rustaq, Wadi al Ma'awel, Fanja, Amerat and Sifah in Muscat.

Adventurer Mohammed al Randi (33), from the wilayat of Quriyat, started his 550km arduous journey on January 13 from the Oman-UAE border in the wilayat of Sunainah in Buraimi.

An employee of the Directorate General of Scouts and Guides in the Ministry of Education, Randi claims to be the first Omani to move along the Tropic of Cancer on foot.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily* from the Rustaq mountain, after walking 152km, Randi said, "I hope to finish the trip in Al Sifah beach in Muscat on January 27 after completing 550km."

The trip, he said, aims to spread awareness on preserving the environment as well educating people on the importance of the Tropic of Cancer in Oman.



"This trip will also help to promote the tourist and archaeological sites along the Tropic of Cancer and also popularise trail or mountain walking."

Randi is walking seven to eight hours every day. He starts at 5am, and takes a break at 9am. The second phase of his walk be-

gins at 3pm and ends at 7pm.

"The terrain of the journey is not easy. The tropic passes through mountains, wadis, and sand dunes. The cold weather and chilly winds add to the challenge," he said, adding that with patience and determination, "I will complete it".

Knowing the difficulty of the trip, Randi prepared well in advance. "I studied the terrain and topography of the passage of the Tropic of Cancer in Oman for days. To prepare my body, I walked daily for more than four hours. I also participated in several marathons in Oman, crossing the Sharqiyah desert, and walked 1,200km from Musandam to Mirbat in Dhofar to explore the mountains and caves."

*The terrain of the journey is not easy. The tropic passes through mountains, wadis, and sand dunes*

MOHAMMED AL RANDI

To leave a legacy of the trip, Randi is meeting school students along the way to talk about his journey and its importance in preserving the environment, climate change and its impact on humans.

Talking about his future plans, Randi said, "I will continue walking to promote tourism in Oman and spread awareness of the importance of preserving the environment. I urge youngsters to pursue some kind of sports, because a healthy mind in a healthy body is important to achieve one's dreams."

# Pact signed to support people with disabilities

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Social Development has signed a cooperation agreement with the Capital Market Authority (CMA) for community partnership in enhancing the participation of people with disabilities in fields related to the capital market and insurance sectors through a suitable training programme.

The joint programme comes within the framework of the initiative 'Be with us for them'.

The move aims to empower people with disabilities and enhance their role in the society by honing their capabilities and competence.

The cooperation deal was



signed by H E Rashid Ahmed al Shamsi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Development and Abdullah Salim al Salmi, CEO of the CMA.

Shamsi said that this initiative stems from the ministry's keenness to develop programmes and services for the people with disabilities and to activate the concept of institutional partnership through social responsibility.

Those moves aim to empower them in the society.

Moreover, an initiative to support the holders of the Disabled Persons' card was introduced during the event. The initiative - to be supervised by the CMA in coordination with insurance companies - will provide advantages and special offers for people with disabilities in the Sultanate of Oman.

# Environment Authority finds rare tree in Buraimi

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Specialists of the Environment Authority (EA) have found and documented a rare perennial tree called 'Haba' in Buraimi governorate on Thursday.

A statement issued by EA said, 'As part of the authority's field survey of wild trees and plants, the specialists found a perennial tree called the 'Haba' in Sumaini



Mountain in the wilayat of Mahdah, Buraimi governorate. 'Specialists confirmed that the

tree is not widespread and its maximum height is 3-4m,' it added.



# Campaign to highlight Buraimi's tourism potential begins today

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is set to launch a campaign on Sunday to promote the heritage and tourism components in the governorate.

The campaign 'Change the atmosphere in Buraimi', which will continue till January end, aims to introduce the heritage and tourist sites in the governorate and promote tourism in the area. 'This will positively benefit the tourism sector partners, and enrich the promotional activities in Buraimi governorate,' ONA reported.

A promotional video, highlighting the most prominent heritage and tourism sites in the governorate, the traditional art,

tourism experiences and activities, will be launched on Sunday as part of the campaign.

Tourism companies, especially those specialised in adventure tourism, will conduct several trips to the governorate during the campaign period.

'FAM (familiarisation) trips will be organised for tourism companies from the UAE so that they include tourism programmes in their itinerary to the Buraimi governorate. In addition, a number of social media influencers and photographers will be invited to popularise the promotional campaign.'

Accommodation offers, services and activities provided by hotel establishments in the governorate will also be published to

make it easy for tourists to visit Buraimi.

Buraimi governorate, which has three wilayats - Buraimi, Mahdah and Sunaina - offers many attractive heritage and tourist attractions, providing various types of experiences and activities.

The governorate has many castles and forts such as Al Khandaq Fort, Al Hilla Fort, Marjab Fort, and Bait al Nad Fort.

Suitable for exploration and adventure tourism, Buraimi also offers places such as Falaj al Saarani, Madaba village, Wadi Sharm, Wadi al Qahfi, Wadi Khamis, and Jabal Kattar, while Sunaina desert, Kohl sands, and Ramlet Hamasa are popular for golden sand dunes.

## BEYOND WORDS



VAISHALI HAMLAI

The columnist is a certified MBTI coach and author, and writer who delves into the complexities of the mind and soul to guide and interpret social behaviour

More often than not I have heard people rave about a couple, so called 'Power couple' and talk about their achievement like it's their own achievement. They somehow seem to forget the difference between themselves and others at that point. Mostly the statement goes much like, "He is a (some glorified corporate made-up designation created to inflate male ego or a business entrepreneur) and she is (another faked out commercial designation created to hype a feel-good flare into one's self-worth)."

But what really is it that makes a 'power couple', as per society. Someone who is financially independent, together and individually. The 'power couple' is a terminology created by those who feel power is directly proportionate to one's propensity to spend. 'Power couple' means where both the partners have equal influences in the social standing and can pull contacts out of their cell phone contact list which many would want in their own phone book. 'Power couple' means someone who can independently provide to their children above and

beyond things and experiences which can be only aspired by some. 'Power couple' means the husband and the wife have both a strong holding in their place of work. 'Power couple' also can be defined as a couple who is respected in the community and has a strong say in the working of the community they represent.

But does this make one powerful? Sure, it does, superficially to some, and literally to

## THE POWER COUPLE

some. But here the manner of evaluating someone's power is what you see. But what about things which are beyond what your eyes see. However, is this really powerful?

A mother who toils day and night for her child isn't a powerful woman, because she is doing a small job. Is it? A housewife who works longer hours than normal working hours, ensuring everything being in place isn't powerful? A woman who cares for her ailing parents day in and out isn't a powerful woman? A Husband who stays at home while the woman goes out to work isn't a

part of a powerful couple? A husband who cooks and cleans at home isn't a contestant for a power couple? A housewife, plainly being a housewife isn't also in the race to be a powerful couple with her husband?

What is it that we think success is, we are merely scratching the surface. We don't want to go deeper to find out the real power couples because we want to quantify every action. It's human to count and be able to make sense. But the quality is always at stake when quantity is being played at.

It is extremely appalling to know that a housewife/househusband wouldn't be contenders for a 'power couple'. They wouldn't even stand a chance.

Today we are seeing that the social system is crashing, the nurturing and caring provided by a family member is going unnoticed.

However, there is hope that there will be a time in future, when these nurturing roles will be rewarded a power couple standing and they too would be in the race to be the number one 'Power Couple'.

In our quest for independence, we are losing out on the joy for interdependence.

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 Press & Publishing

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MOH No: 44/2023

# FDI push: MoCIIP begins licensing services from London embassy



**Our correspondent**  
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion's (MoCIIP) has started offering services for opening a commercial company and a bank account, besides licensing procedures and granting a certificate of affiliation with the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), from its embassy in London.

The new services aim to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) by making investments in

Oman an absolute breeze for foreign firms.

The details of the new procedure were unveiled during the Oman-Britain Business Conference, held in London on Thursday.

Organised by the Omani Embassy in the United Kingdom - in cooperation with the University of West London - the conference saw participation of the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), MoCIIP, the Omani British Friendship Association and government companies representing various sectors.

During the meet, the government companies made presentations on investment opportunities in the logistics, tourism, mining, fisheries and food sectors, and introduced the services and facilities provided by Credit Oman to individual and corporate investors.

MoCIIP introduced the services and facilities through the 'Invest in Oman' portal, which can now be directly processed at the Omani Embassy in London.

Badr bin Muhammad al Mandhari, ambassador-designate of Oman to the UK, said

that the Omani-British Business Conference was a translation of the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to activate the role of economic diplomacy and scope of work of the commercial attaché at the embassy.

"Investors in the United Kingdom wishing to invest in the sultanate can complete their procedures at the embassy in London through 'Invest in Oman'. The services include opening a commercial registry and a bank account, availing a certificate of affiliation with OCCI, and completion of other licensing activities and procedures," Mandhari added.

Arwa bint Abdul Rahim al Balushi, commercial and investment attaché at the embassy in London, explained that the conference was held to encourage foreign investments through economic diversification of non-oil sectors, and to promote investment opportunities through the participation of OIA companies.

Several British government officials as well as around 150 British companies participated in the event.



## Over 5,000 violations of fishing law in 2022

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Over 5,000 violations of the Marine Fishing Law and Protection of Living Aquatic Resources were registered in the sultanate in 2022, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR).

An MAFWR official said that the 'specialists' in the ministry arrested 521 expatriates for violating provisions of the Marine Fishing Law and Protection of Living Aquatic Resources in 2022.

"They also recorded 5,136 violations, which include 3,559 violations of fishing licence regulations, 394 cases of the use of prohibited fishing methods and possession of unauthorised equipment, 198 violations of fishing in prohibited areas and times, 212 cases of the employment of unlicensed expatriate workers, and 370 instances of non-compliance with the placement of plates on boats and ships and

403 various other violations," he added.

According to the official, 2,757 sets of equipment were seized which included boats, engines, nets and devices. The specialists also seized more than 3.5 tonnes of fish and marine resources that were caught and traded during the prohibited seasons in 2022.

Talking about the ministry's efforts to reduce violations, he said, "MAFWR organises monitoring campaigns in cooperation with the relevant authorities, such as the Coast Guard of the Royal Oman Police, the Royal Oman Navy, the Maritime Security Centre and the Ministry of Labour in all fishing sites and living aquatic resources."

The ministry's work includes monitoring fishing craft, coastal and commercial activities, selling fish in the local markets, controlling fish exports through land, sea and airports and monitoring commercial fishing fleet through the electronic tracking system linked to satellites.

# Students plan startup after producing fabric from recycled plastic bottles

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Two students from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) Muscat have recycled plastic bottles to produce fabric. Their project was declared winner at the recently concluded Upgrade Programme.

The project, developed by Zainab Mohammed al Hajri and Jihan Hamed al Busaidi, arose from a real life situation where the team encountered the problem in their day-to-day life.

"A large section of the society in Oman and also in many other countries suffer from the continuous accumulation of discarded plastic bottles," Zainab told *Muscat Daily*.

"We came up with this idea



after pondering over the best way to recycle waste plastic bottles, which impact our environment to a great extent."

The duo is now contemplating a startup after winning at the Upgrade Programme, conducted under the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and Innovation, that encourages to

transform the best graduation projects into successful ICT and industry domain startups.

"The research started as a graduation project at UTAS under the supervision of Dr Wafa al Rawahi and Dr Amal al Rahbi," Zainab informed.

"The project, called 'Sustainable Fabric Production from Re-

cycled Plastic Water Bottles', aims to recycle waste plastic water bottles into a sustainable, environmentally friendly and high-quality fabric that can be used in different industries," she explained.

Talking about the challenges while going about their new venture, Zainab said, "We are still working on it in order to transform this graduation project into a startup. There are some expected challenges such as getting the necessary equipment as it is not available in the sultanate. Moreover, consumer acceptance of the final product is another challenge for us, since the idea of the product is new to Oman."

The main supporters of the project are the Research Council and their families, Zainab said.



### MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No.( 4 /2023)

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

| Tender No. | No E- Tender              | Description of Tender                                                                                        | Tender Fee | Last date to collect the tender | Tender return date | Grade |
|------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| PRE/23/008 | 2023/MM/QS-9              | Design & Construction of Road Profile & Sidewalk Modifications to resolve Water Stagnation in Embassies area | 45         | 29/01/2023                      | 09/02/2023         | First |
| PRE/22/118 | 2022/MM/QS-61 (Re-Call-2) | Design and Construction of Pedestrian Bridge and Embankment Protection Works in Airport Heights (Re-Tender)  | 25         | 09/02/2023                      | 01/03/2023         | First |

**Tender Conditions :-**

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

#### Poor telecom signals in wilayat of Ibri

Since the Blessed Renaissance, one of the concerns of the government has been to develop the communications sector and provide high-quality services in all governorates.

However, services in Miskin, Wadi al Kabir, Mahdah and Al Tawyan in the wilayat of Ibri in Dhahirah governorate need to be improved by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

There have been several requests by the citizens to the authorities for developments in the area.

Rahma al Kalbani, a resident of the area, said, "The mobile communication network is very weak. Many have trouble making calls or sending messages because of the poor network. We have to move away from our area to communicate through mobiles, while school students suffer during their online assignments. Also, the problem compounds when it rains."

Tourists visiting the place, too complain about connectivity problem. The concerned authorities need to look into the matter as it affects several villages. Authorities have responded to us by saying that a full-fledged network project will be implemented soon. We request the authorities to take note of this problem since the area is an important tourist destination.

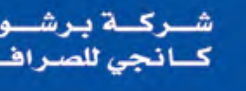
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# Philex Pharmaceuticals to open its \$150mn plant on Wednesday in Salalah

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Philex Pharmaceutical Industries will celebrate the opening of its \$150mn manufacturing plant at Salalah Free Zone on Wednesday.

The opening ceremony of the plant will take place under the patronage of H E Dr. Hilal bin Ali Al Sabti, Minister of Health, according to an Oman News Agency report.

The plant is the latest project in the pharmaceuticals industry in Oman as the sultanate aims to transform Salalah Free Zone into a regional center for the pharmaceutical and biological industries.

Philex Pharmaceutical Industries' project in Salalah include three development phases, including the establishment of an advanced factory for pharmaceutical products and a center



for the research and development (R&D).

The company plans to produce more than 100 types of pharma products, including various types of drugs in the current phase and vaccines in the second phase, with a production capacity of one billion medicinal tablets and one billion capsules annually during the first phase.

Philex Pharmaceutical Industries'

plant at Salalah Free Zone is currently witnessing opportunities and operational plans locally and internationally and its products are marketed in Oman, Qatar, and a number of other countries in the region.

The plant has been built according to approved international specifications, which qualifies it to enter the global markets.

# Profits of Omani banks rise 20% to RO409mn in 2022

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Total net profits of Omani banks listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) jumped by 20.6 per cent to RO409mn for the full year 2022 as compared to RO338.9mn net profits reported in 2021.

Preliminary financial results recently announced by the listed banks on the Muscat Stock Exchange showed an increase in profits of all the banks and the rise of their various financial indicators, according to an Oman News Agency report.

The sharp rise in banking sector profits reflects the state of recovery of the Omani economy from the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the government's efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on various economic activities.

The banks' improved financial results also reflect the efforts made by banks to diversify their lending and financing portfolios and their contributions to financ-

ing projects implemented by the government and the private sector.

Bank Muscat posted the highest profit at RO200.7mn in 2022 compared to RO189.6mn in the previous year. However, the 5.9 per cent year-on-year growth in net profit recorded by Bank Mus-

a net profit of about RO34.9mn in 2022 compared to RO28.3mn in 2021, an increase of 23 per cent. BankDhofar's net profit rose by 36 per cent to RO34.1mn last year as compared to RO25.1mn reported in 2021.

Net profit of HSBC Bank Oman increased from RO18.3mn

19.8 per cent to RO33.1mn in 2022 compared to RO27.6mn recorded in the previous year. Fully-fledged Islamic bank Bank Nizwa was able to increase its net profit in 2022 to RO15mn compared to RO12.5mn in 2021, recording an increase of 20 per cent.

Omani banks' preliminary financial statements indicated that the total assets of the banks increased to RO35.990bn as of December 31, 2022, registering an increase of about RO90mn over the levels recorded at the end of 2021.

All banks recorded an increase in their total assets during the past year, with the exception of Bank Muscat, whose assets declined from about RO13.1bn to RO12.7bn, recording a decrease of 2.3 per cent.

Bank Muscat accounted for 49 per cent of the total net profits recorded by all banks during the last year and it accounted for 35.4 per cent of the total assets of the banks listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange.

*Bank Muscat accounted for 49% of total net profits recorded by all banks during 2022 and 35.4 per cent of total assets of the banks listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange*

cat was the lowest growth among all the banks.

National Bank of Oman (NBO) ranked as distant second with its 2022 net profit amounting to RO48.2mn compared to RO30.3mn in the previous year, recording an increase of 59.2 per cent.

Sohar International Bank came at the third place recording

in 2021 to RO26.7mn in 2022, recording a robust growth of 45.9 per cent.

Oman Arab Bank's net profit surged by more than 128 per cent to RO16.2mn in 2022 compared to RO7.1mn reported in the previous year, recording the highest growth in banking sector in 2022.

Ahlibank's net profit grew by

# Fed vice chair sees high rates 'for some time' to cool prices

Washington, US - US interest rates will need to remain high for some time even as inflation eases, US Federal Reserve vice chair Lael Brainard said, vowing the central bank plans to "stay the course" in fighting price increases.

Inflation has come down from a 40-year high as the Fed hiked rates steeply over the last year to cool the world's biggest economy, and officials have warned against loosening policy prematurely.

"Even with the recent moderation, inflation remains high, and policy will need to be sufficiently restrictive for some time," Brainard said in prepared remarks for an event in Chicago.

This is to ensure inflation returns to two per cent on a sustained basis, she said.

In the past year, the Fed has raised the benchmark lending rate rapidly from around zero to 4.25-4.50 per cent. Brainard's latest remarks suggest rates will have to stay high for a while.

At a separate event Thursday, New York Fed President John Williams echoed Brainard's sentiments on inflation remaining too high and added that bringing down prices will likely require a "period of below-trend growth and some softening of labor mar-



Lael Brainard (AFP)

ket conditions."

While the Fed has taken strong action, "it is clear that monetary policy still has more work to do," he said, noting that policy also affects parts of the economy differently.

As the impact of policy ripples through sectors, he expects "modest" GDP growth at around one percent in 2023, along with a rise in the unemployment rate to around 4.5 per cent.

Given a lag in transmission from the Fed's aggressive campaign, Brainard warned of a greater "drag on US growth and employment" this year.

"It is likely that the full effect

on demand, employment, and inflation of the cumulative tightening that is in the pipeline still lies ahead," she said.

But for now, there is evidence that some persistent components of inflation are coming down, along with signs of a deceleration in wages.

Wages do not appear to be driving inflation up in a "1970s-style" spiral either, she said.

And signs point to the possibility that continued moderation in demand could allow the labor market to ease further and inflation to fall, without "significant loss of employment," added Brainard.

AFP

# Oil demand set to break record: IEA

Paris, France - Global oil demand is set to rise by 1.9mn barrels per day (bpd) this year to a record 101.7mn bpd, with nearly half of the gain from China following the lifting of its COVID-19 restrictions, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in its monthly oil market report.

"This year's oil use is now seen at 101.7mn bpd, 80,000 bpd higher than in last month's report and an all-time high. Jet fuel and kerosene accounts for 45 per cent of this year's demand gains, by far the largest contributor," the report said.

Changes to the road vehicle fleet will eliminate 870,000 bpd of incremental consumption thanks to efficiency gains and electric vehicles, according to IEA.

This occurs against a backdrop of lower prices, a somewhat improved economic outlook, and a faster-than-anticipated re-opening of China, the IEA said, adding that overall, the global economic climate stays challenging, with mild recessions on the cards for the US and eurozone according to consensus estimates.

The agency stressed that 'two wild cards dominate the 2023 oil market outlook: Russia and China,' with the possibility of supply tightening as western sanctions impact Russian exports.



As Chinese oil demand returns to growth, the country is expected to overtake India this year as the world's leader in oil demand growth. The IEA has revised up the estimated increase in Chinese oil demand by 40,000 bpd to 850,000 bpd year-on-year. An accelerating mobility recovery by the second quarter of 2023 will buttress gasoline and gasoil use.

## Supply growth to slow this year

Global oil supply growth in 2023 is set for a dramatic slowdown as OPEC+ shifts into contraction following last year's massive 4.7mn bpd expansion, dominated by the producer bloc, according to the agency.

Gains of 1mn bpd are projected to be fuelled by the US, re-

placing Saudi Arabia, along with Brazil, Norway, Canada, and Guyana, all producers outside the OPEC+ alliance (non-OPEC+).

An overall non-OPEC+ increase of 1.9mn bpd will be tempered by an OPEC+ decline of 870,000 bpd as Russia feels the full weight of sanctions.

Excluding Russia, oil supply from the rest of the OPEC+ could expand by 460,000 bpd in 2023 with Libya ranking as the top source of growth.

Though modest versus 2022, growth in 2023 will still lift the total oil supply to an all-time high of 101.1mn bpd. At 101mn bpd, production in December was down 860,000 bpd month-on-month.

The IEA noted that although the world oil supply is poised to

outpace demand in the first quarter and meet it in the second quarter, a substantial deficit could develop in the second half of the year as demand gallops ahead.

In this case, that would shift the focus onto spare production capacity, most of which is held by Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE.

'Effective spare capacity, excluding volumes shut in by sanctions on Iran and Russia, is projected to average 3.5mn bpd in 2023, up from 3.2mn bpd in the fourth quarter of 2022.

But if OPEC+ were to respond to the call on its crude and ramp up to balance the market, that spare cushion would be squeezed wafer thin,' the agency noted.

Anadolu Agency

# US takes steps to avoid looming default

Washington, US – The US Treasury began taking measures to prevent a default on government debt, as Congress heads towards a high-stakes clash between Democrats and Republicans over raising the nation's borrowing limit.

Such "extraordinary measures" can help reduce the amount of outstanding debt subject to the limit, currently set at US\$31.4tn, but the Treasury has warned that the tools would only help for a limited time - likely not longer than six months.

"I respectfully urge Congress to act promptly to protect the full faith and credit of the United States," said Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in a letter to Congressional leadership Thursday.

She added there is "considerable uncertainty" on how long the measures can last before risking default.

"Failure to meet the government's obligations would cause irreparable harm to the US economy, the livelihoods of all Americans, and global financial stability," Yellen said last week.

JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon echoed that concern Thursday, saying "we should never question the creditworthiness of the United States government."

"That is sacrosanct," he said in an interview with CNBC.

## 'Risky and dangerous'

The world's biggest economy is bracing for a drawn out battle in Congress, as Republicans threaten to block the usual annual rubber stamping of a rise in the so-called debt ceiling.

With new control over the US



A billboard showing the national debt is seen in Washington, DC, on Friday (AFP)

House after last year's midterm elections, Republicans want Democratic President Joe Biden to agree to slash government spending, which they view as having risen to unsustainable heights.

"Unchecked spending will have dire consequences," said House Republican Jason Smith, the new chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, in a statement.

But the White House said cuts of the size Republicans demand would have to come from politically sensitive social security and military spending programs, or involve major new taxes.

It added that Biden would not

negotiate with hardline Republicans over their "risky and dangerous" opposition to increased borrowing for programs Congress already authorized.

"Republicans are creating a crisis that need not exist," said Congressman Brendan Boyle, top Democrat on the House Budget Committee.

Raising or suspending the debt limit does not authorize new spending or cost taxpayers money, Yellen noted last week.

Conversely, "if the debt limit were not raised, the amount of spending cuts or tax increases that would be required would equal US\$1.5tn this year" or more in the next decade, said

Leonard Burman and William Gale of the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center.

They added that "a desire to change the course of fiscal policy should be manifested in new congressional initiatives" rather than a refusal to pay bills arising from earlier action.

## 'Rancorous politics'

The Treasury Department said Thursday it would turn to resources from two funds for retirees as it starts "extraordinary measures."

It will not fully invest a portion of the Civil Service Retirement and Disability Fund (CSRDF), with a "debt issuance suspension

## Yellen warns of 'financial crisis' if US defaults on debt

Washington, US – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned Friday that the United States could see a recession and "cause a global financial crisis" if it defaults on payments, as Congress heads toward a clash over raising the debt limit.

Yellen's comments to CNN in Senegal come as the US Treasury started taking "extraordinary measures" this week to avert a default as the country reached its US\$31.4tn debt ceiling.

But such tools can only help for a limited time, likely no longer than six months, according to the Treasury.

Yellen noted that the actual day on which the Treasury would no longer be able to use these measures is "quite uncertain," and could come as early as June.

If the measures were exhausted and Congress fails to raise the debt limit, the US



Janet Yellen

could see a downgrading of its debt "at minimum," Yellen said.

"If that happened, our borrowing costs would increase, and every American would see that their borrowing costs would increase as well," she added.

"On top of that, a failure to make payments that are due, whether it's to bondholders or to social security recipients, or to our military, would undoubtedly cause a recession in the US economy and could cause a

global financial crisis," Yellen said.

This would also undermine the role of the dollar as a reserve currency used in transactions globally.

The world's biggest economy is bracing for a drawn out battle in Congress, as Republicans threaten to block the usual annual rubber stamping of a rise in the debt ceiling.

With new control over the US House after last year's midterm elections, Republicans want Democratic President Joe Biden to agree to slash government spending, which they view as having risen to unsustainable heights.

But the White House said cuts of the size Republicans demand would have to come from politically sensitive social security and military spending programs, or involve major new taxes.

AFP

## In cold Davos, warmer days seen for the world economy

An air of optimism for the global economy blew through Davos this week after fears that the war in Ukraine, an energy crisis and soaring inflation could trigger a global recession.

"It is less bad than we feared a couple of months ago," IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said at the final panel discussion for the World Economic Forum in the Swiss ski resort on Friday.

Georgieva signalled that the International Monetary Fund may raise its previous forecast of 2.7 percent global growth for this year when it publishes an update at the end of the month.

But she cautioned against high expectations.

"Less bad doesn't quite yet mean good," Georgieva said.

"Be careful not to get on the other side of the spectrum, from being too pessimistic to being too optimistic."

European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde was similarly upbeat for the eurozone economy, saying the "news has become much more positive in the last few weeks".

The rhetoric has shifted from talk of a recession in the 20-nation club to "a small contraction", she said.

The ECB is expecting 0.5-percent growth in the eurozone in 2023, according to its latest forecast.

"So it's not a brilliant year but it is a lot better than what we had feared," Lagarde said.

A drop in energy prices that had soared following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has fuelled the optimism. A mild winter has also eased fears of gas shortages.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told Bloomberg that his country, which was heavily reliant on Russian gas before the war, will avoid a recession that



Participants are seen during a session of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in Davos (AFP)

had been previously predicted for Europe's biggest economy.

The world economy may also get another boost from China's decision to scrap its zero-Covid policy.

Vice Premier Liu He told the WEF that the situation in his country has "comprehensively returned to normal".

Liu invited "international friends" to visit his country, which has dropped quarantine requirements for overseas travel.

Official data this week showed that the world's second-biggest economy and major driver of global growth expanded by just 3.0 per cent in 2022, its weakest performance in 40 years.

But Liu said the Chinese economy would "see a significant improvement" in 2023.

Lagarde said China's Covid policy shift "will kill many people" but will "also revive the economy".

It will be both "positive for China" and the rest of the world, she added.

But the world economy is not out of the woods just yet.

China's economic rebound could put more pressure on infla-

tion as demand in the country surges back.

Inflation has started to ease in the United States and Europe after central banks unleashed a wave of jumbo interest rate hikes to get prices under control.

Investors hope that central banks will slow their monetary tightening, but a resurgence of inflation would probably prompt the US Federal Reserve and others to maintain their hardline stance.

Rate increases slow economic activity as borrowing costs rise.

The US tech sector is already feeling the effects of the economic slowdown, with companies announcing tens of thousands of layoffs.

Google's parent company Alphabet announced 12,000 job cuts on Friday, just days after Microsoft said it would slash 10,000 positions.

There is also concern about a brewing trade spat between the United States and Europe over Washington's US\$369bn programme to subsidise electric cars, solar panels and other clean-tech crucial to the US energy transition.

AFP

## Google parent Alphabet cuts 12,000 jobs

San Francisco, US – Google's parent company Alphabet announced Friday it will cut about 12,000 jobs globally, citing a changing economic reality as it became the latest US tech giant to enact large-scale restructuring.

The layoffs come a day after Microsoft said it would reduce staff numbers by 10,000 in the coming months, following similar cuts by Facebook owner Meta, Amazon and Twitter as the tech sector girds for economic downturn.

The cuts follow a major hiring spree during the height of the coronavirus pandemic when companies scrambled to meet demand as people went online for work, school and entertainment.

"Over the past two years we've seen periods of dramatic growth," Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai said in an email to employees.

"To match and fuel that growth, we hired for a different economic reality than the one we face today."

A review is taking place to make sure that people and their roles are in line with the company's priorities, Pichai said, adding that the workforce



In this file photo, a worker walks along a path at Google's Bay View campus in Mountain View, California on June 27, 2022 (AFP)

would be reduced by around 12,000 positions.

Alphabet employed nearly 187,000 workers worldwide at the end of September 2022. The cuts represent a little over 6 per cent of its total workforce.

The cuts will be "across departments, functions, levels of responsibility and regions," Pichai added.

"The fact that these changes will impact the lives of Googlers weighs heavily on me, and I take full responsibility for the decisions that led us here."

## 'Unsustainable'

Pichai said that the cuts would "sharpen our focus" on priorities including artificial intelligence.

"Being constrained in some areas allows us to bet big on others," he said.

Google's world-dominating search engine has found itself under pressure with the emergence of ChatGPT, a Microsoft-backed chatbot that can generate elaborate, human-like content in just seconds.

Microsoft has said the technology will be used to strengthen Bing, the longtime rival to Google

search.

Google has turned to founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who have left their daily roles at the tech titan, for help responding to the threat posed by the chatbot, according to a New York Times report.

Brin and Page met with Google executives several times last month to brainstorm, the Times reported.

Google declined to comment directly on the Times report.

"We have long been focused on developing and deploying AI to improve people's lives," said Google spokesperson Lily Lin.

"We continue to test our AI technology internally to make sure it's helpful and safe, and we look forward to sharing more experiences externally soon."

Pichai announced severance packages for US employees, who will receive at least 16 weeks of salary, their 2022 bonus, paid vacations and six months of health coverage. He said he remained "optimistic about our ability to deliver on our mission, even on our toughest days."

Wall Street welcomed the cuts: Alphabet shares ended the formal trading day up more than 5 percent to US\$98.02.

AFP

## Russia to sell much-needed oil and gas to Pakistan

Pakistan will start importing oil and gas from Russia by March on terms that will ensure "mutual economic benefit", the nations said in a joint statement on Friday.

Since the launch of its military offensive against Ukraine, Moscow has been targeted by Western economic sanctions and has sharply reduced its hydrocarbon deliveries to Europe, turning to Asia to compensate.

"Both sides agreed that after consensus on the technical specifications achieved, the oil and gas trade transaction will be structured in a way such that it has mutual economic benefit for both countries," the statement said.

"The process will be completed in March," it added.

It followed the end of a three day visit by Russian Energy Minister Nikolay Shulginov to Islam-

abad. The Pakistani government announced in early December that Russia had agreed to export oil to energy-starved Pakistan at a reduced price.

Russian crude oil has been subject since December to a European maritime embargo and a price cap decided by the EU, the G7 and Australia, two measures intended to deprive Moscow of significant revenue.

In response, Russia an-

nounced that it would ban from February 1 the sale of its oil to foreign countries that comply with the price cap.

Pakistan, which relies on most of its energy imports from friendly Gulf countries, has long been hit by energy shortages because of a combination of factors including a poor economy, mismanagement and a lack of storage facilities.

AFP

# Bait Al Zubair presents Sufi Music Festival



As part of its celebrations to mark its Silver Jubilee, Bait Al Zubair Foundation is organising the second edition of 'Bait Al Zubair Sufi Music Festival' over three nights at the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort theatre from January 23-25.

The event features three bands from inside and outside Oman. The bands will sing poems by great poets such as Ibn al Farid, Rabia al Adawiya, and Sheikh Jaed al Kharousi, accom-

panied by a professional performance individually and collectively.

The festival will host Sheikh Hamed Dawood Group on the first day whose works are basically related to classical Sufi poets, especially inspired by the famous Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi. The group contains prestigious artists with long professional careers and with the experience of numerous performances in different parts of



the world, performing one of the most captivating aspects of Syria's traditional arts with a spiritual musical atmosphere that leads to entering the universe of mystical art.

On the second day, the Omani Zawia Band will perform, which is a band concerned with mystical and humanistic music. The band was founded in 2015 and has local and Arab participation, including the Fez International Festival of Spiritual Music in Mo-

rocco. The well-known Tanzanian artist, Yahya Baihaqi Hussain, is participating with the band - he is one of the performers of supplications and known for many participations at the Arab and international levels.

The festival nights will be concluded with the Egyptian band, Al Hadrah for Sufi music. It is a singing group that aims to transfer the heritage of Egyptian Sufi societies to theatres, in an artistic manner preserving the most sig-

nificant components of the Egyptian popular religious heritage.

This edition of the festival comes after the success of the first edition of the Festival of Sufi Music, which hosted Ibn Arabi Band from Morocco, Farid Ayaz Band from Pakistan, Salar Aqili Band from Iran, and Al Zawia Band from the Sultanate of Oman. In its first edition, the festival received wide praise from fans of Sufi music.



## Bank Muscat extends discount on GIG Home Insurance

Bank Muscat has announced that the 40 per cent discount currently being offered on Home Contents and Personal Belongings insurance will be extended to January 31.

The bank pointed out that homes and their contents are the most valuable possessions most people own in their lifetimes. Hence, in line with the excellent feedback received so far, and in an effort to ensure that the maximum number of people in the sultanate can protect their homes and everything under its roof against damage or destruction caused by natural disasters or accidents, the bank decided to extend its special offer till the end of the month, a press release said.

events that might take away one's most valued possessions.

It offers exceptional value to both homeowners and tenants. It protects the building and its contents against fire, explosion, lightning, earthquakes, accidental damage, fixture breakage, and the like.

It also offers worldwide personal belongings coverage for valuables such as passports, driver's licenses, legal documents, jewellery, watches, music, sports and portable equipment, laptops, or any other items that customers may carry outside their homes.

Through its tie-up with GIG Gulf, a regional insurer, the bank has successfully served over 200,000 customers with personalised, top-notch solutions such as Life, Saving, Health, and Motor insurance since 2016. In particular, GIG Home Insurance plan is an ideal solution for protection against unexpected

The plan also includes the Owner's and Occupier's Liability Cover, which protects the insured from any claim made against them, and the Tenant's Liability Cover, which protects the insured if they are legally held liable for property damage.

As an added benefit, the insured can choose to cover domestic helpers under the home insurance policy for both medical coverage and repatriation of mortal remains.

## Ooredoo's presents revamped fibre plans

Different households can now choose from different Internet speeds based on their specific needs with Ooredoo's fast, uninterrupted and affordable Fibre Home Internet plans.

Ooredoo offers revamped Fibre Home Internet plans. The

telecom company even added two additional Home Internet plans to their fantastic range of options. One for the gamers and streamers out there who are in need of a lot of speed and one for customers who are not planning to receive and send a

lot of information, a press release said.

Plans now start from just RO24 per month for up to 80 Mbps Internet speed. Or for RO28 per month get up to 120 Mbps (instead of 50) plus OSN, while for just RO35 per

month you can enjoy up to 200 Mbps (instead of 120) plus STARZPLAY and OSN. And for RO45, customers will get 600 Mbps (instead of 300) plus OSN and STARZPLAY, or for RO95 per month up to 1024 Mbps plus STARZPLAY and

OSN.

Backed by Ooredoo's amazing network, fibre makes it even easier to enjoy everything the online world has to offer, for longer with wide coverage across the country, all against reasonable monthly prices.

## Maserati MSG Racing enters new era in Mexico City



Maserati MSG Racing accelerated into a new era for Formula E at the Mexico City E-Prix, with the team narrowly missing out on the top 10 at the Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez.

Facing the dawn of Gen3, drivers Edoardo Mortara and Maximilian Gunther gained invaluable insight during the Season 9 opener and showed promising initial pace following an encouraging pre-season test, a press release said.

A challenging qualifying session - which saw both drivers fall short of the Duel stages - left the duo facing an uphill recovery in the race, in which they started from 16th and 17th.

Edo advanced to 15th on the opening lap by overtaking McLaren's Rene Rast, although the race was quickly paused when a collision for Robin Frijns brought out the Safety Car.

Action was resumed on lap five but was again halted one lap

later when Jaguar's Sam Bird stopped on track with a technical failure. The field took to green flag running again on lap nine.

Edo and Max overtook a penalised Dan Ticktum during the restart, while the latter also passed Rast, who activated Attack Mode, for 15th.

On lap 18, an unfortunate spin and collision caused by a snap of understeer forced Edo to retire, leaving Max as the team's sole runner for the remainder of the race.

With a late Attack Mode activation, the German pilot made good progress to threaten for points in the closing laps and overtook DS Penske's Jean-Eric Vergne on the final tour to finish 11th.

Formula E's ninth season will continue on January 27 and 28, with a double-header event on the Riyadh Street Circuit in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Diriyah.



## ISWK shines at 'Infinity 2023'

Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) teams presented a spectacular performance in the grand finale of 'Infinity 2023' - The Ultimate Math Championship, conducted at Atlas Skill-Tech University, Mumbai, on January 14 and 15.

Ayaan Khan who participated in the Advanced category bagged the prestigious Mathematician of the Year - gold medal while Tanmay Shukla was the Bronze medal winner in the individual round.

The championship, organised by Aditya Birla World Academy (ABWA), Mumbai, in association with BITS Pilani and the University of Waterloo, Canada (Faculty of Mathematics), is a one-of-a-kind international initiative for students to demonstrate their mathematical prowess and refine their skills in



the subject.

The ISWK students were among 600 students from various schools across India and other countries who had participated in two categories - Senior Mathematicians (grades 9 and 10) and Advanced Mathemati-

cians (grades 11 and 12) in this championship.

Three teams from Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir, had been selected from the zonal round and qualified for the finals. Out of the three teams, two made it to the grand finale.

The team members for the Senior category were Bibek Sanjeev, Shouvik Maiti and Taranjot Kaur.

The members of the Advanced Category included Tanmay Shukla, Ayyan Khan and Pranav Jois.



## Indian expat wins two Media City awards

Ramachandran Nair, an Indian expatriate living in Muscat for more than three decades, won two awards at the 9th Media City Film-Television and Media Awards 2022, held in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala recently.

Nair was recognised as Best Script Writer for his short film, My Little Brother, while his musical album 'Karnikaram' was adjudged Best Concept.

The song 'Karnikaram' was presented by popular playback singer K S Chithra.

Although there are many songs about Kerala, the song 'Karnikaram' reminds people about the state's affection, natural beauty, tradition and abundance. Meanwhile, My Little Brother highlights the issue of adoption - it dwells on the issue of loneliness and revolves around a girl who loses her parents quite early in life and is taken care of by her grandfather.

The Media City Film-Television and Media Awards night was held on December 21, 2022, and attended by renowned film, media and political personalities.

# Mercedes-Benz offers limited-time service packages on luxury models

Mercedes-Benz Oman is offering exclusive service packages on two of its high-performance luxury models until February 28.

The offer includes the Mercedes-Benz GLE 450 4MATIC SUV and the Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 4MATIC+ Coupé – both available with a four years/60,000km service package, a press release said.

Commenting on the service package offers, Shaun Michael, CEO at Mercedes-Benz Oman, said, “We always prioritise the overall customer experience. Owning one of our iconic vehicles means having access, luxury features, legacy, superior high-tech convenience and a solid performance, as well as to an excellent after-sales care. Through this offer, customers can experience timeless elegance and unmatched luxury and comfort that comes with owning and driving a

powerful and exquisitely crafted Mercedes-Benz.”

The Mercedes-Benz GLE 450 4MATIC has a wealth of innovations. The active suspension system E-ACTIVE BODY CONTROL on a 48 volt basis is a world first. The interior is spacious and comfortable, with a third seat row available on request. The infotainment system has larger screens, a full-colour head-up display with a resolution of 720 x 240 pixels and the MBUX Interior Assistant, which can recognise hand and arm movements and supports operating intentions.

The Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 4MATIC+ is powered by a 3ltr engine featuring twin-turbocharging and an electric auxiliary compressor. The 6-cylinder in-line engine generates 320 kW (435 hp) and delivers maximum torque of 520 Nm (384 lb/ft).



# Giti Tire-powered Formula ME Championship debuts in UAE

The inaugural round of the new Giti Tire-powered Formula Regional Middle East Championship Certified by FIA (FRMEC) was dramatic.

When the dust settled at the Dubai Autodrome from three sensational races with 27 high-quality, international drivers, a trio of young talents were celebrating victories – despite none of them being in leading positions in the championship, a press release said.

After two years being based exclusively in the United Arab Emirates, the Formula Regional Asian Championship decided that in 2023, it would become a multi-nation series with one of its Emirati rounds swapped for a trip to Kuwait.

Chris Bloor, executive director, International Sales & Marketing at Giti Tire, said, “These high octane races provide a unique platform for Giti to test tires. In these races, Giti is able to push the tires to the extreme under the most challenging con-



ditions. This also provides the unique opportunity for incredible achievements born from the synergy between our engineering and racing teams.”

In the inaugural race at the Dubai Autodrome held on January 14, Nikhil Bohra took advantage of the reversed-grid pole position of race two. Race GP’s 17-year-old Singaporean did not miss a beat in holding his lead all the way from the beginning, ahead of fellow Formula Regional rookie Aiden Neate (Prema Racing).

Another rising star, Taylor

Barnard was once again on the move, rising from behind the pack in eighth position to claim third by the end of the race.

After placing in 12th and 13th positions in the opening two races, Spanish talent Mari Boya claimed all the glory in the finale.

The 18-year-old driver of the Hyderabad Blackbirds by MP Motorsport qualified his team’s car in second place, and got ahead of poleman, Andrea Kimi Antonelli on the opening lap of the final race.

Boya left the Mumbai Falcons Rookie Cup winner, Antonelli,

behind for the rest of the race to take a clear victory, with Pinnacle VAR’s Thai racer, Tسانapol Intraphuvassak, taking home third.

With fourth and sixth positions from earlier races to add to his second in the finale, Italian Antonelli has moved into an early championship lead.

Antonelli, who is supported by the Mercedes Formula 1 team, is six points ahead of his Mumbai Falcons teammate and Ferrari’s Brazilian protégé, Rafael Câmara, with Taylor Barnard a further two points behind.

# Sharjah Archaeology Museum celebrates 30th anniversary

Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA) marks the 30th Anniversary of the opening of the Sharjah Archaeology Museum, the emirate’s first cultural institution that was established in 1993 to showcase archeological material excavated in the emirate of Sharjah and document the rich history that has shaped understanding of the region.

An increase in the number of excavations and unique discoveries in the Emirate of Sharjah, specifically in the city of Kalba and Mleiha, paved the way for establishing the first museum of its kind in the Emirate, a press release said.

Following directives from Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi, member of the Supreme Council and ruler of Sharjah, a committee

comprising Emirati and French museology experts, as well as archaeologists who worked in various Sharjah sites, was tasked in 1988 to help with the establishment of the museum.

Prior to officially inaugurating the museum on the 5th of January in 1993, the ruler of Sharjah gifted the new museum numerous objects of great significance.

He also issued a dedicated law in 1992 that aims to further protect archeological sites and discoveries and to fight the illegal trade and smuggling of artefacts.

“It is a great day for SMA to commemorate this important milestone of a truly one of a kind museum in the UAE and Gulf region,” said Manal Ataya, director general of

Sharjah Museums Authority.

“I am privileged to have had the opportunity over these many years to oversee the development of the museum’s offerings and ensure we have stronger community engagement via our programmes and exhibitions. I have personally been committed to greater scholarship, collaboration and to narrating the remarkable story of the UAE’s ancient history,” Ataya added.

Several halls at the three-floor landmark showcased objects dating back to different eras including the Neolithic era, the 2nd and 3rd millennium BC, the Iron Age, Hellenistic era, and Islamic era. Other halls were dedicated to restoration of artefacts and antiquities.

# Wizz Air Abu Dhabi inaugurates first flight to Ankara in Turkiye

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, the ultra-low-fare national airline of the UAE, has commenced operations on the exciting new route of Ankara, the second largest city in Turkiye and a modern European metropolis with a rich historical heritage.

The new route provides hassle-free, point-to-point travel for tourists and residents in both the UAE and Turkiye, a press release said.

Ankara, the heart of Turkiye and Central Anatolia, boasts plenty of shopping malls, state houses and a bustling nightlife, with unique opportunities to experience its well-preserved architecture. Exciting attractions include old castles and ruins to two extraordinary monuments central to the Turkish story – the Anıtkabir, a tribute to modern Turkiye founder, and the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations – in addition to a vibrant arts and cultural scene.

The national airline now flies to more than 36 destinations in 25 different countries and is ready to accelerate and expand operations further in 2023. The



flight from Abu Dhabi to Ankara operates on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Michael Berlouis, managing director of Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, said, “We welcome the new year by expanding our ever-growing network further into Europe, an important growth region for Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, expanding our eclectic mix of marvellous destinations. Turkiye is unmissable and historic, and throughout this year we will continue to deliver adventurous travel options that are more convenient and affordable for everyone. We are excited for continued growth in 2023, connecting people to create great memories, and we look forward to seeing you onboard

our young and sustainable aircraft soon.”

TAV Esenbo a general manager Nuray Demirer said, “Ankara Esenbo a Airport is recovering well from the effects of the pandemic. In 2022, we handled more than 8.5 million passengers. We are working hard with our stakeholders to increase direct flights from our capital Ankara to the rest of the world. We have made a good start to 2023. We are delighted to welcome Wizz Air Abu Dhabi’s first scheduled flight in Türkiye, Abu Dhabi-Ankara, and to offer our passengers the convenience of a direct flight to a new destination. We look forward to more new routes with Wizz Air.”

# International TT veterans explore Oman

A break in play on the third day of the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships - Muscat 2023 allowed competitors a unique opportunity to explore Oman and become better acquainted with the host city and its surroundings.

While some remained at Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC) to fine tune their technique, many others took the chance to discover Oman with a trip to Wadi Shab and Nizwa last weekend, a press release said.

The World Veteran Table Tennis Championships also welcomes Princess Zeina Rashid of Jordan, ITTF Foundation Board Member and a table tennis player herself, to watch the next round of action and take in the atmosphere. The ITTF Foundation promotes the physical and mental health benefits of table tennis to people of all ages irrespective of gender, culture, social background, or physical ability.

The day concluded with a gala dinner in the evening, prepared by the organising committee to share Omani culture and officially welcome the players to the country. Alongside a traditional meal of local dishes, the visitors



were treated to a musical performance and a chance to immerse themselves in Oman’s rich heritage.

The previous day saw some fierce competition in the Men’s and Women’s Doubles and Mixed Doubles as teams completed their two group matches to determine who would be advancing to the next round.

Soman Ukkath Variath &

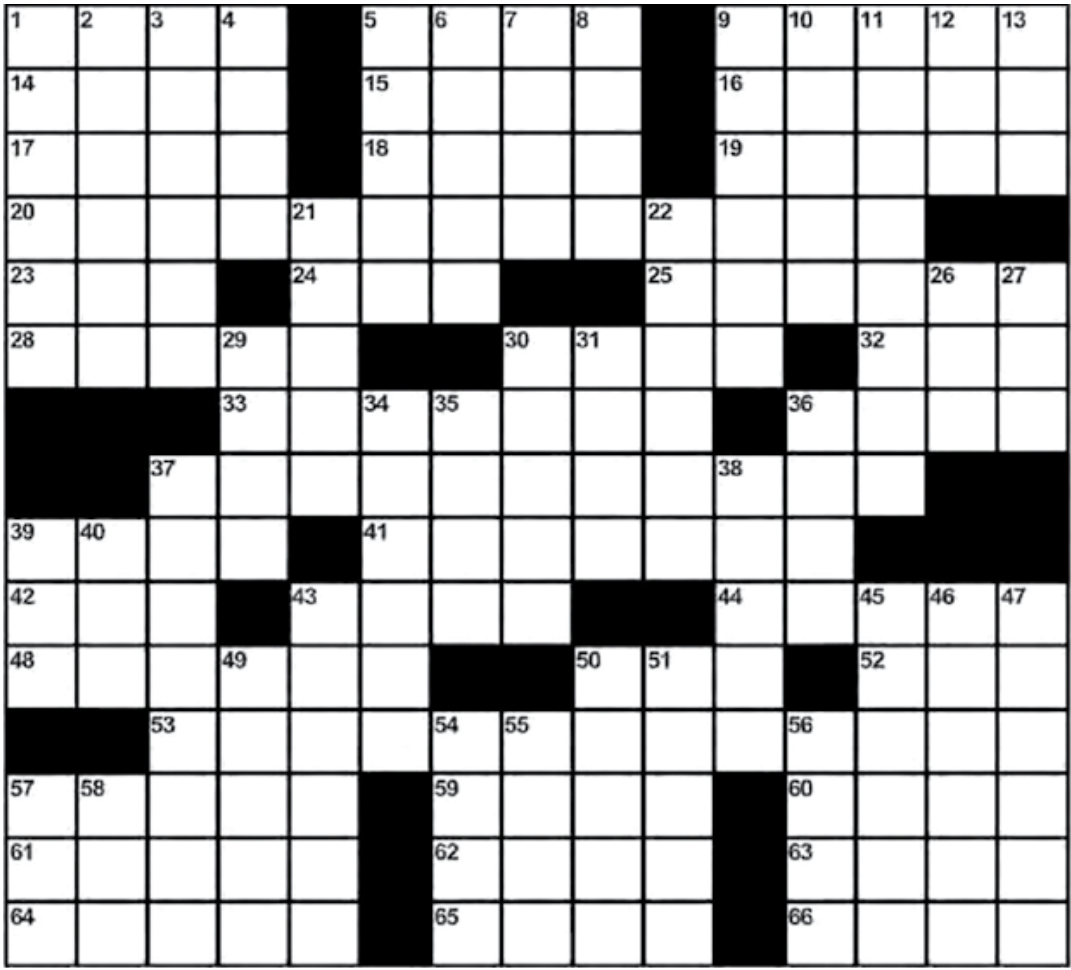
Husam Shalaby advanced to the Round of 32 where they will face Robert Shahnazari and Thor Truelson from the USA. Elsewhere, Diccon Gray and Shirley Gelder of England played out a dramatic five-game match with Stephen Hochman and Wendy Fang of the USA after being pegged back twice and finally triumphed in the deciding game. India’s Jayant Bhalchandra Kulkarni and Neeta

Jayant Kulkarni went through a similar battle in their match with Jean-Marc Leroy of France and Hyelan Kim of Korea, overcoming a tie-break loss in the fourth game to edge the fifth and deciding game and take the match 3-2.

There was an equally dramatic match on table 37 as the German team of Jürgen Bayer and Simone Döbler won three successive games to come back from two down and win over Kailash Nichani and Deepa Vinod Jain of India.

Mohammed bin Salim al Oufi, Treasurer of the Omani Table Tennis Association and a member of the Organising Committee for the World Veteran Table Tennis Championship - Muscat 2023, explained that hosting this world championship in Muscat has greatly enhanced the presence of the Sultanate of Oman on the map of international sports, adding that the Omani Table Tennis Association has worked to host many international tournaments during the past several years, which has contributed to the accumulation of experience among the organising members.

DAILY CROSSWORD



**ACROSS**

1) Beautician, now and then  
5) Wild attempt  
9) Give rise to  
14) Place to roll the dice  
15) Jason's ship, in myth  
16) Falcon's home  
17) In addition to  
18) Conflicted  
19) Slow movement, in music  
20) Breakfast item enhanced by syrup  
23) Rocky prominence  
24) Cockney's roll-call answer  
25) Annoyance  
28) Vow  
30) Astringent  
32) Black gunk  
33) Less huge  
36) Girls that have a ball, briefly  
37) Benign side effect of some antibiotics  
39) Like a billionaire's pockets  
41) Crosspiece over a door  
42) Bank offering

43) Winston Churchill's "Country"  
44) "Hurray!"  
48) Hindu monk (Var.)  
50) Go downhill fast?  
52) Bunting foul with two strikes  
53) Elephantlike creature of old  
57) Church singing group  
59) " \_ old cowhand ... "  
60) Like some threats  
61) Goes up in smoke  
62) Farm division  
63) Fly high  
64) Bank plant  
65) Common rodents  
66) Some farm female

**DOWN**

1) Selections of athletes  
2) Chicken  
3) Make certain  
4) Good vantage point  
5) Man-goat  
6) Figure of speech  
7) Taj Mahal site  
8) Beethoven's birthplace  
9) Islamic salutation  
10) Reaches a maximum

11) One in cuffs  
12) Bald one's blessing  
13) Prefix meaning "new"  
21) Nobel-winning physicist  
Enrico  
22) Butter makers  
26) Chemist's workplace  
27) Triage sites, briefly  
29) "Hurry up!" acronym  
30) Church part  
31) Boxer Spinks  
34) Cunning  
35) Vega's constellation  
36) Russian assembly  
37) Dictionary entry in bold  
38) Other nations, to Israelites  
39) Prefix with "solve" or "respect"  
40) Victorian, for one  
43) "I could eat..."  
45) Bringer of bad luck  
46) Billy the Kid was one  
47) The rest of the group  
49) Accomplishing  
50) Intelligent  
51) Bob and Carol  
54) One failing a polygraph  
55) Pool site, typically

56) Fail to see  
57) Fox rival  
58) Color  
9th May

**NOTE PAD**

CARLOSIGMAIRCA  
BRYANALLANERR  
STAYTOOLONGMEG  
TURNANITADO  
GUPPIESMENTION  
AKAAWAYDAWN  
TAULAGOSLIVES  
ESSEVOKESTARO  
SEEPSSEXTSLAD  
BOLDLEAPTITO  
ELUSIONSTARDOM  
MATPTAENE  
OTTWAITINGLIST  
THOAGLETLADEN  
EENYSESSEXACT

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

When you're working toward a goal, you have every right to use all your skills, not just your intelligence. Today, pull out your secret weapon: your delightful charm! Flash that smile and tell people just how wonderful you think they are. People like to be treated well, and you know how to boost someone's ego without being fake or flirtatious. By helping people lighten up and not take things too seriously, you'll help them take you more seriously.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

It's a strong day for consensus. Others will agree with you, and you'll most likely agree with them. Everyone is on the same page, which means that big projects can move forward more quickly, and fewer egomaniacs are going to feel threatened. You deserve a lot of the credit for getting everyone aligned, and this will be noted in your next discussion with those in power. This is also a great day for resolving conflicts at home. The love you share is bigger than anything else.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

This is a great day to get together and just have fun. Share some laughter with friends. You only need to concern yourselves with sharing and smiles. There is no need to take things too seriously right now, because everything you're involved with is doing just fine. There should be no fires to put out today, so you can relax and use your free time however you want. If you feel like being by yourself, you'll have a great time exploring the world solo.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

The same old, same old suddenly feels a lot fresher today, and you will find yourself actually enjoying your daily routine! There is a lot of comfort in familiar tasks and familiar faces. New adventures can wait. You're in no hurry to get going on any new projects and will enjoy just keep on keeping on with what you're working on now. It's a peaceful, even-keeled day that might not be remarkable but will be very pleasant. And tonight, you'll have a very refreshing night's sleep.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

A joint purchase that you and your partner made recently might suddenly seem like it was a mistake today, either because it's causing some tension between you two or because you're realizing that you don't really need it after all. You have to speak up and share your concerns as soon as you possibly can! Chances are they feel the exact same way, and the two of you can come to a solution together just like you always do!

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

The social games used to be fun and charming, but lately they've become too predictable and tiresome. It's time for a change of plan. People who are all talk and no action need to be avoided. Instead, you need to spend more time with people who commit to things and know how to follow through. Align yourself with people you can depend on. Shifts happen from time to time in relationships, and this is a necessary one.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Your focus should be on fun today: having it, creating it, and commemorating it. Celebrations can happen for any reason at any time, and you're in just the type of mood that will enable you to prove that very point! Make a party happen wherever you go, and don't take anything too seriously. Bad news has taken a vacation from your life, and you deserve it. Amusing people are eager to share their amusing stories, so be encouraging and help other people ride the fun wave you're on.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Positive attention is headed your way, and it could be a super day for your ego! Someone has been looking for an intriguing influence or inspiration in their life, and you could be the one they choose today whether you're ready or not. Step up to the plate and do your best to be there for them. There is no pressure on you. Just do your thing and they'll love every single minute of it. You have a lot of confident energy, and all the pieces will fall into place.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You've still got a few deep feelings about your career that aren't going to go away any time soon. Deal with them today by having a conversation with someone you trust. If you feel you're in the wrong situation, talk to someone who's been through it. While a coworker or supervisor might seem like an obvious candidate, avoid talking to anyone who's too close to your situation. They're likely to have their own issues and agendas regarding you and your job.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

The active nature of the day will serve as a wonderful distraction from whatever or whoever has been bugging you lately, so dive into the chaos and relish that fact that when your brain is busy solving problems, it can't be dwelling on things you have no control over. Work is the greatest escape for you and your friends, so let them get lost in their jobs too. Don't hound them for one-on-one time right now. They might not have time for you.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Making a sacrifice is never much fun, but today if you give in to someone else's demands, you'll be making things a lot easier on yourself. Every conflict you encounter isn't a battle to be won. Some of them are just hazards you have to maneuver through as safely as you can. However, if someone asks you to give up something for the sake of a relationship, make sure that's not just their way of asking you to give something up for their sake. Don't relent too soon.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

When you know you're right, you're right, so listen to what that little voice in your head is telling you today. It has valuable insight that you need. Someone's invitation could catch you a bit off guard today, but it will also show you a glimpse of your possible future. Is this the path you really want to take? Tune in to that voice again and do whatever it says. Picking the right path shouldn't be something you deliberate over for days. It should be something you just do.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Who sang, backed by U2, as the first song in the Live 8 concert in Hyde Park, London, in 2005?

A. Mick Jagger  
B. Elton John  
C. David Bowie  
D. Paul McCartney

02. What concept was described and highlighted in a 1983 book edited by European-British historian Eric Hobsbawm and British Africanist Terence Ranger?

A. Pizza effect  
B. Invented tradition  
C. Imagined community  
D. Folklorism

03. Which of these entertainments was introduced to the western world last?

A. Sudoku  
B. Frisbee  
C. Chess  
D. Mah Jong

Answers: 1.D 2.B 3. A

KIDS COLOURING



**BOGGLER**

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| M | U | C | S |
| N | O | G | D |
| O | E | S | G |
| O | U | I | I |

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

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

**DO YOU SUDOKU?**

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

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

**WORD BUILDER**



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

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

**SUDOKU EASY ANSWER**

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

# Turkey cancels visit by Sweden minister

The visit was called off over a planned demonstration by a right-wing extremist in Stockholm

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkey on Saturday called off a visit by Sweden's defence minister over a planned demonstration by a right-wing extremist in Stockholm. Turkey has been angered by permission obtained by Rasmus Paludan, a Swedish-Danish politician whose anti-Islamist actions sparked riots across Sweden last year, to stage a protest in front of its embassy in the Swedish capital.

A day after summoning the Swedish ambassador over the issue, Ankara said it was cancelling a visit by Sweden's defence chief that was aimed at overcoming Turkey's objections to Sweden's bid to join the NATO military alliance.

"At this point, Swedish Defence Minister Pal Jonson's visit to Turkey on January 27 has lost its significance and meaning, so we cancelled the visit," Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said. Jonson also confirmed the decision to postpone the visit, which he said was made together with Akar at the US military base in Ramstein, Germany, on Friday.

"Our relations with Turkey are very important to Sweden,



An effigy of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seen dangling by his legs from a rope near the Stockholm City Hall, Sweden on January 13 (AFP)

and we look forward to continuing the dialogue on common security and defence issues at a

later date," he tweeted. Paludan has expressed his intention to 'burn the Q'uran',

Islam's holy book, during his protest on Saturday. In April last year, Paludan's

announcement of a Q'uran burning 'tour' for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan

sparked riots across Sweden. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu hoped that Swedish authorities would not allow the protest. "It's a racist action, it's not about freedom of expression," he said.

**'Modern barbarism'** Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin on Saturday condemned the planned protest, slamming it as a 'clear crime of hatred'.

"Allowing this action despite all our warnings is encouraging hate crimes and Islamophobia," he tweeted. "The attack on sacred values is not freedom but modern barbarism."

Turkey had on Friday summoned Sweden's ambassador to 'condemn this provocative action which is clearly a hate crime - in strongest terms,' a diplomatic source said.

Foreign ministry officials told the ambassador that Sweden's permission for the protest in the pretext of defending democratic values was 'unacceptable', the source added.

This is the second time in more than a week that Swe-

den's ambassador to Turkey was summoned.

Last week, he was called to answer for a video posted by a Kurdish group in Stockholm that depicted President Recep Tayyip Erdogan swinging by his legs from a rope.

A tweet by the group, Rojava Committee of Sweden, compared Erdogan to Italy's Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who was hung upside down after his execution in the closing days of World War II.

Sweden, along with neighbouring Finland, needs Turkey's consent to join NATO.

Both countries dropped decades of military non-alignment last year when they applied to join the Western defence alliance in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Ankara says any progress depends on Swedish steps to extradite people it accuses of terrorism or of having played a part in the 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan.

Turkey argues that Sweden has not done enough to crack down on Kurdish groups that Ankara views as 'terrorist'. AFP

## Thousands protest in Spain against government

Madrid, Spain - Thousands of people protested in Madrid on Saturday against Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's leftist government in a rally held in a key election year that was backed by far-right party Vox.

Participants waved red and yellow Spanish flags and called on Sanchez to resign. Some held up signs with a photo of the Socialist premier calling him a 'traitor'. Around 30,000 people gathered in Madrid's Cibeles Square for the rally, according to the central government's delegation in the Spanish capital. Organisers said some 700,000 people had taken part.

The protest was called by dozens of right-leaning civil society groups and backed by conservative parties including the main opposition conservative Popular Party (PP) and Vox.

The right is angered by the government's decision to abolish the crime of sedition, of which nine separatist leaders were convicted over their role in the Catalonia region's abortive secession bid in 2017. It was replaced with an offence carrying a lower prison sentence.

Conservatives are also angered by a flagship law against sexual violence that toughened penalties for rape but eased sentences for other sexual crimes.

Speaking to reporters at the start of the rally, Vox leader Santiago Abascal denounced 'the worst government in history' which 'has divided Spaniards and freed rapists and coup leaders'.

PP leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo, who has tried to push the party to the centre since becoming its leader in April, was not at the rally but encouraged members for the formation to attend.

Most polls suggest the PP would win a general election expected at the end of the year but would need the support of Vox to govern. Spain will vote in May in regional and local elections. Lacking a parliamentary majority, Sanchez's government has been forced since its formation to negotiate with Basque and Catalan separatists to pass bills.

AFP

## Iran Guards warn EU terror label would be 'mistake'

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on Saturday warned the European Union against making a 'mistake' by listing it as a terror group, after the bloc's parliament called for the measure.

Members of the European Parliament voted on Wednesday to include the IRGC on the 27-nation bloc's terror list in 'light of its terrorist activity, the repression of protesters and its supplying of drones to Russia'.

The vote is non-binding but comes with EU foreign ministers already due to discuss tightening sanctions on the Islamic republic next week. "If the Europeans make a mistake, they must accept the consequences," IRGC chief Major General Hossein Salami said, according to the Guards' Sepah News website, in his first remarks on the EU move.

The European Union 'thinks that with such statements it can shake this huge army', Salami said.

"We are never worried about such threats or even acting on them, because as

much as our enemies give us a chance to act, we act stronger," he added.

The Guards oversee the volunteer Basij paramilitary force, which has been deployed against protests since mid-September triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, 22, after her arrest for allegedly violating Iran's dress code for women. Authorities in Iran say hundreds of people, including members of the security forces, have been killed and thousands arrested in the unrest.

The Guards, formed shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, answer to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and boast their own ground, naval and air forces. The United States has already placed both the IRGC and its foreign arm, the Quds Force, on its list of 'foreign terrorist organisations'.

Salami's comments came as he received Iran's parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a former commander of the Guards air force.

AFP

## Canada to repatriate 23 citizens detained in northeast Syria

Montreal, Canada - Canada will repatriate twenty-three citizens who have been detained in northeast Syria in camps for family members of Islamic State group fighters, officials and a lawyer said on Friday.

It would be the largest such repatriation of IS family members yet for Canada, and it comes after the families challenged the government in court, arguing Ottawa was obliged to repatriate the group under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Earlier on Friday, the foreign ministry announced its decision to repatriate six Canadian women and 13 infants. And a court later ruled that four men seeking repatriation as part of the group must also be sent back to Canada, said lawyer Barbara Jackman, who is representing one of the men.

"I've spoken to the parents and they're really, really happy," Jackman said of the court decision, adding that the judge requested that the men be repatriated 'as soon as reasonably possible'.

The foreign ministry said in a statement: "The safety and se-



This file photo shows the Kurdish-run al-Hol camp, which holds relatives of suspected IS group fighters in the northeastern Hasakeh governorate on August 26, 2022 (AFP)

*We continue to evaluate provision of assistance on a case by case basis, including repatriation*

FOREIGN MINISTRY

curity of Canadians is our government's top priority.

"We continue to evaluate the provision of extraordinary assistance on a case by case basis, including repatriation to Canada, in line with the policy framework adopted in 2021," it said. Up until now the government of Justin Trudeau has treated the detained IS families

on a case-by-case basis, and in four years only a handful of women and children have been repatriated.

Since the destruction of the so-called Islamic State 'caliphate' across Syria and Iraq in 2019, more than 42,400 foreign adults and children have been held in camps in Syria.

AFP

## Israeli civilian kills Palestinian at West Bank farm: Army

Sde Efraim, Palestinian Territories - An Israeli civilian shot dead a Palestinian on Saturday at a settler farm in the occupied West Bank after an attempted stabbing, the army said, the latest incident as violence surges in the territory.

A 'terrorist was neutralised' during the 'attempted stabbing attack' at Sde Efraim farm northwest of Ramallah, the Israeli military said, confirming a civilian had shot dead a Palestinian. The Palestinian health ministry said 42-year-old Tariq Maali was killed 'after the occupation (Israel) opened fire on him' near the Palestinian village of Kafr Nama.

The shooting brings to 18 the number of Palestinians killed so far this month in the West Bank, according to an AFP tally which



Israeli security forces close-off the area of a reported stabbing attack in the occupied West Bank, on Saturday (AFP)

includes fighters and civilians. An AFP photographer saw Israeli forces preventing a

Palestinian ambulance from accessing the site. Mahmoud Aidi, a Palestinian medic, said first

responders tried to reach the scene but there was 'a strong army presence concentrated on

the hill, and we weren't permitted to reach the person killed'.

The army said an Israeli ambulance took away the body of a man who had 'already dead at the scene, so there was no medical treatment to be given'.

No one else was wounded in the confrontation, it added.

The farm is known as a wildcat settlement, or an outpost not recognised by Israel, according to Israeli anti-settlement movement Peace Now.

### Rising toll

All settlements are deemed illegal under international law, which Israel disputes.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu plans to pursue a policy of increased settlement expansion in the West Bank, and ultra-Orthodox

Jewish parties in his coalition advocate the annexation of some of the territory.

The inauguration in December of the most right-wing government in Israel's history, led by Netanyahu, has sparked fears of a military escalation in the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War. The majority of the 18 Palestinians killed this year were shot dead by Israeli forces.

Violence this month adds to a toll which saw more than 150 Palestinians killed in the West Bank last year, the highest annual figure since United Nations records began in 2005.

At least 26 Israelis and 200 Palestinians were killed across Israel and the Palestinian territories in 2022. AFP

# Chris Hipkins vows to win election as next New Zealand prime minister

Auckland, New Zealand - New Zealand's incoming prime minister Chris Hipkins vowed on Saturday to 'get things done' and win a looming October general election after being chosen as his party's only candidate to replace Jacinda Ardern.

The 44-year-old red-headed politician emerged as the sole nominee to lead the ruling Labour Party in a meeting of fellow members of parliament, and now faces what is seen as the mere formality of a confirmation by his colleagues on Sunday.

As leader of the party, he will take over as the country's 41st prime minister following Ardern's shock resignation on Thursday. Ardern said she would step down by February 7 but could do so earlier given that her successor was chosen in barely 48 hours.

"I like to think I am pretty decisive and I can get things done," said Hipkins, who became a household name for leading the nation's COVID-19 crackdown for nearly two years.

With his party lagging in the opinion polls under criticism over rising prices, poverty and crime rates, reporters gathered outside parliament in Wellington asked if he can win general elections to be held on October 14.

"Yes," he replied. Ardern, a global figurehead for progressive politics, stunned



Chris Hipkins leaves after speaking to media outside Parliament in Wellington on Saturday (AFP)

New Zealand by announcing her abrupt exit from office, less than three years after securing a second term in a landslide election win.

The 42-year-old - who steered the country through natural disasters, the COVID pandemic, and its worst-ever terror attack - said she no longer had 'enough in the tank'.

Ardern said her decision to step down was 'tinged with sadness'

but after having made the announcement she had 'slept well for the first time in a long time'.

Political commentators have lined up to condemn the social media abuse that was increasingly directed at Ardern before her resignation.

## 'Intolerable vitriol'

Hipkins praised Ardern as 'the leader we needed at the time

that we needed it', but agreed that she had been on the receiving end of 'absolutely intolerable vitriol'.

Ardern's successor is widely seen as a safe pair of hands with more than 14 years in parliament. Hipkins told reporters he was feeling 'energised and enthusiastic' about the new job.

"It's a big day for a boy from the Hutt," he said, referring to the Hutt Valley region near Wellington.

ton. "My parents came from relatively humble beginnings and worked really hard to provide a good life for my brother and I," Hipkins added, vowing to give New Zealanders the opportunities to improve their lives.

*I like to think I am pretty decisive and I can get things done. It's a big day for a boy from the Hutt. My parents came from relatively humble beginnings and worked really hard to provide a good life for my brother and I*

CHRIS HIPKINS

The incoming prime minister said he had already spoken to Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

He declined to give policy or ministerial plans beyond saying that he did plan to keep Finance Minister Grant Robertson in place.

Opposition leader Chris Luxon of the centre-right National Party congratulated Hipkins but said: "The reality is that he's been a

critical part of a government that has failed to get anything done."

"Just changing the leadership of the Labour Party doesn't do enough for the New Zealand people."

Hipkins' selection quashed speculation that Justice Minister Kiri Allan, one of Labour's senior Maori MPs, might have become the country's first Maori prime minister.

## 'Incredibly strong'

Allan praised Hipkins as decisive and said she believed he would be 'an incredibly strong prime minister'.

Hipkins won plaudits for his near two-year term as the COVID response minister in a country that shut down its borders to keep the coronavirus out, only fully reopening in August last year. He conceded last year that people were fed up with the strict pandemic restrictions, describing the border closures as 'tough going'.

Hipkins told reporters on Saturday that he likes cycling, gardening, DIY and being outdoors but conceded: "Maybe I don't have the best fashion sense in parliament."

Asked about whether being a red-haired prime minister would be a historic moment, he said: "I think it was about time we had a ginger at the top."

AFP

## 3 killed in shoot-out in southern Thailand

Narathiwat, Thailand - Three people were killed in a jungle shoot-out between government forces and separatist rebels in Thailand's troubled deep south, police said on Saturday.

A low-level conflict has simmered in the country's southernmost provinces since 2004, killing more than 7,000 people, as rebels in the Muslim-majority region battle for greater autonomy from the state. Thai police and soldiers on Friday trekked up a mountain in Narathiwat province, where they encountered an armed separatist group that began shooting, according to police.

"They started to shoot at us so we had to retaliate, which left three people dead," local police chief Suthon Sukwiset told AFP, adding they were all Thai Muslims. "We discovered three M16s in their possession and have confiscated them."

No police or troops were killed or injured in the operation.

Thailand's far south - heavily policed by security forces - is culturally distinct from the rest of the Buddhist-majority country, which colonised the area bordering Malaysia over a century ago.

Representatives of the Thai government and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional rebel group met in Kuala Lumpur last year for their first in-person peace talks in about two years.

AFP

## Tunisia detains critic of President Kais Saied

Tunis, Tunisia - Plainclothes security officers in Tunisia detained a prominent critic of President Kais Saied in the early hours of Saturday after a military court ruling, his lawyer told AFP.

Seifeddine Makhoulf had been found guilty of insulting police during a standoff at Tunis airport in March 2021.

Makhoulf, head of Islamist nationalist party Al-Karama, shouted 'down with the coup' and 'long live Tunisia' before being bundled into a car, according to a Facebook video posted by the lawyer. Rights groups say military trials of civilians have become increasingly common in Tunisia since a power grab by Saied.

Tunis military appeals court on Friday sentenced Makhoulf

to 14 months in prison with immediate effect, his lawyer Ines Harrath told AFP.

A court had initially sentenced him to five months' jail. "Around 25 officers in plainclothes surrounded his house at 11pm," Harrath said.

After a two-hour standoff, 'they came into the house and he left with them'. Makhoulf has been a prominent critic of Saied, who in July 2021 froze parliament and seized far-reaching executive powers in what critics have called a 'coup' and an attack on the only democracy to have emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings.

Saied later took control of the judiciary and pushed through a new constitution.

AFP

# US designates Russia's Wagner group a 'transnational criminal organisation'

Washington, US - The United States on Friday designated Russia's Wagner group as a 'transnational criminal organisation,' piling pressure on the private Russian army fighting in Ukraine.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said Wagner, controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman close to President Vladimir Putin, has about 50,000 fighters in Ukraine, 80 per cent of them drawn from prisons.

Kirby showed US intelligence photographs of North Korea supplying arms to Wagner for its Ukraine operations, and said the private army has become a rival to the formal Russian military.

The photographs, from November 18-19, show Russian rail cars entering North Korea, picking up a load of infantry rockets



John Kirby speaks during a White House daily news briefing at the James S Brady Press Briefing Room on Friday (AFP)

and missiles, and returning to Russia, he said.

He said the US Treasury was formally designating Wagner as a transnational criminal organisation, putting it in league with Italian mafia groups and Japanese

and Russian organised crime.

The designation will allow the wider application of sanctions on the group's sprawling global network, which includes mercenary operations as well as businesses in Africa and elsewhere.

Wagner 'is a criminal organisation that is committing widespread atrocities and human rights abuses', Kirby said.

"We will work relentlessly to identify, disrupt, expose and target those who are assisting Wagner," he said. Kirby also said the United States had presented its intelligence on Wagner's North Korean purchase to the UN Security Council's unit on North Korea sanctions.

The arms transfers from North Korea are in direct violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, Kirby said.

Kirby said there is evidence that Prigozhin's confidence in Wagner fighters' relative success in Ukraine has generated tensions in the Kremlin. "Wagner is becoming a rival power centre to the Russian military and other

Russian ministries," Kirby said.

"Prigozhin is trying to advance his own interest in Ukraine and Wagner is making military decisions based largely on what they will generate for Prigozhin, in terms of positive publicity."

Prigozhin has claimed credit for Russian advances over several months towards the eastern Ukraine city of Bakhmut, including the capture last week of neighbouring Soledar.

On Thursday, Prigozhin said in a press statement Russia has 'a lot to learn' from Ukraine's army.

But he insisted 'the settlement of Artemovsk will be captured', using the Russian name for Bakhmut. Wagner was founded in 2014 and has been involved in conflicts in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

AFP

# Peru protests rage on despite president's plea for calm

Lima, Peru - Stone-throwing protesters fought pitched battles with police at fresh demonstrations demanding the resignation of Peruvian President Dina Boluarte on Friday, while several hundred tourists were left stranded near Machu Picchu.

Civil unrest since the ouster of Boluarte's predecessor, Pedro Castillo, in early December has left 45 people dead and prompted the government to impose a state of emergency in violence-hit areas.

On Friday, security forces fired tear gas at demonstrators using slingshots in the flashpoint southern city of Arequipa.

Crowds tried for a second consecutive day to invade an airport runway that has been closed and put under the guard of security forces.

A mob burned down a district police station and set fire to a

customs post in Desaguadero, a southern town on the border with Bolivia, local television reported. Clashes also erupted in the northern region of La Libertad, despite a plea by Boluarte for calm.

In the capital Lima, thousands of protesters branded Boluarte a 'murderer' and chanted 'This democracy is not a democracy!' as they took to the streets again.

"We want Dina's resignation. If she doesn't resign, the people will not be at peace," said Olga Mamani, 50.

The airport in the popular tourist destination of Cusco reopened, prompting travelers to queue up for flights. But rail services to the famed Machu Picchu remained suspended, leaving at least 300 people stranded in the town closest to the Inca citadel pleading to be evacuated.

"We're uncertain as to



Demonstrators protect themselves with improvised shields during clashes with riot police within a protest against the government of President Dina Boluarte, in Lima on Friday (AFP)

whether a train is going to come to pick us up," Alem Lopez, a visitor from Chile, told AFP.

In December, around 200

stranded tourists were flown out of the area by helicopter.

The protesters are trying to keep up pressure on the govern-

ment, defying a state of emergency that now covers almost one-third of the country.

The violence has left 44 civil-

ians and one police officer dead.

## 'People disown you'

On Thursday, thousands of people marched through the capital Lima in a large anti-government rally punctuated by clashes with police.

"Dina listen, the people disown you," they chanted, while others called for the president to be assassinated.

Castillo, a former rural school teacher, was removed from office and arrested on December 7 after attempting to dissolve the country's legislature and rule by decree, amid multiple corruption investigations. The crisis also reflects the huge gap between the capital and the rural provinces, which supported Castillo and saw his election as revenge for Lima's contempt.

Rural villagers saw Castillo, who hails from the Andean re-

gion of Peru and has Indigenous roots, as one of their own running the country.

Boluarte, who was Castillo's vice president, succeeded him, but even though she is from the same left-wing party, Castillo supporters rejected her, even calling her a 'traitor'.

Boluarte appealed for dialogue in a message broadcast on state television.

'I will not tire' of seeking peaceful ways to move the country forward, she said late on Thursday, adding that the 'acts of violence generated throughout December and now in January will not go unpunished'.

But her words fell on deaf ears. "This government does not represent us," said Ricardo Mamani, 47, who said he traveled more than 40 hours to take part in the march in Lima.

AFP

INDIA

# Government blocks BBC documentary on PM Modi

New Delhi, India - Multiple YouTube videos sharing the first episode of the BBC documentary *India: The Modi Question* have been blocked as per the directions issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, sources said on Saturday.

Along with YouTube videos, the Centre has also directed Twitter to block over 50 tweets containing links to the concerned YouTube videos. Both YouTube and Twitter complied with the government after directions were reportedly issued by Secretary, Information and Broadcasting on Friday using the emergency powers under the IT Rules, 2021.

UK's National broadcaster British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired a two-part series attacking PM Modi's tenure as Gujarat Chief Minister during the Gujarat riots of 2002. The documentary sparked outrage and was removed from select platforms.

On Thursday, India denounced the controversial BBC documentary series on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and described it as a 'propaganda



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a rally in Mumbai on Thursday (AFP)

piece' that is designed to push a discredited narrative.

"We think this is a propaganda piece designed to push a particular discredited narrative. The bias and the lack of objectivity and frankly continuing colonial mindset are blatantly

visible," said External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi.

Even though the documentary was not made available in India by BBC in India, some YouTube channels appear to have uploaded it to promote an

anti-India agenda.

Sources said that YouTube has also been instructed to block the video if it is again uploaded on its platform. They added Twitter has also been directed to identify and block the tweets containing the link to the

video on other platforms.

This decision was made after top government officials from across several ministries examined the documentary and found it to be an attempt to cast aspersions on the authority and credibility of the Supreme Court of India and sow divisions among various Indian commu-

*We think this is a propaganda piece designed to push a discredited narrative. The bias and the lack of objectivity are blatantly visible*

ARINDAM BAGCHI

nities. The sources added that the documentary was accordingly found to be undermining sovereignty and integrity of India, and having the potential to adversely impact India's relations with foreign States.

ANI

## Air India fined over drunk passenger's urination

New Delhi, India - Air India has been fined US\$37,000 for its handling of an incident in which a drunk senior US bank executive was accused of urinating on a female passenger, Indian media reported.

The man allegedly relieved himself on the 72-year-old woman seated in business class on a November 26 flight from New York to New Delhi, an incident dubbed 'peeagate' by the media. The Indian Directorate General of Civil Aviation also fined Air India's director of in-flight services 300,000 rupees in addition to the carrier's penalty of three million rupees (US\$37,000), reports on Friday and Saturday said.

The flight's pilot also had his license suspended for three months for 'failing to discharge his duties' to ensure safety and discipline.

The banker, Indian na-

tional Shankar Mishra, was allowed to disembark as normal when the aircraft landed in India and no immediate action was taken.

The woman complained and, after the story was widely reported in the Indian media, police arrested Mishra weeks later after he went to ground and reportedly switched off his phone.

US bank Wells Fargo fired him from his job as vice president of its Indian operations after the 'deeply disturbing' allegations.

Air India faced severe criticism for its handling of the woman's complaint and the airline's chief executive was forced to issue an apology. "Air India acknowledges that it could have handled these matters better, both in the air and on the ground and is committed to taking action," chief executive Campbell Wilson said.

AFP

# Wrestlers call off protest over sexual harassment allegations

New Delhi, India - India's top wrestlers have called off a protest after the head of the sport's national federation reportedly agreed to step aside until claims of sexual harassment against him are investigated. Dozens of male and female wrestlers, including Olympic and Commonwealth medallists, had announced a boycott of all competitions until Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh was removed.

Singh, who is also a member of parliament from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has denied the allegations.

Wrestler Bajrang Punia announced the decision to call off

the protest after talks with India's Sports Minister Anurag Thakur on Friday.

"The minister told us that a committee will be formed (to look into the allegations) and it will complete its work in one month," Punia told reporters. "We are confident that a thorough probe will be conducted."

Thakur said Singh 'will step aside' until the investigation is completed within four weeks, the *Times of India* reported.

The protesting athletes were being led by Vinesh Phogat, a three-time Commonwealth Games champion and one of India's most decorated woman wrestlers.

Phogat has accused Singh of



Indian wrestlers Bajrang Punia, Anshu Malik, Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik along with other wrestlers take part in an ongoing protest against the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), in New Delhi on Thursday (AFP)

harassing 'several young wrestlers' and said that she knew 'at least 10 to 20 girls' who had recounted sexual harassment at wrestling camps.

She has said that both girls and boys have come forward to accuse other senior figures in the sport of harassment and bullying. In a letter to P.T. Usha, president of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) on Friday, Phogat and other top athletes said it had taken a lot of courage for them to come forward.

Phogat said that she was 'mentally harassed and tortured' by Singh after she failed to win an Olympic medal and 'almost contemplated suicide'.

Hours after receiving the let-

ter, the IOA announced a seven-member panel to investigate all harassment charges against Singh. He has dismissed the allegations as a political ploy to usurp his position and told media he was 'ready to be hanged' if even a single woman wrestler proved the sexual harassment charge.

India is a deeply hierarchical society and Phogat said many wrestlers were intimidated into not coming forward because of their humble origins.

The allegations come months after the coach of the country's national cycling team was sacked following sexual harassment charges.

AFP

## Avalanche in Tibet: Search for survivors ends

Beijing, China - Search and rescue operations after a devastating avalanche that engulfed travellers on a Tibetan highway have ended, Chinese state media reported, with the death toll now at 28.

The snowslide occurred on Tuesday evening at the exit of a mountain tunnel in southeastern Tibet, trapping a number of people in their vehicles.

China's Ministry of Emergency Management sent a disaster response team to the region the following day.

The death toll from the incident had risen to 28, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported on Friday.

"The search and rescue operation came to an end at 5:30pm on Friday," Xinhua said citing rescue authorities.

The avalanche at the Duoxiongla Tunnel was 'triggered by powerful winds and rising temperatures on Tuesday,' experts from the local emergency rescue headquarters

told Xinhua.

Avalanches are common in the Himalayas, home to the

*The snowslide occurred on Tuesday evening at the exit of a mountain tunnel in southeastern Tibet, trapping a number of people. The death toll from the incident had risen to 28*

world's highest mountains.

In October, at least 26 people died when a mountaineering expedition was caught in an avalanche on Mount Draupadi ka Danda-II in India's northern state of Uttarakhand.

AFP

# Germany faces backlash over refusal to supply Ukraine with its Leopard tanks

Kyiv, Ukraine - Germany faced a strong backlash from allies on Saturday over its refusal to supply Ukraine with its vaunted Leopard tanks to bolster its fighting capacity in the nearly year-long war with Russia.

On Friday, some 50 nations agreed to provide Kyiv with billions of dollars' worth of military hardware, including armoured vehicles and munitions needed to push back Russian forces.

But German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius told reporters on the sidelines of the event at the US Ramstein Air Base that despite heightened expectations, 'we still cannot say when a decision will be taken, and what the decision will be, when it comes to the Leopard tank'.

Ukraine on Saturday denounced the 'global indecision' of its allies on providing heavy-duty modern tanks, saying 'today's indecision is killing more of our people'.

"Every day of delay is the death of Ukrainians. Think faster," presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak tweeted.

Several allies echoed Ukrain-



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky offers relatives his condolences during the funeral ceremony of Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky and other employees, at the Ukrainian House in Kyiv on Saturday (AFP)

ian President Volodymyr Zelensky in saying the tanks were essential to Ukraine's fight with its much larger neighbour.

In a joint statement - and a rare public criticism of Europe's top power - the foreign ministers of the three Baltic states said they 'call on Germany to provide Leopard tanks to Ukraine now'.

"This is needed to stop Russian aggression, help Ukraine and restore peace in Europe quickly. Germany as the leading European power has special responsibility in this regard," said the statement, tweeted by Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics.

Berlin has been hesitant to

send the Leopards or allow other nations to transfer them to Kyiv, with reports earlier in the week saying it would agree to do so only if the US provided its tanks as well. Washington has said providing its Abrams tanks to Ukraine is not feasible, citing difficulties in training and maintenance.

But expectations had grown ahead of Friday's Ukraine Contact Group meeting of around 50 US-led countries that Germany would at least agree to let other countries operating Leopards transfer them to Kyiv's army.

### Funeral

In Kyiv on Saturday, Zelensky attended the funeral of his interior minister and other officials who were killed in a helicopter crash outside the capital on Wednesday. Denys Monastyrsky, one of Zelensky's top aides, became the highest-ranking Ukrainian official to die in the war that Russia launched on February 24, 2022.

The cause of the crash that killed him and 13 others when the chopper fell near a kindergarten was still under investigation.

US officials said Ukraine still faced an uphill battle against Russian forces who still occupy one-fifth of the country 11 months after invading.

But they spoke of a possible campaign in the coming weeks by Ukraine to retake parts of its territory.

AFP

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# SAVOURING THE MOMENT

‘Every season counts now’ says Novak Djokovic after he battles past Grigor Dimitrov to make Australian Open last 16

Melbourne, Australia - An ailing Novak Djokovic said Saturday every moment counted now that he was in the “last stage” of his career, after battling past Grigor Dimitrov and into the Australian Open last 16.

The Serb came through a titanic 77-minute first set before taming the Bulgarian 7-6 (9/7), 6-3, 6-4 on Rod Laver Arena, needing treatment twice on his troublesome hamstring.

He will face home hope Alex de Minaur for a place in the quarter-finals after the 22nd seed equalled his best result at the tournament by defeating Frenchman Benjamin Bonzi in three sets.

Djokovic’s gutsy win inched him nearer to a 10th Australian Open title and record-tying 22 Grand Slam crowns.

Winning once again in Melbourne would also return him to world number one for the first time since June.

Now 35, Djokovic said he was savouring each tournament more. “Every season counts I guess now, when you come to the last stage, the last quarter, of your career,” he said.

“Obviously you start appreciating and valuing each tourna-

ment more because you might not have a lot left in the tank.

“I’ve been truly fortunate to do what I love, I love the sport, I love competing. It’s been almost 20 years now of professional sport. I can’t be more grateful than I am.”

Victory put Djokovic into the last 16 for a 15th time but he was

*I’ve been truly fortunate to do what I love, I love the sport, I love competing. It’s been almost 20 years now of professional sport. I can’t be more grateful than I am*

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

made to work for it, especially with his left hamstring troubling him.

“Every point, every game mattered,” he said.

“Obviously I didn’t know how I’m going to feel physically, it was going up and down,” he said.

“It was an incredible battle, three sets over three hours.”

Djokovic aggravated his hamstring during his run to a 92nd title at the Adelaide International this month and has been struggling with it since.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates his victory against Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov in Melbourne on Saturday (AFP)

De Minaur, who is aiming for a first quarter-final at Melbourne Park, now awaits Djokovic after a 7-6 (7/0), 6-2, 6-1 victory.

“These are the matches you want to be playing,” said the Australian.

“I’m gonna probably have the

best in the world in front of me and I’m ready for the battle.”

Fifth seed Andrey Rublev surged into a last-16 clash with Holger Rune - then thanked his beaten opponent Dan Evans for giving him a banana mid-match. The Russian crushed the

Briton 6-4, 6-2, 6-3 to make the fourth round for a third time.

He will face Danish teenager Rune for a place in the quarter-finals after the ninth seed survived a nasty fall to sweep past unseeded Frenchman Ugo Humbert 6-4, 6-2, 7-6 (7/5).

Friend and 25th seed Evans threw a banana to Rublev at a changeover when he ran out.

“I didn’t ask him, I asked the ball boy, but Danny asked for bananas earlier and he had two so he just said ‘take it’, and I caught it,” said Rublev.

“He helped me with some energy, for sure,” he joked.

In two all-American matches, Jeffrey Wolf strolled past Michael Mmoh in three sets while Tommy Paul made equally light work of Jenson Brooksby. AFP

## Crouching ‘tiger’ Aryna Sabalenka on the prowl

Melbourne, Australia - Fifth seed Aryna Sabalenka marched into the last 16 of the Australian Open on Saturday and then declared she would have to “stay low like a tiger” to beat in-form Belinda Bencic.

The Belarusian mauled 32nd-ranked Belgian Elise Mertens 6-2, 6-3 on Margaret Court Arena to burgeon her status as a favourite for the first Grand Slam of the year.

Bencic, of Switzerland, was just as dominant in her 6-2, 7-5 victory over Italy’s Camila Giorgi on Rod Laver Arena.

Sabalenka described how she would try to cope with hard-hitting Bencic and her big serve.

“I feel like I have to stay really aggressive in the first few shots and then the slower ball or shorter ball will come,” Sabalenka told reporters at Melbourne Park.

“It’s all about fast feet on the first few shots. I have to be like a tiger, ready, stay low and be ready for that.”

Sabalenka needed just 74 minutes to beat her former doubles partner Mertens - the pair won five titles together including the Australian Open in 2021 - but said it hadn’t been as easy as it looked.

“It’s really tough to play against her, especially. She’s a great player, unbelievable fighter,” said the powerful Sabalenka, who is yet to win a major.

“I knew it’s going to be tough. I’m super happy that I was able to stay focused from beginning to the end to win this match because she’s an amazing player.”

Thirtieth seed Karolina Pliskova and 23rd seed Zhang Shuai also went through in straight sets on day six at Melbourne Park, and will clash in the fourth round.

Pliskova, the former world number one from the Czech Republic, defeated Varvara



Aryna Sabalenka hits a return against Elise Mertens (AFP)

*It’s really tough to play against her (Mertens). She’s a great player, unbelievable fighter*

ARYNA SABALENKA

Gracheva of Russia 6-4, 6-2.

She faces China’s Zhang, a 6-3, 6-2 victor over Katie Volynets of the United States.

### Fruhvirtova shines

The youngest player in the women’s draw, the 17-year-old Linda Fruhvirtova, said it was “surreal” Saturday to reach the second week of the Australian Open at just her second Grand Slam.

The Czech teenager recov-

ered from a break down in the third set against compatriot Marketa Vondrousova to win 7-5, 2-6, 6-3 and reach the last 16 in Melbourne.

“It feels pretty surreal,” she told reporters.

“It’s an incredible feeling. I’m just so happy and excited to be able to say: ‘Hi second week!’

“I’m still 17. It’s my second main-draw appearance in a Grand Slam. I’m through to the second week, last 16, in such a big tournament,” said Fruhvirtova, who reached the second round of the US Open on her Grand Slam debut last year.

“I feel good and I’m excited to be playing the next match here.”

The teenager faces Donna Vekic of Croatia next.

Fruhvirtova and Vondrousova both suffered physically at the end of a gruelling afternoon encounter that lasted 2hr 17min.

## Murray’s heroic Australian Open run over in round three

Melbourne, Australia - Andy Murray’s 4:05 am finish eventually caught up with him at the Australian Open as the Briton bowed out in typically defiant style to Roberto Bautista Agut in round three on Saturday.

The 35-year-old Murray was clearly feeling the effects of his epic five-setter in round two, which started on Thursday but ended in the early hours of Friday.

The 24th-seeded Spaniard Bautista won 6-1, 6-7 (7/9), 6-3, 6-4 and faces unseeded Tommy Paul of the United States in the last 16.

Former world number one Murray, who has a metal hip following career-saving surgery four years ago, was 3-0 down in a flash in the first set.

But the three-time Grand Slam champion had Margaret Court Arena firmly in his corner and a huge cheer went up when he finally got on the board, holding serve for 3-1.



Britain's Andy Murray waves as he leaves after losing to Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut in their third-round match in Melbourne on Saturday (AFP)

It was to be only a temporary reprieve as the Spaniard raced away with the first set in a lop-sided 29 minutes.

Murray held serve to start the second set but he appeared sluggish, having been forced to five sets in both his previous matches.

The epic five-setter in round two against Australia’s Thanasi Kokkinakis lasted a gruelling five hours and 45 minutes - the longest match of Murray’s storied career.

He committed a double fault to go 2-1 behind in the second set to Bautista, Murray letting out a howl of frustration.

Five-time Australian Open runner-up Murray has made a career of dramatic comebacks and he threatened one again as he broke back for 4-4, to the delight of the crowd.

Murray does not know when to quit.

His opponent then had two set points in the second-set tie break, only for Murray to roar back to win 9-7 and claim the set.

Bautista got the break to claim the third set, but Murray would not go away in the fourth, even as the match stretched past three hours on court. AFP

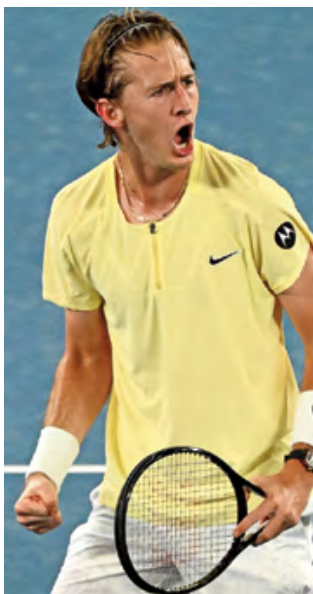
## Korda playing catch-up in prodigious family, with a little help from Agassi

Melbourne, Australia - Sebastian Korda says he’s “the worst athlete” in his high-achieving sporting family, but with a little help from tennis legend Andre Agassi the rising American is working hard to change the dynamic.

The 22-year-old stunned two-time losing finalist and seventh seed Daniil Medvedev at the Australian Open on Friday, weeks after pushing Novak Djokovic to the limit in the Adelaide International final.

Known as Sebi, his composed performances reflect what has been evident for some time - he is on the rise, and with plenty to live up to in the Korda family.

His father Petr is a former world number two who won the



Sebastian Korda celebrates winning a point against Daniil Medvedev

Australian Open in 1998 while his mother Regina Rajchrtova was a Czech player who rose to 26 in the world.

His older sisters are equally prodigious with Nelly an eight-time winner on the LPGA Tour, current world number two and an Olympic champion.

Jessica also opted for golf rather than tennis and she too excelled, winning six titles so far.

“I don’t know what I’m going to be ranked (after his victory), but my mum’s career high was 26, my dad was two, my sister Nelly was number one, my eldest sister Jessica was six,” said Korda, currently ranked 31.

“So I’m definitely the worst athlete in the family so far!”

Nelly, at least, doesn’t believe it for a minute, telling broadcaster Golf Channel at the Tournament of Champions in Florida on Friday: “Honestly he’s the best.

“His hand-eye coordination is unbelievable. His swing -- I’m jealous of his swing actually. It’s crazy. He’s a lefty. He’s a natural righty, but he plays golf lefty.

“He played hockey lefty. I mean, he grew up playing hockey. He was pretty good at it, too. He skates really nicely, plays golf nicely, plays tennis beautifully.”

Djokovic noted his talents in Adelaide this month after fending off a championship point to defeat him in the final, with the 92-time titlist saying he played “beautiful-looking tennis”.

Age is just a number as Japan’s Masuda, Miura win gold in World Veterans Table Tennis



The winners of mixed doubles 85-years category at World Veterans Table Tennis Championships in Muscat on Friday

**Muscat:** Japan’s Kazuo Masuda and Reiko Miura secured gold in the mixed doubles 85-years category at the World Veterans Table Tennis Championships Muscat 2023, held at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

In the final on Friday, they defeated Germany’s Peter Stolzenburg and Marianne Blasberg (11-4, 11-9, 9-11, 11-9).

In the 80-years category Germany’s Dimitrije Bilic and Heidi

Wunner defeated England’s Roy Norton and Carol Judson (9-11, 11-4, 11-5, 11-5).

The championship, organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Oman Table Tennis Association and the International Table Tennis Federation, with support from Oman Fiber Optic, STAG Sports, Omantel and Belltel, saw Denmark’s Carsten Egeholt and Janne Jensen take the title in the 40-years category.

In the final, they overcame Igor Krokkin of Sweden and Finland’s Marina Donner (11-9, 3-11, 11-7, 11-9). Italy’s Hansjoerg Toll and Korea Republic’s Oh Yunkung secured victory in the 45-year category in what was the closest final of the day – the pair recovered from a two-game deficit to secure victory (5-11, 9-11, 11-8, 11-8, 11-4) over Ukraine’s Viktor Vasylevskyi and Nataliia Ostrovska.

Latvian duo Sandijs Vasiljevs

and Ina Jozeppone claimed gold in the 50-years category after beating Denmark’s Karsten Haumann and Pia Toelhoej (11-7, 11-9, 11-7), while Romania’s Andreas Fejer-Konnert and Switzerland’s Margit Geiger emerged victorious in the 55-year category in straight games (11-4, 11-2, 11-4) against Denmark’s Jan Søndergaard and Jette Vieg.

In the 65-years category, Paal Guttormsen of Norway and Estonia’s Kai Thornbech overcame

Ukraine’s Leonid Segal and Svea Onno in a four-game match (7-11, 11-7, 12-10, 11-7) to claim top spot on the podium. The title decider in the mixed doubles 75 years category was a contest between husband-and-wife teams from the United States. David and Donna Sakai beat Del and Connie Sweeris (12-10, 11-7, 8-11, 11-4) to take first prize.

Cheung Tingting and Jiang Zhaozhao from China won the 70-years category.



Viktor Axelsen celebrates a point against Jonathan Christie (AFP)

Axelsen downs Christie to storm into India Open badminton final

**New Delhi, India** - World number one Viktor Axelsen cruised into the India Open badminton final after he eased past Indonesia’s Jonatan Christie 21-6, 21-12 on Saturday.

The Danish ace and top seed, fresh from his Malaysia Open win on Sunday, served out his fourth-seed opponent in 38 minutes in the men’s singles semi-finals in New Delhi.

“I feel really good. I felt really fresh going into my match today,” said Axelsen, whose quarter-final match on Friday was cut short when his compatriot Rasmus Gemke retired with a leg injury.

“I moved well and shots were good.”

Axelsen, who won the India Open in 2017 and 2019, will take on Thailand’s Kunlavut Vitidsarn - who fought past Anthony Sinisuka Ginting of Indonesia 27-25, 21-15 - in the Sunday final.

“I’m looking forward to a good final and I have played Vitidsarn on several occasions in the final,” he said.

The 21-year-old Vitidsarn, a former world junior champion,

banked on strong defence to counter the attacking style of Ginting, who started by taking a 12-6 lead, in a 58-minute battle.

Women’s top seed and Japanese star Akane Yamaguchi beat Thailand’s Su-

*I felt really fresh going into my match today. I moved well and shots were good*

VIKTOR AXELSEN

panida Katethong 21-17, 21-16 to set up a title clash with An Se-young - a repeat of Sunday’s final in Malaysia, which Yamaguchi won.

The two-time world champion and current world number one remained at the top of her game to claim victory in 39 minutes against the Thai.

In the other semi-final, South Korea’s An fought back from a game down to beat China’s He Bing Jiao 11-21, 21-16, 21-16.

Mohammed Shami helps India hammer New Zealand to clinch ODI series

**Raipur, India** - Mohammed Shami led an inspired pace attack to set up a crushing eight-wicket, series-clinching win for India in the second one-day international against New Zealand on Saturday.

Shami, India’s pace spearhead, returned figures of 3-18 to help dismiss the Black Caps for 108 after the hosts elected to bowl first in Raipur.

Skipper Rohit Sharma made 51 and Shubman Gill an unbeaten 40 as India romped home in 20.1 overs to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

And the captain said his bowlers had made an impression with their seam movement at home since the recent ODI sweep of Sri Lanka when Mohammed Siraj led the charge with nine wickets.

“These last five games (including three against Sri Lanka), bowlers have really stepped up,” Rohit said after the win.

“You expect that kind of bowling, that kind of seam movement outside India. But these guys have got a lot of skills, they have been working on that for all this while and you could see the reward.”

Earlier, at the toss Rohit took a while to announce his decision to field and told the presenter he “forgot” about the team call.

But things soon turned serious when Shami struck in the first over and with his fellow quicks had the tourists reeling at 15-5 by the 11th over.

Glenn Phillips made 36 as he combined with the middle- and



India’s Mohammed Shami (C) celebrates after taking the wicket of New Zealand’s Daryl Mitchell (R) during their second ODI in Raipur on Saturday (AFP)

*These last five games bowlers have really stepped up. These guys have got a lot of skills, they have been working on that for all this while and you could see the reward*

ROHIT SHARMA

lower-order batsmen including Michael Bracewell (22) and Mitchell Santner (27) to take the total past 100, but the innings lasted only 34.3 overs.

After Shami’s opening-ball heroics, fellow quick Hardik Pandya and spinner Washington Sundar took over to return two wickets each.

Shami bowled Finn Allen on the fifth ball of the first over at a venue making its international debut.

Mohammed Siraj sent back Henry Nicholls, caught at slip for two, before Shami and Pandya took two wickets caught-and-bowled to rattle the visitors, whose skipper Tom Latham fell

for one.

Phillips and Bracewell attempted to rebuild and hit back in a 41-run sixth-wicket stand before Shami broke through.

He got Bracewell, who hit 140 in his team’s 12-run loss in the opener, caught behind.

Phillips kept up the defiance in another partnership with the left-handed Santner. The pair put on 47 before Pandya bowled Santner.

Phillips departed in an attempt to hit out spinner Sundar only to be caught at mid-wicket, and the innings soon folded.

The Indian openers Rohit and Gill, who hit a match-winning

208 in the opener, put on 72 runs for the opening wicket.

Rohit struck some delightful boundaries including a six off his trademark hook shot to ease into the target.

He kept up the charge as he reached his 50 in 47 balls but soon fell lbw off fast bowler Henry Shiple.

Virat Kohli hit a few boundaries before he was stumped by Latham off Santner for 11.

Gill hit the winning four with the left-handed Ishan Kishan at the other end.

The final match is on Tuesday in Indore.

AFP

Barca coach Xavi in ‘state of shock’ over Alves accusations

**Barcelona, Spain** - Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez said Saturday that he is in “a state of shock” after Dani Alves’ arrest on sexual assault allegations.

The 39-year-old defender, sacked by his Mexican club Pumas after his arrest, is being held in custody without bail in Barcelona. The charge of sexual assault in Spain can mean anything from unsolicited and unwanted sexual groping to rape.

While police declined to give details on the case, a source close to the investigation told AFP that Alves is accused by the woman of rape. She reiterated her accusation before the judge on Friday, the source added.

Alves, who played for Barcelona for eight seasons between 2008-2016, rejoined the Catalans for a short spell last season under his former team-mate Xavi.

“It is hard to speak about a situation like this, first of all,” Xavi told a news conference on Saturday, the day before his team’s



Dani Alves

clash with Getafe in La Liga.

“I think like everybody, I am surprised, taken aback, I am in a

state of shock, knowing Dani.

“That’s the first thing that comes to mind. And after that,

because it’s a matter for the law, and the law will run its course, we cannot get into it.

“Regarding Dani, I feel bad for him, I am surprised, given how Dani is, and how he has been when he was here with us.

“(I’m) surprised, taken aback, I can’t say anything else.”

Catalonian police said they received a complaint on January 2 from a woman who accused Alves of sexual assault.

The alleged sexual assault took place at a popular Barcelona nightclub overnight December 30-31, according to Spanish media reports.

Alves was a key player in Barcelona’s golden era, winning three Champions League trophies with the club, and six La Liga titles.

The Brazilian also played for Sevilla, Paris Saint-Germain and Juventus among other sides.

AFP

Troubled Juventus docked 15 points in suspect transfer trial

**Milan, Italy** - Juventus’ troubled start to the new year slipped into disaster on Friday after the Italian Football Federation docked the Serie A giants 15 points for using transfers to artificially boost their balance sheet.

The FIGC said in a statement that the points sanction was to be inflicted this season, a huge blow to Juve whose chances of qualifying for next season’s Champions League are now greatly compromised.

Juve drop down from third to 10th place on just 22 points, 15 from the top four positions in Italy’s top flight.

Missing out on Europe’s top - and richest - club competition would be a further blow to the club’s accounts which last season were nearly 239 million euros in the red.

Juve’s current sporting direc-



Juventus’ former chairman Andrea Agnelli was handed a two-year ban

tor Federico Cherubini was also banned for 16 months.

The club’s former leadership were also handed long bans by the FIGC including two years to ex-chairman Andrea Agnelli and former CEO Maurizio Arrivabene and 30 months to former sporting director Fabio Paratici, now at Tottenham Hotspur.



SAUDI CAMEL-WHISPERERS USE ‘SPECIAL LANGUAGE’ TO TRAIN HERD

# Arabian Alheda'a



Saudi herder Mansour al-Qatula is pictured next to his animals during the annual King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in Rumah desert

The cries of camel herder Hamad al-Marri mean nothing to the untrained ear, but his animals respond instantly, gathering behind him to walk together across the Saudi desert.

The mode of communication, known as Alheda'a, was inscribed last month on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the deep traditional connection between camels and inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula.

A skilled camel herder can use his voice alone to soothe an animal, make it kneel and even signal a change in direction as they trudge together through the desert sands, said the UN cultural agency.

"There is a special language between

the owner of a camel and his camel," explained 36-year-old Marri, a civil servant who owns 100 camels, grazing them 150km northeast of the capital Riyadh.

"The camels know the tone of their owner's voice and respond to him immediately, and if someone else calls them, they will not respond to him."

Dubbed the 'ships of the desert', camels have long been a crucial mode of transportation in Saudi Arabia, conferring status on their owners and fuelling the rise of a lucrative camel-breeding industry.

There are "many rock carvings that show painted camels and tell the story of the camel, whether they have been used in war or trade," said Jasser al Harbashi, CEO of the

Saudi Heritage Commission.

The point of pursuing the UNESCO listing was to 'protect' Alheda'a and "provide an opportunity for its development", he said, without elaborating.

The bid was submitted jointly with neighbouring Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

They know their name

Alheda'a can be deployed for a range of tasks: bringing together a scattered herd threatened by an approaching sandstorm, for example, or soothing camels as they drink water.

"Herders train their camels to recognise the difference between right and left, to open their mouths when asked, and to kneel down to be ridden," according to UNESCO's description of the practice.

"It is transmitted within families and communities, with children accompanying adult family members on daily trips."

Saudi herder Mansour al Qatula learned about Alheda'a in just this way, watching his father and grandfathers while he was a young boy. He told AFP he intended to pass it on to his three children.

"We have inherited the care of camels (in my family) for more than 200 years,"

he said. "Now my children love it, and they constantly ask to come here, and their voices are known as well."

Earlier this month, Qatula brought his camels to the seventh edition of the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, which aims to promote the camel as an essential component of Saudi heritage.

Participants in the beauty contest competed for prizes totalling 350 million riyals (US\$93 million). The dromedaries were judged on attributes including their lips, necks, humps and colouring.

During a break in the action, Qatula explained how Alheda'a allows herders to bond with their charges.

"The owner of the camels calls his camels with special names, and through repetition, they know their name and respond to it," he said, as one of his camels let out a cry of her own.

"Look," he said, laughing as he stroked the animal. "She feels the same way."

AFP

There are many rock carvings that show painted camels and tell the story of the camel, whether they have been used in war or trade

JASSER AL HARBASH



Saudi herder Hamad al-Marri communicates with his animals during the annual King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in Rumah desert, northeast of the Saudi capital Riyadh

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COFFEE ART



By Anirban Ray

Many things can happen over a cup of coffee. Discussions, agreements, conclusions, deals... but what about creative flair? Coffee can, indeed, breathe life into portraits, landscapes, abstract artworks. And how!

For Muscat based Indian artist Dheeraj Gadicherla, coffee is more than a stimulating beverage – it is the key medium for his artistic endeavours. Coffee helps him translate his thoughts and the images imprinted on his mind onto his canvas. He creates faces, landscapes, emotions and a variety of artistic expression, all with coffee.

"For a long time I called my paintings 'coffee and time experiments' since I was not sure how my paintings would turn out. Take oil paint, a time tested medium as an example, the artist is guaranteed a certain colour after the paint has dried due to the multitude of calibrations the paint manufacturer may have done through due course. It could be by varying the filler medium or the quality of raw materials used in extracting the pigments etc," Gadicherla said, adding, "I cannot afford this luxury of research into my medium - coffee. So, I took it upon myself to research this medium in depth."

The idea to use coffee as a medium for art started a few years back when this full time engineer started to paint a portrait for his friend using coffee as a medium.

The way coffee moves...

He said, "This all began when I painted a friend's likeness using coffee as the medium. I realised that this beverage that I consume with so much gusto is a very malleable medium in art. Earthy tones are often associated with vegetable dyes and other mineral extracts. However, the earthiness that coffee brings to paintings has been a revelation - there is a richness in tone and depth of colour that I find eternally fascinating. The way coffee moves on canvas is unpredictable and often I have no control on the final outcome."

A year ago, Gadicherla had held a solo exhibition in Muscat on the theme of mental illnesses wherein all artworks were created using coffee as the medium. The exhibition was well received for his depth of expression as well as for the dexterous use of coffee in portraying various types of mental illnesses.

"Art, no matter the medium, is entirely subjective. However, I do not think that conventional media could've rendered the same effect for my abstracts in a way that coffee did, especially in portraying mental illness," he said.



# 'Brew'haha

INDIAN ARTIST DHEERAJ GADICHERLA USES COFFEE TO EXPRESS HIS CREATIVITY. HIS IDEAS, AND HIS COFFEE, BOTH SPILL ONTO HIS CANVAS WITH TRANCELIKE YET EARTHY RESULTS



*I do not think that conventional media could've rendered the same effect for my abstracts in a way that coffee did, especially in portraying mental illness*

DHEERAJ GADICHERLA

Throughout his work, Gadicherla has used coffee as a medium with much experimentation. He has brewed coffee in different proportions to create the shades he needed as well as prepared concoctions with egg and tempera (modelling paste) and exposing it to the elements.

While drying each layer, he introduces new elements based on his thoughts or experiences to determine the direction of the composition. The elements could be more coffee, sea water, sand from the desert, air, salt, vinegar, etc, incorporated into each layer until he feels his thoughts are transposed on the canvas. The layers are then dried with varying degrees of heat, humidity, wind, etc to dictate the direction of the painting.

Unconventional tools, techniques

"Brewing coffee is also a crucial step. I brew it in multiple ways. The espresso machine and South Indian filter coffee press are my favourite accessories. Sometimes I boil the coffee out to paint with it, sometimes I let the prepared coffee dry in the sun for over five days and then use it to paint, he said.

Gadicherla is unorthodox with the gear, too. Along with regular brushes, he often uses a toothbrush, construction trowels, spackle tools, air compressors, pencils, fingers etc.

One of Gadicherla's challenging works has been the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque using coffee. "I was truly able to appreciate the artisans who have put in so much effort into building such a beautiful mosque. It was a humbling experience, albeit very taxing on my wrist and forearms." The other one has been a painting that was two years in the making, to represent the artist's life at each stage in various places he travelled - Sri Lanka, Oman, India, Vietnam.

For Gadicherla, creating a standard portrait usually takes seven to ten days. "This is because of the various layers I build with coffee and each layer needs to dry completely before I apply the next layer. My abstract works take longer due to the process I employ - each abstract painting takes anywhere between a month to 2 years to complete, and comprises 10 to 12 layers of coffee."

The coffee artist often lays his canvases for drying in the desert or on the beach, whenever he prepares them on site, during a camp. However, while the paintings dry up and their hues mature, his creative thought process goes through several layers of evolution as new ideas dawn on him and new inspiration motivates him for his next venture.



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