

Oman to be major draw at ITB Berlin

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate is set to captivate attendees at ITB Berlin 2024, the world's premier travel and trade show, with its theme 'Beauty has an Address'. The event, from March 5 to 7, will kick off with a press conference and an opening ceremony on March 4, highlighting Oman's significant role as the host country.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism will unveil Oman's rich tapestry of tourist and cultural offerings under this theme. Oman's delegation, led by H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage

and Tourism, aims to present the country's ancient history, diverse attractions and cultural heritage through a series of events and activities.

The press conference will be presided over by H E Azzan bin Qassim al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Tourism, while the opening ceremony - set for 6pm - promises a spectacular showcase of Oman's beauty through various performances.

Called Vision 2024, the presentation will explore new horizons in sustainable tourism development and Oman's positioning on the global stage. The ceremony will feature performances by Omani artists and



folk bands, accompanied by the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra, and will be followed by a reception highlighting Omani culinary delights.

Oman's exhibition stand, covering approximately 800sqm, will be a focal point

throughout the three-day event, starting with an official opening tour on March 5. The tour will witness the participation of key figures, including the Mayor of Berlin, the Secretary-General of UN Tourism and CEO of Messe Berlin.

Ministry of Heritage and Tourism will unveil Oman's rich tapestry of tourist and cultural offerings under the theme 'Beauty has an Address'

Additionally, Oman will participate in segments called 'Youth Travel and Economy Accommodation' and 'Adventure Travel and Responsible Tourism' and host panel discussions on achieving net zero in tourism and exploring adventure tourism in

the sultanate. The discussions will feature insights from destination management companies and offer attendees a deeper understanding of Oman's adventure tourism opportunities.

Highlighting its commitment to the MICE industry, Oman will present ITB MICE Night 2024, focusing on trends, networking opportunities and Omani cuisine. The ITB Blogger Base event on March 6 will offer bloggers a unique experience of Omani hospitality, with opportunities to learn about the country, participate in a raffle and engage with Omani partners.

A concert by the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra at Berliner

Philharmonie on March 6 will blend classical music with traditional Omani compositions, showcasing the country's musical heritage. Additionally, a panel discussion on March 7 will delve into the role of gastronomy in community empowerment, sharing insights from Oman's experience in leveraging its culinary heritage to bolster local communities through tourism.

This comprehensive participation at ITB Berlin 2024 underscores Oman's dedication to promoting its cultural and tourist attractions on an international platform, inviting the world to explore the beauty and diversity of the sultanate.

Hon'ble Lady greets teachers, school personnel

Muscat - Honourable Lady Sayyida Ahad Abdullah Hamad al Busaidi, Spouse of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, has congratulated teachers on the occasion of Omani Teacher's Day.

The greetings message read as follows: "We are pleased to congratulate teachers, both male and female, in our dear country on the occasion of the celebrations marking Omani Teacher's Day, which falls on 24 February.

"We value teachers' central role in the educational process and their abundant contribution in grooming future cadres, empowering them with useful knowledge, sound values and sciences, so that they can in turn contribute to the service of the nation.



"We wish teachers success in accomplishing their important mission. We also extend our deep thanks to the administrative bodies and all personnel operating in the field of education. We appreciate their tangible efforts in upgrading the education system.

"We wish that the endeavours of all be crowned with success. Many happy returns of the occasion."

Teachers' dedication lauded

While paying tribute to educators across Oman, Dr Madiha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, appreciated His Majesty Sultan Haitham's unwavering support and recognition of the school education sector.

Marking a significant gesture of gratitude, February 24 has been designated as an official holiday for all teachers and administrative staff, acknowledging their dedicated efforts and commitment.

On the occasion of Omani Teacher's Day, Dr Madiha lauded the dedication of teachers in fulfilling their responsibilities. She highlighted their pivotal role in nurturing students and preparing them to play active roles in the nation's holistic development journey.

The minister also expressed gratitude to the Honourable Lady for her congratulatory message and deep appreciation for the hard work undertaken by educational staff and administrators.

Oman pushes for Palestinian statehood at ICJ

Muscat - The inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination are being violated day after day by Israel's illegal policies of 'genocide', Oman reiterated to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague at a public hearing on Friday.

The UN's top court continued its hearing from different states and three international organisations who question the legality of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Representatives of countries including Qatar, Pakistan, Malaysia, the United Kingdom and Oman delivered their positions on the fourth day of the hearing at the ICJ.

Oman reaffirmed during the proceedings, delivered by H E Abdullah Salim al Harthi, Ambassador of Oman to the Netherlands, that for more than 75 years, the Palestinians have been living under occupation, oppression, injustice and daily humiliation committed against them by the Israelis, even as the international community and organisations failed to assist the people of Palestine to realise their aspirations of having their own independent state.

"For four months, the world has witnessed in Gaza one of the worst atrocities - acts of genocide in modern times. More than 29,000 are dead and 68,000 wounded, 2.2mn live in unbearable conditions, being driven from one place to another in clear violation of international norms," H E Harthi told the world court.

"Violation of the right to self-determination, and occupation, settlement and annexation of Palestinian lands by Israel since 1967 impede the realisation of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people," he added.

The ambassador said there is overwhelming international agreement on the right to self-determination and its continued denial in the occupied Palestinian territories. He stressed that "the



For four months, the world has witnessed in Gaza one of the worst atrocities - acts of genocide in modern times

H E ABDULLAH AL HARTHI

court should decide Israel puts an immediate and unconditional end to this illegal situation, and the need for states to support these efforts".

H E Harthi added that the prolonged occupation, settlement and annexation of Palestinian territories over decades is designed to perpetuate the occupation and make it permanent.

Related to this policy, he said, is the displacement of Palestinians and the establishment of a coercive system of discrimination, zoning, unlawful land appropriation, arbitrary arrests and arbitrary violence since 1967.

He pointed out that the international community has an obligation to prevent unlawful annexation of Palestinian land. "A fundamental principle of international law as reflected in the Charter of the United Nations is that the use of force in any form is prohibited. Consequently, acquisition of territory by use of force is illegal. The 75-year occupation and settlement policy of the State of Israel is preventing the establishment of a contiguous, viable Palestinian State and is an affront to international law."

RAINS TURN DESERT INTO STUNNING OASIS IN DHAHIRAH



The rains caused by a low pressure which hit Oman earlier this month resulted in flooded wadis and lakes in the Empty Quarter in the Governorate of Dhahirah. Photographer Khalid Abdullah al Hadrami from Manah captured this image of Safa Lake, a stunning oasis in the middle of the desert, formed by rain water from wadis in the wilayats of Yanqul and Dhank



Ambassador's address on Japan National Day

Call for tough measures to curb accidents on Bausher-Amerat road

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Despite the government's best efforts over the years to build and develop more roads as a solution to the increasing traffic congestion in Muscat, the risks faced by motorists on the Bausher-Amerat road continue.

On Thursday, one person was

killed in a collision involving two vehicles on the road.

A statement issued by Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority said, 'The fire, rescue and ambulance teams of CDAA in Muscat governorate dealt with an accident where a truck collided with a vehicle. The collision resulted in a fire, tragically claiming the life of the truck driver.'



The accident sparked strong reaction from citizens who called for measures to prevent such tragedy in the future.

Nasr al Busaidi emphasised the need to completely ban trucks on the mountainous road due to the history of disastrous accidents involving trucks.

Another citizen Salim al Salmi expressed frustration, stating

that warnings have been issued repeatedly. Decisive action, such as installing signboards and iron barriers, are now necessary to prevent similar tragedies.

Ayman al Batashi suggested constructing a tunnel as a long-term solution to enhance road safety and adopt measures and infrastructure improvements to prevent future accidents.

On the occasion of the birthday of His Majesty Emperor Naruhito of Japan, I would like to express our sincere appreciation to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the people of Oman and wish for continued success and prosperity of our bilateral relations.

Japan got off to a difficult start of Year 2024 with an earthquake in the Noto Peninsula. During this difficult time, we are all comforted by the thoughtful words from the world, which give us the courage to move towards recovery and reconstruction. I would like to take this opportunity to show my sincere gratitude for your support.

On the fifth anniversary of the accession of His Majesty last year, Their Majesties Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako paid a State Visit to the Republic of Indonesia. It was Their Majesties' first goodwill visit after ascending the throne and showed their enthusiasm to work in the international arena.

Thirty years ago in 1994, Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress, then Crown Prince and Crown Princess made their first official overseas trip, including Oman. The long-standing relationship between the Imperial Family of Japan and the Royal Family of Oman was further cemented by their visit, and I am confident that it will last in the years to come.

Last year, we witnessed growing bilateral interactions in various sectors. A visit by Yamada Miki, former State Minister of Environment and Secretary-General of the Japan-Oman Parliamentary Friendship Association, was a symbolic event to demonstrate our diversified connections.

We cannot discuss Japan-Oman relations without referring to our economic ties. A number of Japanese delegations visited Oman aiming for business opportunities in February and March and a Japan-Oman business mission was also organised. We are privileged to announce some of the business will materialise shortly.

Navigating a unique partnership

Address of **H E Jota Yamamoto**, Ambassador of Japan to Oman, to mark the 64th birthday of His Majesty Emperor Naruhito of Japan



Collaborative tourism sector activities between the two countries have also been evolving these days. Saud Bahwan Group is now working in full swing to open a renowned Japanese hotel in Muscat. Japanese-styled hot spring spa will be introduced in Ain al Kasfa in Rustaq, a city rich in history and culture. Speaking of one-of-a-kind products from Japan, Seiko has

opened its first boutique in Mall of Oman.

As Oman gears up for developing clean energy in line with Oman Vision 2040, Japanese companies stand in support of these efforts. Kobe Steel Ltd and Mitsui & Co Ltd have signed a deal with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) for the production of

direct reduced iron. Marubeni Corporation, under Salalah H2 Consortium, has agreed with Hydrom on studies for green ammonia. What makes our ties unique is the Japanese liquefied hydrogen carrier's port of call during its world tour.

Our interactions have extended to defence, sports, culture, the academic field and more. Bilateral defence dia-

logue paved the way for future cooperation and exchanges. There was also a recent visit by Admiral Sakai Ryo, Chief of Staff of Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force. I was honoured to present the Japan Foreign Minister's Commendation to Oman Karate Committee in the presence of many distinguished Majlis A'Shura members last December.

An exhibition to showcase Japan's proud cuisine, sushi, was held in co-operation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. A Japanese professor delivered lectures on international politics at National Defence College and Diplomatic Academy. Work by archaeologists at historic sites in Oman were hugely successful as in the previous years.

We made a leap forward in many fields, and I have to highlight that we could successfully resume a long-awaited Japanese language course for people in Muscat. After a nearly four-year suspension, Oman-Japan Friendship Association (OJFA) welcomed a professional Japanese teacher in November and the course has already attracted many active learners.

OJFA underwent a transformation last year with a new Chairman, Sheikh Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan. I would like to show my great respect and appreciation to him for his leadership during the tenure to steer his team towards success. I am committed to working closely with Sheikh Abdullah and OJFA to take our friendship to the next level.

As more and more people start to see Japan as their academic destination, the Embassy of Japan participated in the education fairs Ghedex and EduTrac Oman for the first time and staged a 'study-in-Japan' campaign to meet the high demand. At these events, there was active involvement of Omani alumni who studied in Japan. Their firsthand experiences motivated visitors and reaffirmed the importance of people-to-people ties.

Year 2023 concluded with another milestone event when Oman officially announced its participation in Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai. A high-ranking delegation has repeatedly visited Japan to prepare for the event and more are expected to follow this year. Expo 2025 showcases arts and culture of the world, and at the same time, it will serve as a catalyst for closer bonds of people.

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Oman-Japan ties A source of inspiration

Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan
Chairman of the Board,
Oman-Japan Friendship
Association

On behalf of all Members of the Board of Oman-Japan Friendship Association (OJFA), I take this opportunity to convey warm and heartfelt greetings to His Majesty Emperor Naruhito of Japan on the auspicious occasion of his 64th birthday.

It is a matter of joy that this year, Oman is celebrating the fourth anniversary of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's Accession Day. Under the wise and visionary leadership and guidance of His Majesty Sultan Haitham, Oman is making rapid progress on all fronts, guided by Oman Vision 2040. We pray to the Almighty to bless His Majesty with good health and a long life.

OJFA celebrates the deep-rooted and long-standing relationship between Oman and Japan. Established in January 1974, OJFA - in close co-operation with the Embassy of Japan - has played a pivotal role in nurturing lasting bonds between the two great nations through a range of impactful events and activities in the fields of culture, society, economy, arts and science.

The friendship between Oman and Japan is truly inspiring. It is forged on shared values and mutual respect. It has weathered the test of time, fostering deeper understanding of each nation's rich and diverse culture and heritage. It is interesting to note that our two nations have accomplished a remarkable milestone of sharing this unique relationship for over 50 years. This friendship is tes-



OJFA has been a distinct platform for cultural exchange and deeper, more meaningful people-to-people connections

tament to the passion, commitment and understanding that have continued to play a binding role over the years.

OJFA has been a distinct platform for cultural exchange and deeper, more meaningful people-to-people connections. The association, in close co-operation with the Embassy of Japan, has held several events that have showcased the inspiring heritage and culture of Japan here in Oman.

Last year in November, the Ship for World Youth (SWY)

Committee-Oman commenced the 14th SWYAA Global Assembly in Muscat under the patronage of H E Khalid bin Hashil al Muslahi, Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs in Foreign Ministry. A total of 141 alumni from 25 countries participated in the opening ceremony. SWY is the international youth exchange programme sponsored by the Japanese government, and Oman has been one the most active participating countries.

In the same month, OJFA - in

co-operation with the Embassy of Japan - commenced a Japanese language course conducted by a native Japanese language speaker.

Apart from these, several activities, like book launches and specialised workshops for children, offered people in Oman opportunities to understand, be inspired and absorb the subtle nuances of Japanese culture.

Beyond cultural bonds, Oman and Japan have a long-time partnership in the area of trade. Through exports and imports both Oman and Japan have benefited from each other's strengths. Japanese advancements in engineering have led to export of products like machinery, electronics, steel, iron, automotive and more to Oman. Japanese companies have also made their presence felt in Oman through joint ventures in various sectors including the growing energy sector. Similarly, Oman - a nation reputed for its oil and gas, aluminium and fishery products - has remained one of the largest exporters of these products to Japan.

Today on this special occasion, OJFA reiterates its commitment to taking this beautiful bond of friendship between Oman and Japan to even greater heights.

Once again, on behalf of all the board members of OJFA, I convey sincere greetings to His Majesty Emperor Naruhito on his 64th Birthday.

On this special day, may God Almighty grant His Majesty good health and a long life. And may the deep-rooted ties between Oman and Japan continue to be a source of inspiration.

Oman, India to cooperate in archives field

Muscat - The sultanate's National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) and National Archives of India have finalised an executive programme of co-operation, which will be submitted for approval by competent authorities of both parties and formally signed in the near future.

The cooperation was finalised during a visit of a delegation of National Archives of India (NAI), led by Arun Singal, Director General of Archives, on February 21 and 22, to explore areas of collaboration in archival work.

Activities agreed upon and



featured in the proposed cooperation include organising a joint exhibition of curated materials from both archives alongside a



conference highlighting the historical relations between India and Oman; exchanging digital copies of documents that hold

mutual interest to enrich both collections; facilitating a framework for exchange programmes involving experts in the fields of

digitisation and preservation to share knowledge on best practices of both institutions; and releasing a joint publication based on curated archival materials from both archives.

During discussions with Dr Hamad Mohammed al Dhawyani, Chairman of NRAA, Singhal spoke on the historical ties between India and Oman and informed the former about the existence of a large number of records pertaining to Oman in NAI and other repositories of India.

As a gesture of goodwill, Singhal handed over a list of 70 select documents related to

Oman that are available in NAI covering the period from 1793 to 1953 and dealing with a wide range of subjects.

Additionally, 523 pages of copies of records were also handed over to Dhawyani on important subjects, including change of the Omani flag from red to white (1868); succession of Sayyid Faisal bin Turki as ruler of Oman after the death of Sultan Sayyid Turki (1888); an official visit of the Sultan of Muscat and Oman to the Viceroy of India (1937); and the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation between the Republic of India and the Sultan of Muscat

and Oman signed on March 15, 1953 in Muscat (English, Hindi and Arabic versions).

Facsimile prints of three important treaties between the two countries were also gifted to NRAA - treaty between the British India Government and the Sultan of Muscat (in Arabic and English), dated April 5, 1865; and two treaties concluded with the Imam of Muscat: one by Mehdi Ali Khan, dated October 12, 1798, and another by Sir John Malcolm, in his capacity as Envoy of the Governor General of India to the Court of Persia, dated January 18, 1800.

OHRC DELEGATION VISITS SUMAIL CENTRAL PRISON

A team from Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC), led by Prof Rashid Hamed al Balushi, Chairman, visited Sumail Central Prison. The delegation included several members of its Coordinating Committee for Justice and Coordination Affairs. The visit was conducted within the scope of OHRC's efforts to regularly visit prisons and detention centres and cooperate with these facilities



Immense possibilities for green energy in Oman: IEA advisor



Our Correspondent Muscat

The first edition of Oman-France Clean Energy Forum took place at Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC on Thursday. Several industry experts from Oman and France took part in exploring green energy initiatives. The one-day conference served as a platform for discussions on various aspects of green energy, addressing challenges, solutions and fostering collaborations between governments and corporations.

The forum was part of the sixth edition of the French Embassy's flagship annual event French Weeks. The month-long programme, which ends on March 5, kickstarted with a performance by Muscat Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the French Embassy on February 6.

Themed 'Make it Iconic: Choose France', this edition of French Weeks boasts an array of events - gastronomic, art, educational and business - showcasing different facets of France in Oman.

Speaking during the forum on February 22, Dr Abdullah al Abri, consultant and special advisor at International Energy Agency (IEA), said there is urgent need

for nations to establish a common language for trade in the realm of clean energy. "Green energy cannot happen instantly but requires measured and steady steps. I have urged governments to effectively translate policies into practical roadmaps with the crucial need of patience."

Considering Oman's wealth in oil and gas, Abri noted that the shift to low-carbon energy would take time but "held immense possibilities for the nation".

HE Veronique Aulagnon, Ambassador of France to Oman, remarked on the unique nature of the forum - a departure from traditional discussions on oil and gas. "The forum is a significant step into the future, emphasising the ambitious targets for the clean energy sector."

She highlighted the presence of well-established French companies in Oman and fruitful discussions on their potential collaborations, ranging from expertise to feedback on pilot projects underway in France.

"Inclusion of the first-ever Oman-France Clean Energy Forum reflects a forward-looking perspective, aligning with global efforts to drive sustainable energy practices," she added.

World Travel Week - Middle East starts today

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Sultanate of Oman, under the auspices of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, will host the third edition of 'World Travel Week - Middle East' starting Sunday.

The four-day event will feature 94 tourism experts from across the globe alongside 31 Omani tourism entities and hotels.

The event is part of the ministry's initiatives to bolster the luxury tourism segment in Oman, drawing companies and professionals from the international tourism sector for collaborations and interactions with local tourism institutions.

Its programme includes tailored tours for major global tourism companies, offering them an immersive experience of Oman's diverse attractions across its governorates. These activities aim to provide a well-rounded perspective of Oman's tourism potential, with 14 companies specifically selected for familiarisation visits to Dhofar governorate.

Haitham bin Muhammad al

The four-day event will feature 94 tourism experts from across the globe alongside 31 Omani tourism entities

Ghassani, Director General of Tourism Promotion in the ministry, highlighted the event's significance, stating, "World Travel Week is a vital addition for luxury tourism companies. It has showcased its value and impact in previous editions."

He further emphasised the role of the ministry in hosting the event, noting its contribution in enhancing international collaborations in luxury tourism, sharing expertise and cementing Oman's status as a premier luxury travel destination on the world stage.

"The event is set to witness significant participation from luxury tourism experts and specialists from various countries, underscoring its global relevance and appeal," Ghassani added.

CPA launches Ramadan Basket

Our Correspondent Muscat

To ensure the availability of goods in markets during Ramadan, Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) launched the Ramadan Basket programme in all governorates on Thursday.

The authority also scaled up efforts to monitor markets for deceptive practices or price manipulation during the holy month.

A statement issued by CPA said, "The Ramadan Basket includes several essential food items and is priced between RO9.900 and RO11.975. The objective of the family pack is to ensure fast and safe shopping for both locals and residents as well as to support people with limited income."

The basket includes rice, flour, dates, Arabic coffee, cooking oil, sugar, milk, oats, semolina, tomatoes, cheese and pasta among other items.

Khalid al Siyabi, Director of Market Regulation and Monitoring Department at CPA, said the authority has taken proactive measures to address the needs of citizens during Ramadan. "The initiative to provide a Ramadan Basket containing essential commodities at a nominal price demonstrates a commitment to support individuals with limited income during this special month."

He informed that CPA will ensure the Ramadan Basket is ac-



cessible to all segments of society. Cooperation with suppliers and merchants, along with the monitoring efforts of the authority's departments, aim to ensure the availability, safety and reasonable pricing of essential food items during Ramadan.

Additionally, the authority is actively monitoring commercial offers and advertisements during the holy month. This includes scrutinising promotions for both essential and non-essential goods, electronic products and vehicles. CPA's involvement in approving and overseeing these offers reflects its commitment to preventing any fraudulent practices or price manipulation during this period.

Siyabi also informed about past violations related to the pricing of vegetables and fruits in Al Mawaleh Central Market during Ramadan.

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Rakiza Fund acquires 40% stake in Tihama Power

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Rakiza Fund, Oman's private equity infrastructure fund committed to investing across various infrastructure assets in Oman and Saudi Arabia, has announced the financial close of its first transaction in Saudi Arabia. The fund has acquired a 40% stake in Saudi-based Tihama Power Generation Company.

Tihama Power comprises four Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plants located at Ras Tanura, Ju'aymah, Shedgum, and Uthmaniyah in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. These plants produce 1,600MW of electrical power and 6.3mn pounds per hour of process steam and have been operational since 2006.

The output of Tihama Power is consumed by Saudi energy giant Aramco through a long-term agreement.

Rakiza will partner with the French utility and energy giant Engie on this project. Engie, a world-class infrastructure manager, holds a 60% share in Tihama Power.

By implementing CHP technology, Tihama Power prioritises energy efficiency by capturing and utilising heat that would otherwise be wasted, thereby avoid-



Tihama Power Generation Company is the fifth asset in Rakiza's portfolio, which includes a diverse range of investments in transportation, network utilities, data infrastructure, and social infrastructure

ing distribution losses.

Rakiza Fund is independently co-managed by the regulated independent fund manager Oman Infrastructure Investment Management (OIM) and the UK-

based investor, developer, and fund manager Equitix.

Muneer al Muneeri, OIM Founder and CEO, said, "We are delighted to make our first investment in Saudi Arabia. This transaction underscores our commitment to investing in the market and the Saudi Vision 2030. Our strategy and unique relationships in Saudi Arabia and Oman provide us with a distinct advantage in sourcing and securing deal flow, and deploying capital in attractive infrastructure projects within the region."

Tihama Power is the fifth asset in Rakiza's portfolio, which includes a diverse range of invest-

ments in transportation (ports), network utilities, data infrastructure, and social infrastructure.

Oman Infrastructure Investment Management and Equitix established the Rakiza Fund to invest in public-private partnerships (PPP) and other core infrastructure projects in Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Rakiza seeks to capitalise on the drive towards privatisation and foreign direct investment (FDI) across the GCC region, where first-mover investors with access to opportunities can generally achieve higher returns while enhancing long-term impact.

Development Bank names Hussein al Lawati as CEO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Development Bank, a leading financial institution supporting economic growth and progress in Oman, has announced the appointment of Hussein al Lawati as its new Chief Executive Officer, effective today.

With a career spanning over 18 years in the banking and finance sector, Lawati's extensive background in strategic planning, innovation, growth, acquisition, and strategic partnerships ideally positions him to lead Development Bank's mission forward, the bank said in a press statement.

His leadership at Muscat Finance Company as CEO showcased his ability to drive business growth, manage large teams, and execute significant digital transformations. Prior to his tenure at Muscat Finance, Lawati held senior management roles at Bank Dhofar, including DGM and Chief Corporate Banking Officer, and AGM and Chief Retail Banking Officer, where he managed substantial assets and introduced key regulatory compliant solutions and CRM systems.



Hussein al Lawati

"I am excited to be asked to lead Development Bank at this important time. Driven by a talented and experienced team, the bank is a well-respected brand with a long and rich history of helping Omani businesses of all sizes succeed. My role is to set out the next stage of the bank's journey and build a strategy for growth and innovation," Lawati said.

As CEO of Development Bank, Lawati will leverage his extensive experience to enhance the bank's operations, drive innovation, and support Oman's economic development. His leadership is expected to bring a new era of growth and success to the

bank, aligning with its goals of fostering sustainable development and ensuring innovative Omani businesses have access to the right capital to start and scale.

Eng Mohammed al Ghasani, Chairman of Development Bank, said, "Hussein has worked at the very highest levels of Omani banking and finance, delivering outstanding results and strong growth. Given his proven track record, strategic acumen, and dedication to excellence, he is the perfect choice to lead Development Bank. On behalf of the board, I am delighted to welcome Hussein as CEO and look forward to working with him in the exciting years ahead."

Development Bank, formerly known as Oman Development Bank, is at the forefront of financing development and economic diversification in the sultanate. Through the provision of tailored business loans and working capital for startups, SMEs, and large enterprises in sectors key to Oman Vision 2040, Development Bank plays a vital role in promoting sustainable economic growth and prosperity across the country.



Govt-related entities' debt metrics fall in GCC: Fitch

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Government-related entity (GRE) debt in the GCC countries has been falling as a share of GDP but will remain a key tool for policy-making in 2024, Fitch Ratings said in a new report.

"This is because GCC governments continue to use GREs to drive economic diversification and support budgetary priorities. Trends will diverge, ranging from Oman's efforts to reorganise and improve the sustainability of its GREs to Saudi Arabia's leveraged push to use GREs to spur economic diversification," Fitch said.

Fitch estimates that aggregate debt at GCC non-bank GREs declined to 25% of GDP in 2022 from 33% in 2021. Debt ranged from 13% of GDP in Kuwait to 44% in the Abu Dhabi.

Aggregate debt of GCC government-related banks (wholesale or interbank funding, excluding customer deposits) fell to 16% of GDP in 2022 and ranged from 6% of

GDP in Bahrain to 44% in Qatar.

The amount of contingent liabilities from banks in general is even larger, with sector assets ranging from 91% of GDP in Oman to 225% in Qatar, due to depositor protection by governments, the rating agency said.

According to Fitch, all GCC states have a record of supporting their GREs, either on an ongoing basis or in periods of distress. The likelihood of future assistance is high given past experience, combined with the continuing importance of GREs to national economic growth strategies and, frequently, their status as national champions.

"We assess that GRE indebtedness has the highest potential to affect sovereign ratings in Qatar and Oman, considering the scale of exposure against the strength of their balance sheets. However, the risk has moderated for both in recent years, contributing, in conjunction with other factors, to recent positive rating actions," Fitch said.

Over 600 delegates from 20 countries to participate in Suhar Investment Forum

Muscat - The Suhar Investment Forum, an international event in the North Batinah Governorate, organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) branch in the region, will be inaugurated on Monday under the patronage of H H Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said.

The two-day forum at the Radisson Blu Hotel, Suhar, will be attended by more than 600 delegates from over 20 countries, according to a press release.

The forum will discuss the investment climate and environment in North Batinah Governorate, showcasing the latest developments in the investment landscape with the participation of government officials, experts, businessmen, and investors from various sectors.

Ahead of the forum, the OCCI North Batinah Branch disclosed the details of feasibility studies for 104 investment opportunities with a total capital value of approximately RO1bn. These opportunities span eight main sectors including - industrial, logistics, circular economy, mining, food security, tourism, informa-



OCCI North Batinah Branch disclosed the details of feasibility studies for 104 investment opportunities with a total capital value of approximately RO1bn. These opportunities span eight main sectors and are expected to create about 9,000 job opportunities

tion technology, and healthcare - and are expected to create about 9,000 job opportunities.

Eng Saeed bin Ali al Abri, Chairman of the OCCI Branch in North Batinah Governorate and Chairman of the Forum's Organizing Committee, said that the

forum will feature keynote speeches, visual presentations, and four panel discussions on the themes 'Suhar - A Preferred Destination for Investment,' 'Suhar - Incentives and Opportunities,' 'Suhar - Growth and Investment Opportunities,' and

'Suhar - Supporting the Goals of Oman Vision 2040.'

"The Forum has received an overwhelming response with a confirmed participation of over 20 countries and more than 600 delegates and participants having registered for the event,"

Abri added.

The Suhar Investment Forum aims to showcase successful foreign investments in the governorate, highlighting the safe and business-friendly environment created through efforts to support various sectors. The forum will bring together government officials from different entities and institutions responsible for investment sectors, providing an opportunity for investors to directly interact with them. This interaction will facilitate bilateral meetings between investment delegations and representatives of the Omani business sector, fostering partnerships, alliances, and agreements.

Moreover, the forum will include the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding across various fields, indicating the commitment to furthering investment opportunities and collaborations. In addition to the main forum, there will be an accompanying event that features government agencies, major institutions in the governorate, and small and medium enterprises.

UAE's 2024 growth expected to be over 5.5%

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Damian Hitchen, CEO of Saxo Bank in the MENA region, believes that the UAE economy will continue to grow in 2024. This growth is expected to be over 5.5%, mainly due to investments in technology and renewable energy.

In his statement to the Emirates News Agency (WAM), Hitchen mentioned that the UAE's strategic location, business-friendly environment, and forward-looking policies attract investors and companies worldwide. He is optimistic about the opportunities for projects and investments in the UAE and the



Damian Hitchen

Middle East in the upcoming years.

Additionally, Hitchen highlighted the UAE's significant role in global financial markets, with its economic plans closely tied to global trends. He also noted that

the country benefits from its strategic location and top-notch infrastructure, offering various opportunities for commercial activities.

Damian explained that the UAE's commitment to innovation and global partnerships enhances its global economic position, supporting its economy. He mentioned that the country has made progress in diversifying its economy away from oil by investing in sectors like tourism, technology, renewable energy, and financial services. These efforts have reduced reliance on oil revenues.

He highlighted that the UAE

has successfully diversified its economy by supporting innovations and entrepreneurship, attracting foreign investments. Programmes like the Golden Visa and free zones help attract talents and companies, aiding economic diversification. The UAE's flexible strategy for economic diversification has positioned it as a key player in the global economy.

He discussed the UAE's investments in technological innovations like artificial intelligence and blockchain, creating opportunities for startups and tech institutions. He also mentioned the

UAE's role as a major financial centre, with financial technology services spreading and Dubai and Abu Dhabi experiencing rapid growth in this sector.

Damian highlighted that the UAE, a key global tourist destination, continues to attract record numbers of tourists. He mentioned that infrastructure and real estate projects are also drawing many investors, with all sectors benefiting from the country's economic diversification efforts, strategic location, and business-friendly environment, contributing to economic growth.

WAM

Consortium led by Abu Dhabi's ADQ to invest \$35bn in Egypt

Abu Dhabi, UAE – ADQ, an Abu Dhabi-based investment and holding company, has unveiled plans to invest \$35bn in Egypt.

ADQ will acquire the development rights for Ras El-Hekma for \$24bn to develop the region into one of the largest new city developments by a private consortium. As part of this investment, ADQ will also convert \$11bn of deposits that will be utilised for investment in prime projects across Egypt to support its economic growth and development.

Ras El-Hekma is a coastal region in Egypt located approximately 350km northwest of Cairo. The significant investment marks a pivotal step towards establishing Ras El-Hekma as a leading first-of-its-kind Mediterranean holiday destination, financial centre and free zone equipped with world-class infrastructure to strengthen Egypt's economic and tourism growth potential. The Egyptian government will retain a 35% stake in the Ras El-Hekma development.



ADQ will acquire the development rights for Ras El-Hekma for \$24bn

Spanning over 170mn sqm, Ras El-Hekma will be a next-generation city comprising mainly of tourism amenities, a free zone and an investment zone combining, among else, residential, commercial, and recreational spaces with seamless connectivity domestically and internationally.

ADQ, leveraging its expansive portfolio and partners, aims to unlock the appeal of Ras El-Hekma as a premium international financial and tourism destination adopting the latest cutting edge digital and technological smart city solutions. ADQ intends to leverage Egyptian and international partners as part of its development and investment plans. Work is expected to commence in early 2025.

ADQ's decision to invest in Ras El-Hekma is underpinned by its extensive track record of smart-growth planning and investing in similar large-scale infrastructure and development projects in the region. ADQ's experience in providing fully integrated infrastructure solutions across a broad range of services, including energy, water, transportation and real estate, promises to bring significant benefits to the new development and Egypt's economy, and is expected to attract over \$150bn in investments.

Ras El-Hekma's master plan will pioneer innovative solutions that deliver a positive and lasting impact that is designed to attract foreign direct investment, boost trade, support Egypt's private sector via an in-country localisation program and drive job creation to maximise economic benefits.

Mohamed Hassan al Suwaidi, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of ADQ, said,

Germany's economy contracts

Berlin, Germany – The gross domestic product (GDP) in Germany shrank 0.3% in the fourth quarter of last year compared with the third quarter, in line with the initial estimates, according to a second reading released on Friday.

The figure followed an upwardly revised 0% quarter-on-quarter growth in the three months to September, escaping recession, Destatis data showed.

"In the final quarter, declining investment had a dampening effect on economic activity, while consumption increased slightly," said Ruth Brand, president of Destatis.

On an annual basis, the GDP in Germany dropped 0.2% in the fourth quarter of 2023.

For the whole year of 2023, Germany's economy contracted 0.3% from the previous year, as initially estimated. The initial estimates may change when the government release final figures for the full year.

Anadolu Agency

IMF official warns central banks against premature interest rate cuts

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund has warned central banks around the world against a premature cut in their interest rates.

IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack told a Thursday press briefing that inflation levels have been coming down in many economies, "but it's not yet at target or near close enough to target."

"Our line, or our view remains the same, which is the job is not yet done on monetary policy," she said. "We are urging central banks to guard against a premature easing of monetary policy."

Kozack said, however, that some adjustments in monetary policy may be needed where underlying inflation and inflation



IMF has revised up its global economic growth forecast to 3.1% for 2024, 0.2 percentage point higher than the 2.9% estimate made in the institution's World Economic Outlook (WEO) in October

expectations are "clearly and decisively" moving towards the central banks' target levels.

She noted that the IMF has revised up its global economic growth forecast to 3.1% for

2024, 0.2 percentage point higher than the 2.9% estimate made in the institution's World Economic Outlook (WEO) in October.

The global economy is expected to show a growth rate of 3.2% in 2025, according to the WEO Update released in January.

Kozack said the upward revision was made largely due to the resilience in the US economy and several large emerging markets and developing countries.

"At the same time, inflation has been falling faster than expected in most regions, and that is thanks to the easing of supply constraints and the impact of restrictive monetary policy," she added.

Agencies



Turkish economy grew 4% in fourth quarter

Istanbul, Turkey – Economists taking part in an Anadolu Agency survey said they estimate the Turkish economy grew 3.97% in the fourth quarter of last year.

The Turkish Statistical Institute is set to release GDP figures for the quarter on February 29.

According to the survey of nine economists, the estimation for the country's economic growth is 3.97%, hovering between 3.3% and 4.7%.

The average of economists' growth expectations for the whole year of 2023 was 4.4%.

The average of nine economists' growth forecasts for the end of 2024 was 3.44%.

Turkey's economy grew 4% in the first quarter of 2023 and 3.9% in the second quarter.

The country's official statistical agency is set to release GDP numbers for the fourth quarter.

Anadolu Agency

Chip giant Nvidia's market cap briefly tops \$2tn

Colin Laidley

Global semiconductor giant Nvidia shares rose over 4% at the open on Friday, propelling its market capitalisation above \$2tn in the wake of its blowout earnings Wednesday.

Nvidia's path to \$2tn has been 25 years in the making, but the first trillion took longer to reach than the second. The company went public in January 1999 and it took it more than 24 years to hit the \$1tn milestone, which it reached last May.

The climb from \$1tn to \$2tn took just 270 days.

Nvidia's stock price has more than tripled in the last year amid booming demand for artificial intelligence and the advanced semiconductors in which Nvidia specialises.

Nvidia is just the fourth US company to touch \$2tn.

Apple, which closed above \$2tn on August 20, 2020, was the first to get there. It



was followed by Microsoft, which crossed the threshold on June 22, 2021. Google-parent Alphabet briefly reached it on November 8, 2021, but it has never closed above the \$2tn mark.

The only other company in the world to have achieved such a high valuation is Saudi Aramco, the state-owned national oil company of Saudi Arabia.

Nvidia pared its early gains and finished the session up 0.4%, putting its market cap at \$1.94tn.

(Source: Investopedia)



شركة التغليف المحدودة (ش.م.ع.) Packaging Co Ltd. (SAOG)

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

On behalf of the Board of Directors, we present the Chairman's Report of "Packaging Co Ltd (SAOG)" for the year ended on 31st December 2023

The year ended with revenue of RO. 10,060,270/- and net profit of RO.110,471/- (after tax) as against revenue of RO. 10,562,150/- and net loss of RO.168,514/- (after tax) in the same period of previous year 2022. The profit before depreciation is RO.717,350/- (after tax) for the year 2023, compared to profit before depreciation of RO.428,734/- (after tax) in the previous year 2022.

The increased competition from the local carton makers have resulted in lower average sales realization than the expected and resulted in lower profit. The paper prices were stable in the year 2023 but have started increasing and may have negative impact over profitability in the year 2024.

We would like to place on record our thanks to all our employees for their dedication and hard work.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to all of you for the patience and confidence reposed in the company. We also thank the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Muscat Securities Market for their support.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq bin Taimur Al Said for his vision and growth oriented policies aimed at bringing about a prosperous national economy.

Chairman of the Board of Directors

Financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2023

	2023 RO	2022 RO
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment	4,921,421	5,478,729
Current assets		
Inventories	2,612,428	3,022,364
Trade and other receivables	3,650,949	3,813,348
Bank balances and cash	26,173	14,519
Total current assets	6,289,550	6,850,231
Total assets	11,210,971	12,328,960
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Equity		
Share capital	3,000,000	3,000,000
Share premium	90,811	90,811
Legal reserve	550,595	539,548
General reserve	53,378	53,378
Revaluation Reserve	581,608	581,608
Retained earnings	523,367	423,943
Total equity	4,799,759	4,689,288
LIABILITIES		
Non-current liabilities		
Non-current portion of term loan	530,072	687,952
Employees end of service benefits	41,686	20,591
Deferred tax liability	263,259	243,560
Total non-current liabilities	835,017	952,103
CURRENT LIABILITIES		
Current portion of term loan	157,880	157,880
Trade and other payables	2,376,797	2,585,021
Bank borrowings	2,491,518	3,394,668
Loan from a related party	550,000	550,000
Total Current Liabilities	5,576,195	6,687,569
Total liabilities	6,411,212	7,639,672
Total equity and liabilities	11,210,971	12,328,960
Net assets per share	1.600	1.563

Statement of comprehensive income

	2023 RO	2022 RO
INCOME		
Revenue from contracts with customers	10,060,270	10,562,150
Direct costs	(8,914,900)	(9,970,582)
Gross Profit	1,145,370	591,568
Other income	159,814	288,150
	1,305,184	879,718
EXPENSES		
General and administration	515,465	510,963
Selling and distribution	416,764	365,677
Finance Charges	242,785	201,127
	1,175,014	1,077,767
profit / (Loss) before taxation	130,170	(198,049)
Deferred tax (charge) / credit	(19,699)	29,535
Net (loss) / profit for the year	110,471	(168,514)
Other comprehensive income:		
Not reclassifiable to income statement:		
Loss on revaluation of freehold land	-	(100,000)
Deferred tax release on revaluation decrease	-	15,000
Other comprehensive loss for the year	-	(85,000)
Total comprehensive income for the year	110,471	(253,514)
Basic earning per share	0.037	(0.056)

Note: The Complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who request them either in Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of the request at the company's address at PO Box No 2818, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman.

Sohar International sponsors students' 'Sustainable Innovation Hackathon'

In alignment with its commitment to contribute to the national innovation strategy aiming to position the sultanate among the top 20 countries in the Global Innovation Index, Sohar International, the fastest-growing bank in Oman, recently sponsored the 'Sustainable Innovation Hackathon for a Better Future', hosted by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Muscat.

The event, took place from February 19 - 21, served as a platform for young entrepreneurs and innovators to collaborate, ideate, and contribute to a more sustainable future. With a focus on harnessing the creativity and ingenuity of Oman's youth, the event aimed to drive positive change and foster sustainability, a press release said.

The event was graced by the presence of H E Abdulsalam bin Mohammed bin Abdullah al Murshidi, chairman of the Oman Investment Authority. Representing the bank, Khalil Salim al Hedaifi, chief Government and Private Banking officer at Sohar



International, graced the event as the guest of honour for the closing ceremony. Hedaifi stated, "We are proud

to sponsor the 'Sustainable Innovation Hackathon for a Better Future' as it embodies our commitment to nurturing local

talent and driving positive change in Oman. The passion and creativity demonstrated by the participants throughout the

event are truly remarkable. "The Sustainable Innovation Hackathon has not only provided a platform for young entre-

preneurs to showcase their ideas but also fostered meaningful connections between stakeholders across sectors.

By empowering the youth and fostering innovation, we contribute to the realisation of Oman Vision 2040 and the nation's long-term development goals."

During the Event, The hackathon was accompanied by a student entrepreneurship fair and a lecture delivered by H E Murshidi. This reflected the co-operation and partnership between the university, government and private sector institutions.

Sohar International has continuously demonstrated an unwavering commitment to strengthening the national economy and fostering the holistic development of Oman.

This steadfast dedication is exemplified by the bank's consistent support for initiatives aligned with these values. Such actions serve as a testament to Sohar International's resolute efforts to drive growth in the business landscape, promote entrepreneurship and innovation, and advance the cause of sustainable development.

Mercedes-Benz Oman announces Ramadan offers

During Ramadan, customers who purchase a brand-new Mercedes-Benz E-Class or GLC Coupé will enjoy complimentary services with limited-time exclusive offers from Mercedes-Benz Oman.

Available from March 1 till April 10, the exclusive offers include a five-year/75,000 km service package, four years of Mobilo on-road assistance, three years of unlimited mileage warranty, and free registration for the first year of vehicle ownership, a press release said.

"At Mercedes-Benz, all touch-points that form the customer ownership journey are important to us, including after-sales service. We always aim to offer a personalised and seamless experience for our customers in Oman, especially during the Holy Month of Ramadan.

"We want our customers to cherish every mile in their new Mercedes-Benz E-Class or GLC Coupé" said Shaun Michael, chief executive officer, Mercedes-Benz Oman.

This Ramadan, the exclusive



We want our customers to cherish every mile in their new Mercedes-Benz E-Class or GLC Coupé

SHAUN MICHAEL

offers extend across the new Mercedes-Benz E-Class and GLC Coupé. The latest GLC Coupé combines sporty perfor-

mance with high efficiency. Meanwhile, the Mercedes-Benz E-Class is an exemplary and re-designed version of its presti-

gious kind with its executive comfort, effortless style, new dimensions of digital customisation, and spaciousness.

Graduation ceremony held for ISD class 12 students

Indian School Darsait organised its class 12 Graduation Ceremony 2023-24 on February 5. Nidheesh Kumar P P, director, Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman and Shalimar Moideen, vice president and head - Academic Sub-committee, School Management Committee, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest and Guest of Honour respectively.

The ceremony began with the Royal Anthem of Oman and the National Anthem of India followed by the lighting of the ceremonial lamp and an invocation prayer. Shamshad Hamza, vice principal (Senior Section) welcomed the dignitaries, invitees, parents, teachers and students.

In his presidential address, Vijaya Saravanan Sankaran pointed out, "Learning is a continuous process, and it's the hard work and dedication of the teachers that help in shaping the students to grow into responsible citizens



of the country". He urged the students to come back to ISD with their success stories.

Nidheesh Kumar called upon the students to be curious and inquisitive, creative and technowise while Shalimar Moideen shared his 'mantras' - sense of purpose, adaptability, building

and nurturing humanity, and dreaming big'. Amar Srivastava, principal, highlighted the values of honesty, hard work and humility. Representing the batch, Aby Jacob Varghese, the Head Boy, and Aysha Davood, the Head Girl, shared fond memories of the school.

Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah launches SiO2 The Beach Lounge

Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah introduces a new venue to complete its 13 existing dining offerings - SiO2 The Beach Lounge - set to redefine the coastal experience in Muscat, as the city's hotspot for a feet-in-the-sand experience.

Elegantly set on the edge of the 500m long stretched beach of Al Bandar hotel, opposite the resort's two dining venues Capri Court and Chow Mee, the SiO2 Beach Lounge draws its name from the very elements that make up the sandy shores - quartz, silicon and oxygen. This synthesis of nature serves as inspiration for a place where the elements of earth, breeze and sea converge to create an unforgettable afternoon and evening atmosphere, a press release said.

The brainchild of the Rene D Egle, area general manager, and inspired by contemporary island beach lounges and elegantly combined with the beautiful views of the Gulf of Oman, SiO2

boasts a thoughtfully designed space with a thatched roof bar made from palm tree leaves.

The combination of beach and contemporary furniture with light grey tones paired with blue and grey cushions adds a glamorous touch to the dramatic sunset behind the Hajar mountains. SiO2 The Beach Lounge can cater for 70 guests while keeping the venue intimate and exclusive.

The menu is crafted to revive guests' senses with a creative blend of cocktails and mocktails to enhance guests' palate- all inspired by the four elements of nature - fire, water, earth, and air. The 'Above the Clouds' and 'The Flying Bird' cocktails, influenced by the air element, feature frankincense and a phoenix feather for a mythical touch. The expertly curated beach lounge menu ensures an exquisite à la carte offering available daily from 5pm until 1am.

ATB 500 Draw adds intrigue to Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championship

Dubai, UAE - As attention turns to the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships' ATP 500 tournament from Sunday, the Official Draw for the emirate's 32nd men's event served up a host of intriguing matches as three of the world's Top 10 players lead the chase for glory at Dubai Tennis Stadium.

The 32-player field for the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships ATP event also includes three former winners in last year's champion Daniil Medvedev - the 2021 US Open winner - 2022 winner Andrey Rublev, and three-time Grand Slam winner Andy Murray, who registered a sole Dubai triumph in 2017.

World No4 and top-seed Medvedev was drawn against Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko, who attended the draw. "Can we redo the draw?" joked the World No45.

OPAZ delegation explores investment in Jordan

H E Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, deputy chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, and accompanying delegation, Yaqoub bin Badr al Ruqayshi, deputy ambassador at the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and Hilal bin Mubarak al Rashidi from OPAZ Investment Development Sector, met during their visit to Jordan with Nayef Hamidi al Fayez, chairman of the Board of Commissioners of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority.

This visit comes within the programme of the visit of H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The meeting also covered environmental activities, port systems, logistics, renewable energy projects, and green industries, besides investment cooperation between the two brotherly countries.

Dheeb talked over the volume of investments in industrial cities,



free zones, and special economic zones, as well as the area allotted to artificial intelligence and renewable energy sectors in SEZAD. In addition, he examined initiatives related to modern industries, mining, gypsum, pharmaceutical, medical, and petrochemical sectors, as well as projects involving the generation of green hydrogen and its derivatives in collaboration with global multinational corporations.

A presentation on Al Rawdha

SEZ, Wilayat Mahdah, in the Governorate of Buraimi, and the growth of the integrated economic zone on the Saudi Arabian border - which was created with the intention of integrating the industrial and logistical movement - were also included in the agenda. The two zones feature land ports that will make it easier for goods to be moved between the different countries. These zones will be integrated with the existing free zones in Salalah, Sohar,

Mazyouna, Muscat International Airport, Duqm Port, and the adjacent port of Salalah and Sohar for the project of linking a railway with the Arab Gulf countries.

The Aqaba Development Corporation, the Aqaba Authority's investment branch, Aqaba Company for Ports Operation and Management, the Ayla project, and tourism initiatives on the southern shore were among the facilities and operating companies that were visited.

Meethaq Islamic Banking opens new branch in Wilayat of Rustaq



Ooredoo partners with Thawani and National Finance

Is it time to upgrade your smartphone or tablet? Do you want to buy the latest device without having to pay the full amount up-front? Ooredoo has partnered with Thawani Technologies and National Finance Company to offer customers an interest-free 'buy-now-pay-later' (BNPL) option.

BNPL is a FinTech solution enabling customers to break up the cost of a big purchase into manageable amounts over a fixed period of time, a press release said.

Bassam al Ibrahim, CEO at Ooredoo said, "We are pleased to have signed an agreement with Thawani Technologies, a leading provider in the FinTech sector, and National Financial Company, the Sultanate of Oman's leading finance company. This new payment option will allow customers to enjoy short-term financing to help upgrade their worlds in the here and now.

"From a macro perspective, adapting FinTech solutions enables more people to participate in the national economy to help further boost Oman's growth and prosperity."

Eng Majid al Amri, founder and CEO of Thawani Technologies, said, "We are thrilled that Ooredoo Oman is invested in the fast-growing buy-now-pay-later market."

Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat inaugurated its newest branch in the Wilayat of Rustaq in the Governorate of South Batinah. The opening ceremony was held under the patronage of Sheikh Dr Yahya bin Suleiman al Nadabi, Wali of Rustaq and was attended by esteemed guests, customers and officials from Meethaq Islamic Banking.

During the ceremony, Dr Yahya was introduced to Meethaq's comprehensive suite of Islamic Banking services and facilities. It also highlighted Meethaq's strategic vision to maintain its leadership position within the sector and outlines forthcoming steps in expanding its branch network to new locations. With this new addition, Meethaq's strengthens its remarkable network to 28 branches across different governorates, reinforcing its pre-eminent standing in offering Islamic Banking services and establishing itself as the largest Islamic window with branches in Oman.

On this occasion, Sami Bait Rashid, assistant general manager - Meethaq Personal Banking, said, "The opening of Meethaq's latest branch in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq reflects our commitment as a foremost Islamic financial services



The opening of Meethaq's latest branch in the Wilayat of Rustaq reflects our commitment as a foremost Islamic financial services provider in the sultanate

SAMI BAIT RASHID

provider in the sultanate. Meethaq continually enhances and diversifies its services and facilities to deliver good-quality services through our branches, meeting the evolving needs and aspirations of our customers. "This new branch extends our reach, ensuring accessibility

for our valued customers in Rustaq and neighbouring areas. They can benefit extensively from all our banking services and products available through this branch, including opening accounts, provision of cards and financing facilities. Meethaq remains steadfast in

its strategy to expand its network and offer the best Islamic banking services in the sultanate."

The new branch offers various Shari'a-compliant services and facilities for individuals, catering conveniently to customers in the Wilayat of Rustaq.

Meethaq Islamic Banking has witnessed remarkable growth since its inception, boasting the largest Islamic branch network in Oman with 28 branches, a dedicated network of over 50 ATMs/CDMs, and free access to more than 850 ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country.

Every Meethaq product undergoes Shari'a compliance certification by the Shari'a Supervisory Board and is adhered to the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman. Meethaq's alignment with AAOIFI standards (Accounting & Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions) further distinguishes Meethaq Islamic banking products, ensuring a world-class Islamic banking experience. Meethaq remains dedicated to its customer-centric vision, understanding evolving needs and aligning services with global trends to achieve both present and future goals.

ATM 2024 to focus on India's outbound tourism

With the Indian outbound market forecast to be worth US\$143.5bn annually by the end of this decade, the Indian tourism sector will come under the spotlight during Arabian Travel Market (ATM) 2024, which returns to the Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) for its 31st edition in May. According to a report by

booking.com and McKinsey, 70% of Indians travelling overseas choose nearby destinations, with one-third choosing destinations in the Middle East. The UAE is the top regional destination, followed by Saudi Arabia. According to the DET, India is Dubai's top source market, with 1.9 million visitors in the first 10 months of 2023.

Saudi Arabia is aiming for 7.5 million visitors by 2030, a press release said.

To illustrate the sheer size and potential growth of India's overall outbound market, prior to the pandemic in 2019, Indians made 26.9 million overseas trips; the report predicts that by 2030, that number could increase to 50 million departures.

Danielle Curtis, exhibition director ME, Arabian Travel Market, said, "The boom in outbound travel from India is being driven primarily by the growing middle class. In 2020, only 37 million households had annual income between US\$ 10,000 and up to US\$35,000, but by 2030 that number will rise significantly to 177 million.

Bosher Sports Centre clinch U11 title

Bosher Sports Center (BSC) U11 beat Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) U11 by 8 wickets in the Oman Cricket Junior Domestic League Season 2023-24 supported by Mazoon Dairy SAOC at municipality grounds recently.

ISWK U11 posted 156 in 15 overs courtesy Ishan Goyal's 48 followed by quickfire innings from Ashbel Burboz scoring 25(11) and Siddhanth Narayan scoring 32(15). Urjita Dande was the sole wicket-taker for BSC U11 A. In response, Aarush Sangati's 45 of 20 balls and Urjita Dande's 39 of 15 ensured BSC U11 A claim the championship with 3 overs remaining. Ashbel Burboz and Vihaan An-



chan picked 1 wicket each.

In the prize distribution ceremony, Alkesh Joshi, treasurer

- Oman Cricket, Kiran Asher - board member, Oman Cricket, Paul Martin (Mazoon Dairy)

and Duleep Mendis - chief development officer - Oman Cricket graced the stage. Aarush Sangati of BSC U11 A was awarded the Best Batsman, Urjita Dande of BSC U11 A was awarded the Best Bowler and the Best All Rounder was awarded to Abhay Santosh of ISM U11. BSC U11 A claimed the championship and ISWK U11 were the Runners Up.

BRIEF SCORES (Final)

ISWK U11 156/2 in 15 overs (Ishaan Goyal 48(29); Urjita Dande 1/32) lost to BSC U11 A 157/2 in 12 overs (Aarush Sangati 45(20); Ashbel Burboz 1/29) by 8 wickets.

Ministry of Endowments reviews plans in Muscat

Within the purposeful annual meetings between heads of service units and governors, H E Al Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidi, Governor of Muscat, met with H E Dr Mohammed bin Saeed al Mamari, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs on Wednesday to review the Ministry's efforts and areas of cooperation and partnership with Muscat Governorate.

During the meeting, a number of programmes were discussed that the Ministry is working on to implement according to the basic topics that are focused at Oman Vision 2040. These include priority for education, learning, sci-



entific research, and national capabilities, priority of citizenship,

identity, heritage, and national culture, priority of welfare and

social protection, and priority of governance of the state's administrative apparatus, resources and projects.

Most important sectors that the ministry works on were reviewed. These included endowments, mosques, and Zakat, works that have been implemented in these sectors as well as offer of electronic services in order to facilitate all related procedures.

Muscat Municipality head, wallies, and a number of officials from Muscat Governorate and the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs attended the meeting.



شركة التغليف المحدودة (ش.م.ع.)
Packaging Co Ltd. (SAOG)

INVITATION TO ATTEND THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Board of Directors of PACKAGING COMPANY LIMITED SAOG (the Company) has the pleasure to invite the shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting , which will be held on Tuesday at 05:00pm on 26/03/2024, via the electronic platform which can be accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.om) and will be held in this location (through www.mcd.om) . If the quorum requirement for holding the Annual General Meeting is not fulfilled, a second Annual General Meeting General Meeting shall be held on Thursday at 05:00pm on 28/03/2024, via the electronic platform which can be accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.om) and will be held in this location (through www.mcd.om) to discuss the following agenda:

- To consider and approve the Board of Director's Report for the financial year ended 31st December 2023
- To consider and approve the company's organization and management report for the financial year ending December 31, 2023.
- To consider and approve the Auditor's report, Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss account for the financial year ended 31st December 2023.
- To Inform the association of the related party transaction during the financial ended 31st December 2024.(as per attached).
- To consider and ratify the Board of Directors sitting fees paid during the preceding year and to determine the board sitting fees for the upcoming financial year. (as per attachment).
- To appoint the auditors for the financial year ending 31st December 2024 and to approve their remuneration.
- To evaluate the performance of the board of directors for the financial year 2023, as per report submitted by the auditors.

According to the Company's Articles of Association and the controls for holding General Meetings using modern technology issued by the capital market authority , we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- Legal person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend the General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCDC.
- Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the General Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the General Meeting. If the shareholder's shares are increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled, and the shareholder will have to vote again on the day of the General Meeting.

For further information please contact on telephone No 99434183 or email: jasim@packoman.com

Chairman

Legal adviser

External Auditor

TWO YEARS OF WAR

HOW THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT HAS UNFOLDED

Moscow/Istanbul - The Russia-Ukraine war entered its third year on Saturday, marking another grim milestone in a conflict that the UN has warned will leave an impact to 'be felt for generations'.

Since February 24, 2022, the war has claimed the lives of at least 10,582 civilians, including 5,017 men, 3,093 women and 587 children, according to the latest UN figures published this week.

The number of injured is at least 19,875, including 6,524 men, 4,546 women and 1,298 children, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported, stressing that the actual figures are likely 'significantly higher'.

UN data shows almost 6.5mn Ukrainians have sought refuge globally, with some 3.7mn more displaced inside the country.

By all estimates, prospects for peace remain dim at the moment as the two sides remain at odds over the way forward.

Kyiv wants Moscow to abandon all its territorial claims, withdraw its forces from Ukrainian territory and give financial compensation for the damage inflicted.

Moscow, on the other hand, insists that Ukraine shelve a law banning talks with Russia and wants it to return to its neutral, non-aligned and non-nuclear status, as well as ensure the rights and freedoms of its Russian-speaking citizens.

The festering conflict has seen several pivotal incidents and strategic turn of events over the past 24 months.

Here are some of the key moments:

Special military operation

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the start of a 'special military operation' in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, three days after saying that Moscow would recognise Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions as independent states.

The global response to Putin's announcement was overwhelmingly negative, with Western countries slapping Moscow with what would be the first of many sanctions.

Push for Kyiv

In the initial phase, Russian forces made significant advances toward Kyiv.

Fierce clashes occurred in Irpin and Bucha, with the latter gaining global attention as President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Russia of committing war crimes there, a claim denied by Moscow.

In late March, Russia announced it would 'radically reduce activity' in the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions, while Ukraine said on April 2 that it retook control of the entire Kyiv region.

Control of Zaporizhzhia

On March 4, Russian forces gained control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Europe's largest nuclear power plant and one of the biggest in the world.

Moscow and Kyiv have since regularly accused each other of shelling the plant and its surroundings, stoking fears of a nuclear catastrophe.

Grain deal

Turkey, the UN, Russia, and Ukraine reached an agreement in Istanbul on July 22 to resume grain exports from three Ukrainian Black Sea ports that were suspended due to the war.

Under the deal, a coordination centre was established to conduct joint inspections at entrances and exits of harbours and ensure the safety of routes.

The deal, initially set for a period of 120 days, was renewed several times, before Russia eventually pulled out in July 2023.

Partial mobilisation in Russia

On September 21, Putin gave his nod for partial mobilisation in the country for the first time since World War II, under which 300,000 Russians between ages 18 to 50 would be called up for military service.

Annexation of Ukrainian regions

Putin declared the unilateral annexation of four Ukrainian regions - Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson - on September 30.

The announcement came after pro-Russian authorities conducted referendums in the regions on September 23-27.

The international community, including Turkey, the US and several European nations, condemned the referendums and refused to recognise their validity. In response, Zelensky signed a decree declaring Russia's annexation of the four regions, as well as the 2014 annexation of Crimea, null and void.

Crimea Bridge blast

On October 8, a massive explosion damaged the Kerch Bridge, a key passage linking Russia and Crimea.



Since February 24, 2022, the war has claimed the lives of at least 10,582 civilians

At least three people were killed in the blast, which Putin said was a 'terrorist attack' carried out by Ukrainian intelligence, claims that Kyiv would confirm 10 months later.

Russia's Kherson withdrawal

On November 9, Russia ordered its troops to withdraw from Kherson, a port city in southern Ukraine, to the left bank of the Dnieper River.

Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu said the decision was taken to save the lives of Russian soldiers.

Two days later, the Defence Ministry announced that Russian forces had completed their withdrawal across the river.

Zelensky heads to US

On December 21, Zelensky visited the White House, his first overseas trip since the start of the war, for crucial talks with US President Joe Biden and senior

UN data shows almost 6.5mn Ukrainians have sought refuge globally, with some 3.7mn more displaced inside the country. By all estimates, prospects for peace remain dim at the moment

American officials.

During the visit, the Biden administration announced the transfer of the first Patriot air defence system to Ukraine as part of a new US\$1.85bn military aid package.

Drones above Putin's residence

On May 3, 2023, Moscow said it had shot down two Ukrainian drones over Putin's Kremlin residence, calling it a 'terrorist' plot

to assassinate the Russian president.

Zelensky flatly denied any involvement, emphasising that Ukraine's focus was on reclaiming its own territories rather than attacking foreign nations.

Battle for Bakhmut

On May 21, Russia declared full control over the city of Bakhmut, an important transport and logistics hub in the Donetsk region, which is situated within the predominantly Russian-speaking industrialised Donbas region.

Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials initially denied Russia's claims, but on May 30, Ukrainian military spokesman Serhiy Cherevatyi admitted that the city was under Russian control.

'Ukrainian sabotage group'

The governor of Russia's Belgorod region claimed on May 22 that a 'Ukrainian sabotage group' had entered the area, saying Russian forces and other

government services were taking measures to 'eliminate' the threat.

Ukraine has since then purportedly launched a series of attacks on Russia's border regions, notably Bryansk and Belgorod, including drone and artillery strikes and raids by paramilitary groups.

Russia-Belarus nuclear pact

On May 25, Russia and Belarus signed a deal on the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.

The agreement specifies the conditions for storing these weapons in a dedicated facility. Moscow said the decision was taken in response to what it described as an 'extremely sharp escalation and the activity of NATO's joint nuclear missions'.

Kakhovka dam explosion

Russia and Ukraine blamed each other for blowing up the Kakhovka dam on June 6, which flooded surrounding areas and forced thousands of people from their homes.

Moscow accused Ukraine of attempting to cut off fresh water to Crimea, while Kyiv claimed that Russia blew up the dam to slow down an expected Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Counteroffensive and defensive actions

On June 10, Zelensky announced that Ukraine had launched a counteroffensive and was also taking defensive actions.

By the end of 2023, the Ukrainian counteroffensive was widely acknowledged to have failed to deliver any sort of decisive breakthrough.

Wagner rebellion

On June 24, the Wagner paramilitary group accused Russian forces of attacking its fighters, moving them from Ukraine to the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.

Russian authorities labeled it 'an armed rebellion' and initiated a criminal case, while President Putin denounced it as an act of 'treason'.

The very next day, Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin and his fighters were 200km (125 miles) away from Moscow when they decided to retreat to avoid violence.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko acted as a mediator, saying he engaged with Prigozhin to help the two sides reach a quick solution.

Prigozhin's death

On August 23, exactly two months after the rebellion, Prigozhin was killed in a plane crash in Russia.

The Wagner chief and nine other people, including the group's co-founder Dmitry Utkin, were aboard a private jet that crashed in the Tver region, north of Moscow.

US delivery of cluster bombs, missiles

On July 8, President Biden announced that the US had started deliveries of cluster munitions to Ukraine due to a lack of conventional shells, calling it 'a temporary measure'.

On September 6, the US unveiled another US\$175mn military assistance package for Ukraine, which included depleted uranium shells.

Ukraine also received Storm Shadow and SCALP missiles from Western allies, with a target range of over 800km (500 miles), forcing Russia to pull out warships of its Black Sea Fleet from the port of Sevastopol.

Israel's war on Gaza

Since October 7, the Gaza war has led Western financial and military aid intended for Ukraine to be redirected toward Israel.

The Ukraine conflict has also faded into the background, especially in terms of global media coverage and political attention, since Israel launched its war on the besieged Palestinian enclave.

Ukraine replaces top commander

On February 7, 2024, Zelensky dismissed Ukraine's commander-in-chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

The move was widely expected as Zaluzhnyi was said to be responsible for Ukraine's unsuccessful 2023 counteroffensive and suspected of having presidential ambitions.

He was replaced by Oleksandr Syrskiy, who previously served as the commander of the Ukrainian ground forces.

Battle for Avdiivka

On February 17, Syrskiy ordered Ukrainian forces to retreat from Avdiivka, a city in the Donetsk region that Ukraine had been fortifying for nearly a decade, and which was targeted in a Russian operation since October 2023. Zelensky blamed Western allies for the situation, saying they had created an 'artificial deficit of weapons' for Kyiv.

Anadolu Agency

Sweden's NATO bid awaits last vote

Athens, Greece - A positive atmosphere prevailed at a meeting of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban with his Swedish counterpart Ulf Kristersson held in Budapest just days before the Hungarian parliament's expected vote on Sweden's NATO bid on Monday.

At a joint news conference after the meeting with Kristersson, Orban said: "Today's meeting was a very important milestone in a long process of rebuilding trust." He added that time is needed to rebuild the trust between the two countries, which has been damaged.

"Being NATO allies means that we are willing to die for one another. It is built on mutual respect. Taking that process at the appropriate pace has been wise," Orban emphasised.

Kristersson, for his part, said: "We are both members of the EU and will soon be allies in NATO." Thanking Orban for the invitation to the meeting, he added:



"We had a good conversation today on continued defence and security policy cooperation between our two countries."

Kristersson remarked that their talks on Friday were constructive and that cooperation would continue in areas where the two countries already have mutual understandings and interests. Moreover, the Swedish prime minister announced that both countries have just signed a bilateral agreement to continue

cooperation on the Swedish-made JAS 39 Gripen war jets, which Hungary leased in 2006.

The two leaders agreed that the leasing of the 14 jets will be extended for another decade beginning in 2026, with Hungary purchasing four more from Sweden. Kristersson said the agreement would strengthen European security and benefit both countries.

He also praised Hungary for its contribution to NATO's Air Policing operation in the Baltic Sea, near Sweden.

On Tuesday, Hungary's ruling Fidesz party proposed holding a vote on Sweden's NATO membership bid next Monday.

Sweden must obtain the approval of 31 NATO member states before it can join.

Hungary remains the only NATO ally that has yet to approve Sweden's membership in the alliance.

Anadolu Agency

Donald Trump claims indictments helping him attract Black voters

Washington, US - Former US President Donald Trump on Friday claimed that his criminal indictments and mug shot have boosted his support among Black Americans because they see him as a victim of discrimination.

Trump was speaking at the Black Conservative Federation's annual Honors Gala in Columbia, South Carolina.

Claiming that the Black community's support for him has grown lately, he said: "A lot of people said that that's why the Black people like me because they have been hurt so badly and discriminated against, and they actually viewed me as I'm discriminated against."

Referring to his mug shot taken in Atlanta last summer after he was charged for trying to change the election results to his favour, the former president said: "When I did the mug shot in Atlanta, that mug shot is number



Donald Trump

one. You know who embraced it more than anyone else? The Black population."

Trump said that he was acquainted with numerous Black individuals since Black construction workers had built his properties.

Though he seemed to have received applause for his words, Trump did not touch on Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, which started when he was the president after the killing of a Black man in Minneapolis in June 2020.

George Floyd, 46, died on May 25, 2020, after Officer Derek Chauvin, 46, who is white, knelt on Floyd's neck as he repeatedly said he could not breathe.

The killing was captured on video and sparked protests across the country about police brutality and racial injustice.

Among his plenty of speeches about the protests at that time, the former US president repeatedly called BLM protesters 'thugs', 'terrorists' and 'anarchists'. In May 2020, Trump remarked that the demonstrators outside the White House after Floyd's killing were 'just there to cause trouble', adding that if they approached too close, 'they would have been greeted with the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons, I have ever seen. That's when people would have been really badly hurt, at least'.

Anadolu Agency

UK: Junior doctors start fresh strike over pay dispute with government



London, UK - Junior doctors across England on Saturday started another round of strike action in their long-running pay dispute with the government.

Dr Robert Laurenson and Dr Vivek Trivedi, the British Medical Association's (BMA) junior doctors committee co-chairs, expressed their disappointment in the government's failure to present a 'credible pay offer' to address the longstanding

issue.

Laurenson and Trivedi in a statement emphasised that the government could have averted the strikes by engaging in meaningful negotiations and offering reasonable terms.

"The government could have stopped these strikes by simply making a credible pay offer for junior doctors in England to begin reversing the pay cuts they have inflicted upon us

for more than a decade," they said.

They also emphasised the toll that the ongoing dispute has taken on the health care system, with many doctors feeling exhausted, demoralised, and overworked.

"More and more colleagues who have simply had enough with the already 26 per cent pay cut, are leaving the NHS (National Health Service) for

better-paying jobs in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere that value their workforce.

"All doctors are looking for is to reverse pay cuts and be paid the same, in real terms, as in 2008 - which looks like around £21 per hour instead of the current £15 per hour," they underlined.

The strikes will extend until February 28.

Additionally, junior doctors

are in the process of conducting a ballot among their members to secure a mandate for an additional six months of potential strike action starting in the spring.

A recent poll by market research company Savanta revealed that 53 per cent of respondents voiced support for the strikes, while only 28 per cent expressed opposition.

Anadolu Agency

UN reports dreadful conditions in DR Congo

United Nations, US - The humanitarian situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is deteriorating rapidly, a UN spokesman said on Friday.

Stephane Dujarric, the spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, highlighted the grave concerns at the regular press briefing. "The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said today it is gravely concerned by the worsening humanitarian situation civilians face in the eastern part of the country."

The recent escalation of conflict around the town of Sake in North Kivu Province has displaced 144,000 people from the outskirts of Goma, Dujarric noted.

"Non-state armed groups have also launched a spate of targeted attacks against civilians this week in Beni as well as in the Irumu Territory of Ituri Province."

The UNHCR's teams have documented alarming incidents of 'killings, kidnappings, and the burning of homes'.

To address the crisis, UNHCR is working with local authorities to expand displacement sites near Goma and plans, alongside other humanitarian organisations, to deliver 900,000 shelters in 2024. "This effort nearly doubles the 500,000 built last year," Dujarric added.

Xinhua

UN, West just watching Israeli crimes in Gaza Strip: Erdogan

At least 92 Palestinians were killed and 123 others were injured over the last 24 hours

Ankara, Turkey - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday criticised the UN and Western countries for 'just watching the humanitarian crimes' committed by Israel in Gaza for the last 140 days.

"So much so that the UN Security Council does not and cannot call for an immediate cease-fire," Erdogan decried, speaking at a meeting of the Justice and Development (AK) Party in Turkey's northwestern province of Sakarya.

"Neither Western powers nor the UN Security Council have made a useful effort to prevent Israeli violence," he stressed.

At least 92 Palestinians were killed and 123 others were injured over the last 24 hours as Israel continues its onslaught on the besieged Gaza Strip, the territory's Health Ministry said on Saturday. "The Israeli occupation committed eight massacres against families in the Gaza Strip, leaving 92 martyrs and 123 injured over the past 24 hours," a ministry statement said.

"Many people are still trapped under the rubble and on the roads as rescuers are unable to reach them," it added.

Flouting the International Court of Justice's provisional ruling, Israel continues its onslaught on the Gaza Strip where at least 29,606 Palestinians have been killed, mostly women and children, and 69,737 injured since October 7, according to Palestinian health authorities.



Those killed in Israeli attacks being taken to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital morgue in Deir al-Balah, Gaza on Friday

Neither Western powers nor the UN Security Council have made a useful effort to prevent Israeli violence

RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN

Israel has pounded the Gaza Strip since a cross-border attack by Hamas, which Tel Aviv says killed nearly 1,200 people.

The Israeli war on Gaza has pushed 85 per cent of the territory's population into internal displacement amid acute shortages of food, clean water and

medicine, while 60 per cent of the enclave's infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, according to the UN.

For the first time since its creation in 1948, Israel stands accused of genocide at the International Court of Justice, the highest judicial body of the

United Nations, over its Gaza war.

An interim ruling in January ordered Tel Aviv to stop genocidal acts and take measures to guarantee that humanitarian assistance is provided to civilians in Gaza.

Offensive in Rafah

Meanwhile, Israeli War Cabinet member Benny Gantz threatened on Friday that the army 'will eventually launch its much-anticipated offensive' in the southern Gazan city of Rafah.

"The fighting will continue also in the future, deep within the enemy's territory and not along the border," Gantz said in a video message shared on social media. "We will protect the communities (Israeli settlements in the Gaza envelope) with increased forces and we will reach every place where Hamas fighters are."

He also addressed residents of Israeli towns in the Gaza envelope. "The decision to return is in your hands. The state will assist all families or communities to make the right decision for them.

We will provide you with all the civil services," he said, adding that their security is the government's responsibility.

The Israeli government has evacuated residents in dozens of settlements and towns in the Gaza envelope to hotels and guest houses across Israel since the beginning of the war on October 7. Many have refused to return while the war is ongoing.

On the northern front, Gantz pointed out that the war 'will not end until northern residents can return'.

"We are working militarily and politically. Hezbollah has already been pushed from the border, and we are preparing for the day the order is given when we need to expand our activities."

Many residents of northern towns have also been displaced due to border fighting that erupted between the army and resistance factions in Lebanon, led by Hezbollah, since October 8. Gantz's threats come in conjunction with the start of meetings in Paris, with the participation of Qatar, Egypt, US and Israel, to discuss ways to calm the situation in Gaza and reach an agreement to exchange Palestinian prisoners and Israeli hostages.

Israel's participation in the meetings marks a notable development in the course of the war, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided February 13 not to send a delegation back to Cairo for further talks.

Anadolu Agency

German lawyers sue Olaf Scholz over 'abetting' Gaza 'genocide'

Berlin, Germany - Amid the intense conflict in Gaza, a group of lawyers is filing a criminal complaint with the German federal prosecutor against the senior German politicians including Chancellor Olaf Scholz, accusing them of 'aiding and abetting' the 'genocide' they say is being committed by Israel in Gaza, Al Jazeera reported on Friday.

According to the report, the case against several members of the country's Federal Security Council, which directs national security policy and authorises weapons exports, was announced on Friday.

Additionally, the Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, Economics Minister Robert Habeck, Finance Minister Christian Lindner and others has been named in the case.

The lawyers behind the case represent families of two Palestinians with roots in the Gaza Strip, including that of Palestinian-German migration



This file photo shows people carrying banners and Palestinian flags, staging a solidarity demonstration in Cologne, Germany, on February 4, 2024

scholar Nora Ragab.

"We, Palestinians in the diaspora, will not stand by and watch a genocide being committed against our families and our people," Ragab said in a statement. "We will use all means at our disposal. ... Today we aim to hold the German government accountable for its complicity in the genocide in Gaza."

Al Jazeera reported that the European Legal Support Center,

the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy and the UK-based Law for Palestine are among the civil society organisations backing the case.

In a jointly written statement, they said: "The German state is one of the countries that has shown some of the strongest political and material support to Israel in its assault on the Gaza Strip and the Palestinians."

Alexander Gorski, one of the lawyers supporting the case, ac-

knowledgeed that 'from a legal point of view and given the political landscape in Germany, this case will be a difficult one'.

"But we believe it's our responsibility as people working in the judicial sector to try to do something," he told Al Jazeera. "We are seeing a genocide being livestreamed around the world, and despite this, the Israeli government is still being supported by other countries and is still receiving weapons from them."

Israel has said it wants to crush Hamas, which governs the densely populated strip, but after four months of war, the devastating civilian toll is causing alarm among world leaders.

In late January, the United Nations' top court, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), found it was 'plausible' that Israel was committing acts in Gaza that violated the international Convention on Genocide.

ANI

Skyrocketing cocoa prices feared to trigger chocolate shortages worldwide

Accra, Ghana - Chocolate lovers around the world may have to brace themselves for a sweet treat shortage as cocoa prices reach unprecedented heights, with economists projecting no downward trend through 2024.

Cocoa prices have more than doubled since the beginning of last year, reaching an all-time high of US\$9,010.59 per tonne on the New York commodities market in the second week of February.

Unfavourable weather conditions, smuggling, and swollen shoot disease are said to have contributed to the price increase, resulting in lower crop yields in Ivory Coast, which produces nearly 40 per cent of the world's cocoa bean, and Ghana, which produces 20 per cent.

El Nino, a weather pattern that causes dryness in West Africa, has had a significant impact on cocoa production in these coun-

tries. Strong seasonal winds and a lack of rainfall have also contributed to the shortage, forcing traders to scramble for supplies and driving prices up.

Chocolate manufacturers, as a result of rising primary ingredient costs, are bracing for a potential demand slowdown.

In a report by ingredients supplier Henley Bridge, cocoa price increases of 15-20 per cent for the first half of 2024 are expected to continue for the remainder of the year.

This surge in pricing has already had a ripple effect on the industry, with chocolate makers adjusting their operations to stay afloat.

"It's upsetting considering we haven't witnessed such a significant decrease in cocoa output in recent years," Samuel Adimado, president of the Ghana cocoa buyers group, told Anadolu, expressing his concern over the de-

cline in cocoa production.

"Not only have we observed a drop in production, but we've also had to scale back our operations, including layoffs and the termination of contracts for some staff members," he added.

However, Javier Blas, a London-based energy and commodities expert and Bloomberg opinion columnist, believes 'this is a necessary crisis'.

"The world needs higher prices to encourage the re-planting of millions of old trees - and take better care of the current ones," he said in a recent post on X.

The implications of the cocoa scarcity go beyond the chocolate business.

Other products that use cocoa as an ingredient, such as cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, may see price increases or supply chain disruptions.

Emerging economies, particularly those with a high demand for chocolate, may experience difficulty supplying customer demands.

Anadolu Agency

INDIA

Quad fellowships extended to ASEAN countries: Jaishankar



PM Narendra Modi addresses during inauguration of projects in Chhattisgarh via video conference, in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

PM Modi launches multiple projects in Chhattisgarh

New Delhi - Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday inaugurated and laid the foundation stone of multiple development projects worth Rs 34,400 crores in Chhattisgarh under 'Viksit Bharat, Viksit Chhattisgarh'.

The projects cater to several sectors including roads, railways, coal, power and solar energy among others.

Addressing the programme virtually, the prime minister hailed the development undertaken in Chhattisgarh saying that the dream of building a Viksit Chhattisgarh will be realised through the empowerment of farmers, youth and women.

"Chhattisgarh has hardworking farmers, talented youth and a wealth of nature. Whatever is needed to develop, Chhattisgarh had it earlier and is there even today. But those who ruled the country for a long time after

independence did not have a big vision," he said.

During the occasion, Modi dedicated NTPC's Lara Super Thermal Power Project, Stage-I (2x800 MW) to the nation and laid the foundation stone of NTPC's Lara Super Thermal Power Project, Stage-II (2x800 MW) in Raigarh.

While Stage-I of the station is built with an investment of around Rs 15,800 crore, Stage-II of the project shall be constructed on the available land of Stage-I premises, thus requiring no additional land for the expansion, and entails an investment of Rs 15,530 crore, a PMO release said.

Equipped with highly efficient super critical technology (for Stage I) and ultra-super critical technology (for Stage II), the project will ensure lesser specific coal consumption and carbon dioxide emission.

ANI

New Delhi - External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Saturday announced that the second cycle of Quad STEM Fellowships has been extended to ASEAN member countries too.

Jaishankar's remarks came on the closing day of the Raisina Dialogue in the national capital on Saturday. He was addressing the 'Quad Think Tank Forum' session at the Raisina Dialogue.

"One very unique Quad initiative has been the STEM Fellowship programme - under which about a 100 scholars from the four countries have enrolled in courses in US universities," said Jaishankar. "I am very happy to share with you all that the second cycle of Quad STEM Fellowships has been extended to ASEAN member countries as well," he added.

The Quad Fellowship is an initiative of the governments of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States. Announced by the Quad partners on September 24, 2021, this scholarship programme is designed to build ties among the next generation of scientists and technologists.

The Quad Fellowship is operated in consultation with a non-governmental task force composed of academic, foreign policy, and private sector leaders from each Quad country. Beginning in 2024, the fellowship will be administered by the Institute of International Education (IIE), a global not-for-profit organisation that manages many of the world's scholarship and fellowship programmes.



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar speaks during a panel discussion at the 9th edition of the Raisina Dialogue 2024, in New Delhi on Friday (ANI)

One very unique Quad initiative has been the STEM Fellowship programme under which about a 100 scholars from the four countries have enrolled in courses in US universities

S JAISHANKAR

The Quad Fellowship sponsors exceptional master's and doctoral students to study sci-

ence, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in the United States. The fellowship supports students from the four Quad countries - Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

The fellowship develops a network of science and technology experts committed to advancing innovation and collaboration in the private, public, and academic sectors, in their own nations and among Quad countries. The programme builds foundational understanding among Quad Fellows of one another's societies and cultures through pro-

gramming and networking opportunities with each country's top scientists, technologists, and politicians.

Addressing the session, Jaishankar also said that coming together of India, the US, Australia and Japan as part of Quad group serves to illustrate the growth of a multipolar order and advance a post-Cold War thinking against 'spheres of influence'.

"I believe it (Quad) has five messages. One, it reflects the growth of a multipolar order. Two, it is post-Alliance and post-Cold War thinking. Three, it is against spheres of influence. Four, it expresses the

democratising of the global space and a collaborative, not unilateral approach. And five, it is a statement that in this day and age, others cannot have a veto on our choices."

Highlighting the significance of Quad grouping in Indo-Pacific at the session, he said: "Now, this in turn would elicit the question, why the Indo-Pacific? And the answer, I think, by now is very clear. The post-1945 division of what till then was perceived to be a cohesive threat resulted in our contemplating the Indian Ocean and the Pacific one as two separate entities."

ANI

DEADLY FIRE AT FAIR



Massive fire breaks out at Ramnagar fair, in Farukhabad, Uttar Pradesh on Saturday. As per reports, one person died and seven others were injured in the incident (ANI)



Aam Aadmi Party and Congress leaders attend a press conference in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

LS polls: AAP, Congress seal 4:3 seat-sharing deal for Delhi

New Delhi - After weeks of suspense and wrangling over the allotment of seats in the national capital ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, INDIA partners AAP and Congress on Saturday announced a seat-sharing pact for Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Chandigarh and Goa.

As part of the agreement reached between the ruling party in Delhi and the Congress, the latter will contest three of the seven Lok Sabha seats in the national capital while the AAP will field candidates in the remaining four constituencies.

At a joint press conference of

top leaders of the two parties in the national capital on Saturday, Congress general secretary and MP Mukul Wasnik said his party will contest the Chandni Chowk, North East and North West seats in the Lok Sabha elections.

"AAP will contest four seats - New Delhi, West Delhi, South Delhi and East Delhi," Wasnik said.

In neighbouring Gujarat, the Congress will contest 24 of 26 Lok Sabha seats, leaving the remaining two - Bharuch and Bhavnagar - for the AAP.

In Haryana, the Congress will

contest eight of the nine Lok Sabha seats while the AAP will contest one seat - Kurukshetra.

Wasnik added that the two parties also reached a consensus on the grand old party contesting the prized Chandigarh Lok Sabha seat.

"After a long discussion on Chandigarh, the two parties decided that the Congress candidate will contest the seat," he added.

As part of the seat-sharing deal, the Congress will contest both the Lok Sabha seats in Goa.

ANI

US President Joe Biden to meet Italian PM Giorgia Meloni on March 1

Washington, US - The White House announced on Saturday that Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni will visit the United States on March 1.

While addressing a press briefing, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, said that US President Joe Biden would welcome the Italian Prime Minister to the White House.

"On March 1, President Biden will welcome Prime Minister

Meloni of Italy to the White House to reaffirm the strong relationship between the United States and Italy," she said.

Moreover, the leaders will discuss shared approaches to address global challenges, according to the White House press secretary.

"The leaders will discuss shared approaches to address global challenges, including their commitment to continue supporting Ukraine as it confronts



US President Joe Biden will receive the Italian PM at the White House

Russia's aggressions, preventing regional escalation in the Middle East, delivering humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, developments in North Africa, and close transatlantic coordination regarding the People's Republic of China," she highlighted.

Additionally, the US President and the Italian PM are also expected to discuss Italy's G7 presidencies and coordinate in advance of the NATO summit.

"They will also discuss Italy's

G7 presidencies and coordinate in advance of the NATO summit in Washington...," she said.

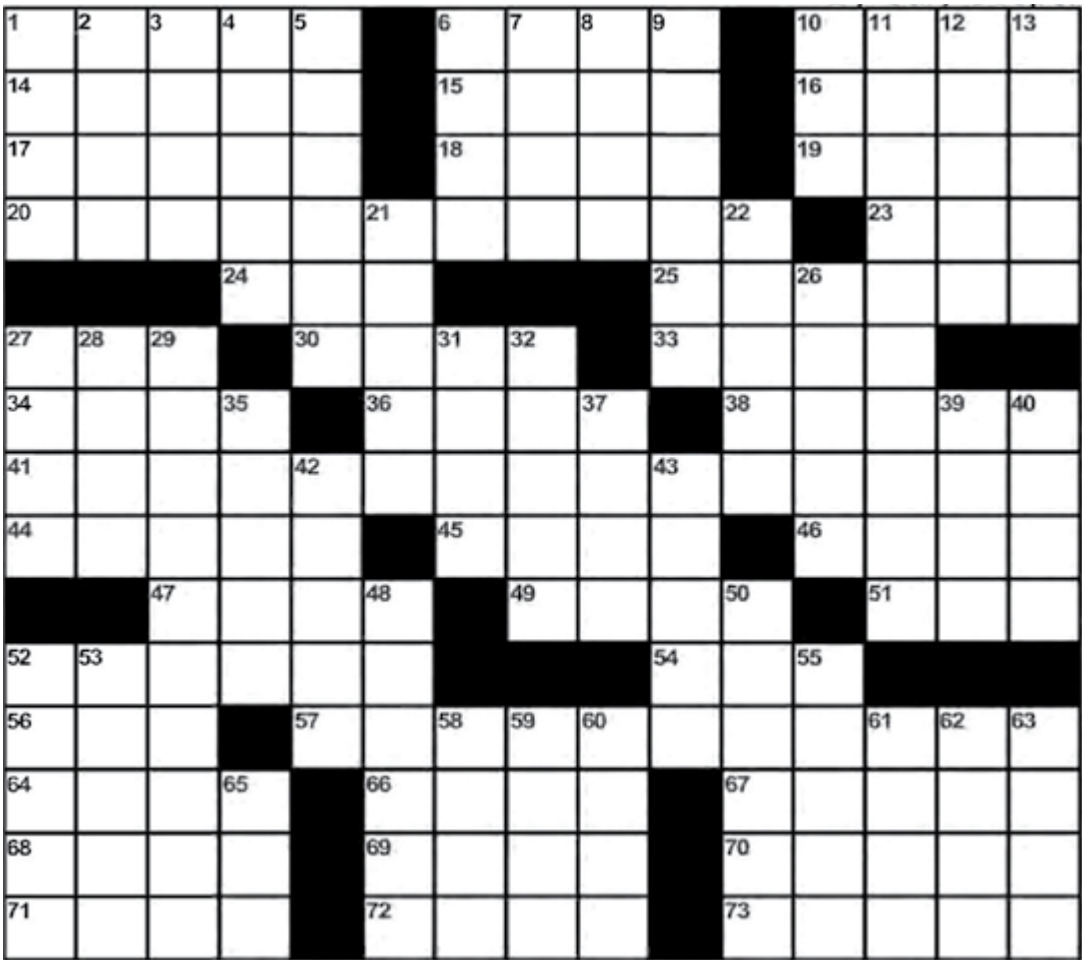
On the second anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, US President Joe Biden announced over 500 new sanctions against Russia for its ongoing war of conquest of Ukraine and the death of Aleksey Navalny, who was Putin's fiercest opposition leader.

He further emphasised that these sanctions will target indi-

viduals connected to Navalny's imprisonment, and several Russian sectors. "Today, I am announcing more than 500 new sanctions against Russia for its ongoing war of conquest on Ukraine and for the death of Aleksey Navalny, who was a courageous anti-corruption activist and Putin's fiercest opposition leader," he said, according to an official release by the White House.

ANI

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Animal with a striped rear
- 6) Insect feeler
- 10) Sorrow I sigh
- 14) Pneumonia type
- 15) Malaria symptom
- 16) Passed-down knowledge
- 7) Lady between Hillary and Michelle
- 18) Better said, sorry
- 19) Sleeping?
- 20) Reo, r one
- 23) Partner of only
- 24) Pride or lust, say
- 25) James Cameron film
- 27) In on the latest trends
- 30) Little row
- 33) Hopeful singer's tape
- 34) Hearty draughts
- 36) Cenozoic and Big Band
- 38) Textile fiber
- 41) Secondhand store section
- 44) All finished, as dinner
- 45) Thailand's former name
- 46) Words with "record" or "trap"
- 47) More than dislike
- 49) Ski lift
- 51) Cover with turf
- 52) Playfully
- 54) Pen point

DOWN

- 1) Paella cooker
- 2) "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" e.g.
- 3) Lie a accent to
- 4) The City of Light
- 5) Natives of Umm Qasr
- 6) Hors d'oeuvre selection
- 7) Turkish honorific (var.)
- 8) Oahu gala
- 9) Group of ve
- 10) Beginning of "carte" or "king"
- 11) Surgeries that affect mental ability
- 12) Venue for big crowds
- 13) Commemorative meal
- 21) Remove, as a tent

DOWN

- 22) Difficult to miss
- 26) New Delhi nannies
- 27) One of the wealthy
- 28) Russian gold medalist
- Kulik
- 29) Places to live the high life?
- 31) Hawk among gods
- 32) Implicitly understood
- 35) It's better than a bargain
- 37) Thickish piece
- 39) Really enthusiastic
- about 40) Mild exclamation of surprise
- 42) Bit of nuttiness
- 43) Dweller on the Arabian Sea
- 48) Cream-filled dessert
- 50) Entrepreneur's dream
- 52) It's attractive to a moth
- 53) Parry
- 55) Flower base
- 58) Shaving cream ingredient
- 59) Mends, as bones
- 60) Act the usher
- 61) "For Your Eyes..."
- 62) Furnace burner
- 63) Windy day toy
- 65) Out of control

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

One of your friends keeps going on and on about how they are changing and growing, but you've yet to see any real evidence of this transformation. Before you call them on their baloney or tell them that they are fooling themselves, think about what they really need right now: your support, not criticism. Be patient and understand that sometimes real change takes real time. It doesn't always happen dramatically. Encourage them to keep going and they'll be able to.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Today, try to open up just a little bit and let the world see the part of yourself that you are sometimes too afraid to reveal. Talk about that hobby you're still trying to get the hang of, or sing a few bars of the song you've been working on with your vocal coach. You might not be ready for prime time, but so what? Have pride in your imperfections and show the world that you are a work in progress (just like the rest of us). People are very attracted to imperfect people.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

While your ambition is usually something that helps you be in the right place at the right time, now your drive for success could send you right over a cliff! Be cautious about voicing your opinions, because the allies you used to always be able to count on for support are not necessarily on your side this time. Of course, that doesn't mean you are wrong, but it does mean that political games are going to be a bit trickier to play today than they usually are.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

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

- A. Best Disease
- B. Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva
- C. Schnitzler Syndrome
- D. Phocomelia

2. Which were the last Olympic Games in which East Germany took part as a country?

- A. 1992
- B. 1988
- C. 1984
- D. 1982

3. What Greek letter is used to denote the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter?

- A. Pi
- B. Rho
- C. Delta
- D. Theta

Answers: 1.D 2.B 3.A



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

If you have been too self-indulgent recently, you need to try to rein it in today. People are starting to wonder whether or not you have the right priorities, so cut out excessive activity and get back to a simpler way of living for now. You'll welcome it even if you haven't been craving it. Drink water instead of wine, cook at home instead of dining out, shop at thrift stores instead of luxury boutiques. All these little substitutions will make you appreciate your pampering all the more.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You'll see the problems that arise today before anyone else does, but you have to be careful about how you alert everyone to them. If all you do is point fingers and complain about how things are not what they could be without offering any constructive ideas, you are whining, not helping. Before you raise any red flags, think of a possible solution. That way, when you are pointing out a problem, you are also pointing out a way to fix it and thereby making yourself useful.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Thinking ahead may seem impossible now. You really don't know what's coming. Since you don't have a crystal ball, you won't be able to figure it out without more information. But maybe you shouldn't get so caught up in thinking in terms of a certain time frame. Instead of figuring out what the next week, month, or year holds, think in bigger and less specific terms. This is a good time to indulge in fantasies. Imagine what you want your life to be like in general.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Today the people around you may be behaving in some unexpected ways, but you probably will be as well. There is a lot of uneven energy around you. But this unpredictability can add a lot of fun to the day too. So if someone who is usually introverted suddenly starts talking a mile a minute, just play along and go with the flow. Try being more submissive than you usually are, and see what this normally shy person has to say. You'll get joy out of seeing them get their moment in the sun.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You might not have all the knowledge in the world, but you have a lot of heart, and that will count for a lot today. By using your kindness and compassion to make stronger friendships with people, you'll be able to use their skills to get closer to what you want. Don't think of it as using someone, because you're not. It's perfectly acceptable to align yourself with people who add value to your life. After all, they choose to have you in their life because you add so much too.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

A new business or professional opportunity could come up today, but the timing might not be totally right for you. Resist the urge to force things. Listen to your instincts. If you don't feel ready to take on something new, don't accept it. Trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole will only end in frustration. Self-preservation is important today, so keep track of your resources, energy level, and social commitments!



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

It's been tough keeping up with all of the changes that have been going on with the people in your social network, so why not host a small dinner party so everyone can get up to speed on what is going on in everyone else's life? You are the perfect person to serve as the cornerstone for everyone. Relationships are a living thing. They continually grow and evolve, so make sure you're encouraging them to grow in a healthy and happy direction for everyone.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Any business transactions you participate in today should be given your closest attention. Make sure you're charged the correct amount at the store. Reread a contract before signing on the dotted line. Save that receipt for the electronics purchase. Take nothing for granted. No one is necessarily trying to trick or cheat you, but you need to protect yourself more conscientiously. It doesn't take any more effort, and it will save you a lot of money and headaches down the line.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your latest scheme is an important one, and you are definitely approaching the point of no return when it comes to your level of commitment. If you want things to continue, you need to throw yourself into the process. Otherwise, you need to jump ship immediately or you run the risk of getting in too deep. If this plan involves travel, you will have to look at your calendar far into the future and make sure you can take the time you need to do things the way you want to do them.

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

T	S	T	A
O	I	B	U
Y	A	U	B
B	P	Y	T

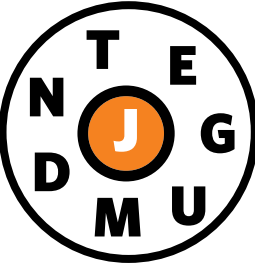
Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters.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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BAYER BETTER BAYERN

Leverkusen set unbeaten record and go 11 points clear with win against Mainz

Leverkusen, Germany - Bayer Leverkusen battled past Mainz 05 2-1 on Friday to go 11 points clear at the top of the league and set a new record for a Bundesliga club with their 33rd straight game without defeat across all competitions.

The Bundesliga leaders, who lacked their usual efficiency up front while also allowing the visitors enough space to attack, needed a mistake by Mainz keeper Robin Zentner to snatch the win.

Xabi Alonso's team, who beat Bayern Munich's previous unbeaten run of 32 matches, are now on 61 points, with second-placed Bayern, on 50, in action against RB Leipzig on Saturday.

They went in front with Granit Xhaka's stunning effort from 20 metres in the third minute but it was shortlived with Dominik Kohr's diving header just five minutes later levelling things for Mainz.

Leverkusen had possession but Mainz keeper Robin Zentner made a string of fine first half saves to keep the visitors in the game before letting a weak Robert Andrich shot in the 68th slip through his hands for the hosts to reclaim the lead.

Mainz were left with 10 men when Jessic Ngankam was sent



Bayer Leverkusen's Granit Xhaka (C) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Mainz on Friday

off for a foul on Xhaka.

"We have to be honest to ourselves and say that we did not play a good game," said scorer Andrich.

"We were a bit lucky to win it.

But we won't be complaining about the three points.

"We were too impatient and not precise enough. We did not find the solutions needed. We made far too many mistakes."

I am not the only problem, says Tuchel

Meanwhile, Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel said he was not the only one responsible for his team's bad form and hoped the

club's decision to part ways with him at the end of the season would liberate him and his players for the remainder of the campaign. The Bavarians this week decided to cut ties with Tuchel at

the end of the current campaign despite his contract running until 2025 following a three-game losing run in all competitions.

"It does not matter if I understand the decision of the club or

whether I am happy with it," Tuchel told a press conference ahead of Saturday's match against RB Leipzig in the Bundesliga.

"The only thing that matters now is that there is clarity. Clarity brings freedom and it is good for the matches and the training."

"Freedom for the coach on how to act. You don't have to think about long-term consequences of your choices," he said. "You can be a bit more reckless."

Tuchel had taken over in March 2023 from Julian Nagelsmann with high expectations but he suffered a bumpy start, crashing out of the German Cup and the Champions League before snatching the Bundesliga title from Borussia Dortmund on the final matchday.

This season they have been equally unpredictable, showing only glimpses of the form that saw them dominate German football for more than a decade.

They were eliminated from the German Cup by third-tier club Saarbruecken and also lost their Champions League Round of 16 first leg 1-0 at Italy's Lazio last week. "I never felt that we as coaching staff stopped reaching the team," Tuchel said. "But we have a discrepancy from training to matches and the coach is responsible."

"I don't think I am the only problem but I accept my responsibility. I am not satisfied with the way we play and have been unhappy for quite some time. Now we have a new situation but the situation has been solved and communicated but I don't think I am the only problem," he said.

Officials must avoid Liverpool bias, says Chelsea's Pochettino

London, England - Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino called on match officials to make fair decisions in their League Cup final against Liverpool on Sunday and cautioned them against being swayed by emotions over Juergen Klopp's departure.

Pochettino pointed out his side's penalty appeals were unfairly dismissed during their 4-1 defeat at Anfield in the Premier League last month.

"What we need to be sure is that we are going to compete and be fair in every single decision," Pochettino said on Friday.

"When we played against Liverpool in Liverpool, I think not one key decision was for us. Two penalties were not given. Duels, 50-50s were always for the other colour, always red. I want to be treated in a fair way."

The Argentine manager does not want the emotions and pressure surrounding Klopp's farewell season to be a factor at play, hoping the referee, Chris Kavanagh, will officiate the challenges at Wembley without the 'red' bias.

"It's nice, Liverpool is an



Mauricio Pochettino

amazing club and I love Klopp. It's his last season here and we go to compete in the same way, both teams, and to see it for both clubs in the same way.

"But after my last experience playing there, what I want in Wembley is to go there and not feel the pressure. It is to play a game in the same level and the best team will win.

"But not to feel the pressure of people around."

Pochettino was denied the previous chance to get his hands on English silverware during his time at Tottenham Hotspur, having lost the League Cup final to Chelsea in 2015.

Injured Hojlund to miss two to three weeks

Manchester, England - Manchester United striker Rasmus Hojlund, who has scored in six successive Premier League games, is expected to be sidelined for two to three weeks with a muscle injury in a big blow for the team's quest for a top-four finish.

"It is a small injury, two or three weeks," manager Erik ten Hag told reporters on Friday. "It is a risk (to get injured) in high-intensity training. It is not a big injury but he has to wait for two three weeks."

The recovery time means that the 21-year-old Dane not only missed Saturday's league game against Fulham, but he will also be out of action for United's FA Cup fifth-round tie at Nottingham Forest on Wednesday and the Manchester derby at the Etihad on March 3.

Hojlund has seven goals in the league after his brace helped United to a 2-1 victory at Luton Town last Sunday.

Ten Hag's team, who have won their last five matches in all competitions, are sixth in the Premier League standings on 44 points, five behind fourth-placed Aston Villa. Fulham are 12th.

The manager spoke to reporters for the first time since



Rasmus Hojlund

I am 19 months in. I see we go in the right direction. I can see a team coming, progressing and developing. We work hard on the training pitch and during games.

ERIK TEN HAG

British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe's \$1.25 billion deal for a 25% stake in the club was completed.

Ten Hag said he and Ratcliffe speak regularly and he believes the new co-owner has confidence in him.

"Absolutely, we have so many talks, we are very aligned, we have the same ambition and are very aligned in the process," Ten Hag said. "I am 19 months in. I see we go in the right direction. I can see a team coming, progressing and developing. We work hard on the training pitch and during games."

Ratcliffe is keen to restore United to their former glory. They last won the Premier League in 2012-13, which was Alex Ferguson's final season as manager.

He echoed a famous Ferguson phrase earlier this week when he said he wants to eventually get the better of rivals Manchester City and Liverpool.

"I'd want to knock them all off their perch," Ratcliffe had said.

Ten Hag said Ratcliffe's lofty goals do not mean more pressure on him or his players.

"It's normal pressure because we have the same ambition," the manager said.

"And we have the same targets," he added.



Juergen Klopp

League Cup final a defining moment in Klopp's farewell

London, England - Winning the League Cup would be a crucial addition to the final segment of a memoir with Liverpool, the soon-to-depart manager Juergen Klopp said before his side's final match against Chelsea.

Klopp has announced his decision to step down as Liverpool manager at the end of the season, citing dwindling energy levels. The 56-year-old, who is the only Liverpool manager to win six different major trophies, would dedicate the victory to everyone connected to the Merseyside club as part of his trophy-laden nine-year epoch.

"I want to win on Sunday but not for me or my trophy cabinet," Klopp said. "It is for the boys, for the club, for the people. That is much more important. "We wrote, and we are still writing, a wonderful book, and when I leave we close that book and put it on the shelf and then someone else will write a wonderful book.

"Yes, there is space for some chapters. It is long. I am not there and writing the resume already? Not at all. I am 100% in trying to create a few special memories on top of what we have done."

Klopp's side have a lengthy injury list that could hinder their chances of securing a record-extending 10th League Cup triumph at Wembley.



Marquez Lopez

Qatar hand Asian Cup-winning Spanish coach Lopez new contract until 2026

Doha, Qatar - Qatar's Asian Cup-winning coach Marquez Lopez has been handed a contract until 2026 and will take charge of the team in a full-time capacity, the Qatar Football Association has announced.

The Spaniard took over on an interim basis on loan from Qatar Stars League club Al-Wakrah in

late December following the departure of Carlos Queiroz, and steered the host nation to a second successive title with victory in the final over Jordan.

"The Qatar Football Association expresses gratitude and appreciation to the Al-Wakrah Sports Club for their cooperation and consent in facilitating

coach Marquez Lopez's appointment as national team head coach," the organisation said in a statement.

Lopez's next game in charge will be against Kuwait on March 21 in Asia's preliminaries for the 2026 World Cup.

Qatar have never qualified for the World Cup finals

through the preliminaries, having made their debut in 2022 as tournament hosts.

The Asian champions are top of their group, which also includes India and Afghanistan, with six points from their first two games.

The top two finishers advance to the next phase.

DANCE WITH BASHIR

England eye big lead after spinner wrecks India in Ranchi

Ranchi, India - Shoaib Bashir ripped the heart out of India's batting lineup to keep England on course for a handy first innings lead on day two of the fourth test in Ranchi on Saturday.

The lanky off-spinner justified his selection for the match with figures of 4-84 to restrict India to 219-7 on a spiteful pitch where the ball often kept low.

India's in-form opener Yashasvi Jaiswal (73) was done in by one such delivery and the hosts, who are 2-1 up in the five-

strong position," Root said of the contest.

Root led England's remarkable turnaround from a precarious 112-5 with an unbeaten 122 before the tourists were all out for 353.

Ollie Robinson raced to his maiden test fifty, hitting a six and nine fours in his counter-attacking 58.

Ravindra Jadeja (4-67) removed Robinson and Bashir in the same over and went on to dismiss James Anderson to

He is a great young lad to have in the group. "He should take a lot of confidence for the rest of this game and going forward as well. It looks like the pitch will keep getting worse

JOE ROOT

match series, finished the day trailing England by 134 runs.

Dhruv Jurel (30) and Kuldeep Yadav (17) provided late resistance with a 42-run partnership for the unbroken eighth wicket.

"He was brilliant. He is a great young lad to have in the group," England's batting mainstay Joe Root said of Bashir.

"He should take a lot of confidence for the rest of this game and going forward as well.

"It looks like the pitch will keep getting worse. If we can get three early wickets, hopefully that puts us in a really

claim the final English wicket.

Root remained unbeaten after his 31st test hundred, a masterly knock studded with 10 fours.

India wobbled early in their reply after skipper Rohit Sharma, having made two, edged Anderson to be caught behind.

Jaiswal was fluent at the other end, though, and the nearest England got to dismissing him before his half-century was when Ben Foakes grabbed an edge. Replays, however, confirmed the ball had touched ground before the wicketkeeper collected it.



Shoaib Bashir celebrates one of his four wickets

Shubman Gill (38) got off to an impressive start but could not capitalise on it, falling lbw to Bashir.

Rajat Patidar (17) fell in the same manner to the spinner, while Jadeja (12) was snared at short leg off Bashir's bowling.

Jaiswal, the leading scorer of the series, passed the 50-mark for the fourth time in seven innings, which include two double

hundreds.

The left-hander, however, fell just when he was looking good for another hundred and his exit put England in charge.

Jaiswal rocked bat wanting to play Bashir through the off-side but the ball stayed low and hit the toe-end of his bat before hitting the stumps.

India were reeling at 161-5 when left-arm spinner Tom Hartley twisted the knife dismissing Sarfaraz Khan and Ravichandran Ashwin.

Jurel and Kuldeep, however, frustrated England with their dour rearguard action.

Kalinskaya stuns Swiatek in Dubai to book Paolini title clash

Dubai, UAE - Russian qualifier Anna Kalinskaya continued her giant-killing run at the Dubai Tennis Championships by stunning world number one Iga Swiatek 6-4 6-4 on Friday to reach the final and inch closer to her maiden tour-level title.

Standing in Kalinskaya's way on Saturday will be unseeded Jasmine Paolini, who saved six set points late on in the other semi-final on Centre Court against Romanian Sorana Cirstea to win 6-2 7-6(6).

Australian Open quarter-finalist Kalinskaya fought from a break and 4-2 down and forced Swiatek into making a number of errors with relentless hitting in the first set which the 25-year-old wrapped up in a little under an hour.

The world number 40, who stunned U.S. Open champion Coco Gauff in the last round after outclassing 2017 French Open



Anna Kalinskaya

winner Jelena Ostapenko, broke early in the second set as Swiatek continued to spray the errors.

A frustrated Swiatek threw her racket to the floor at one point before Kalinskaya went up 2-0 and the Russian withstood some late pressure to close out the victory and snap the Doha champion's seven-match winning run.

"She's a great player. I know if I don't stay calm and aggressive she's going to destroy me," Kalinskaya said.

"That was my plan. To stay aggressive, move her a lot. I'm happy I won."

Paolini had reached the semi-finals after in-form fourth seed Elena Rybakina pulled out of their quarter-final clash on Thursday due to illness and the 26th-ranked Italian wrapped up the first set against an off-colour Cirstea in 40 minutes.



Karen Khachanov

Khachanov to meet Mensik in Doha final

Doha, Qatar - No. 2 seed Karen Khachanov of Russia won a marathon first-set tiebreaker and advanced past Australia's Alexei Popyrin 7-6 (12), 6-2 in the semifinals of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open on Friday in Doha. Khachanov will face Jakub Mensik in the final after the Czech native beat Frenchman Gael Monfils 6-4, 1-6, 6-3.

Khachanov won the first four points of his first-set tiebreaker but let Popyrin right back in it, leading to a 6-5 deficit. The Russian saved the first of three set points he faced in the tiebreaker, but he did not finish the job until his fifth set point at 13-12.

Zverev stunned in Mexico

Eighth-seeded Jordan Thompson of Australia is one win away from his first career ATP Tour title after upsetting top-seeded Alexander Zverev of Germany 7-5, 4-6, 7-6 (2) in the semis at Los Cabos, Mexico.



Jack Leach

England's Leach to undergo knee surgery

Ranchi, India - England's Jack Leach will undergo surgery after a knee injury ruled him out of the ongoing test series in India, the spinner said on Saturday.

Leach hurt his knee twice while fielding during England's first test victory in Hyderabad and the 32-year-old missed the last two matches where India bounced back to take a 2-1 lead in the series.

"I'm going to have an operation to get the rest of the swelling out because it's not budging," Leach told BBC Radio 5 Live.

"It was quite an unfortunate one. It was the second ball of the first innings in the field, so that whole game I was playing with this knee problem.

"I obviously knocked it a few times throughout that game and it has just created a long period of recovery. I need to get the operation done and then hopefully I can get back to playing cricket."

England do not play another test series until the home summer when they host the West Indies in July, soon after the Twenty20 World Cup, while his county team Somerset begin their new season in April.

"I'd love to have a run of playing cricket and getting into a bit of a rhythm again and hopefully that can happen again once I've got this sorted," Leach added.

I'm going to have an operation to get the rest of the swelling out because it's not budging

JACK LEACH

In Leach's absence, Shoaib Bashir has stepped up for the tourists in the first innings of the fourth test with figures of 4-84 so far as he ripped through the top order to restrict India to 219-7, trailing England by 134 runs.

'Red Bull are out in the distance'

Manama, Bahrain - Formula One champions Red Bull and Max Verstappen, dominant last year, will start the season next week still well ahead of the rest on the evidence of testing in Bahrain, rivals said.

Red Bull won 21 of 22 races in 2023 and are clear favourites, with Verstappen chasing his fourth successive championship.

The Milton Keynes-based team, celebrating their 20th anniversary this year, have also won 38 of the last 44 grands prix.

"I think Red Bull clearly are out in the distance," Mercedes' seven times world champion Lewis Hamilton told reporters on Fri-



Lewis Hamilton

day, the third and final day of pre-season testing.

Verstappen topped the timesheets on the opening day but Ferrari's Carlos Sainz was quickest on Thursday, although

teams are running through their own test programmes with different fuel levels and settings.

That said, others agreed they were still playing a game of catch-up.

"There's one car that seems to have found a big step," McLaren team principal Andrea Stella told reporters on Thursday. "Unfortunately, (that's) the car that was already the quickest last year."

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc said his initial feeling was that his car was much more driveable than last year's but "Red Bull unfortunately remains quite a bit ahead."

"I think we're in a good position, we had a decent car at the end of last season and I think we've definitely taken some steps in the right direction but we're still a very long way behind Red Bull and a long way behind Ferrari," said McLaren's Lando Norris.

Verstappen, who won a record 19 races last year with team mate Sergio Perez winning two, told reporters on Friday that the RB20 had behaved as expected.

"I couldn't really wish for more, I was actually wishing for less perhaps," Verstappen said of the first day. "I did a lot of laps, everything went well, the balance was very nice... completed the whole programme without any problems."

ANYONE'S GAME

Oosthuizen, Ortiz share lead in Oman while chasing pack of five just a shot behind

Muscat - Louis Oosthuizen ended 2023 with two victories on home soil and it appears that could signify the start of something big this season as he moved into a share of the third-round lead on Saturday in the \$2 million International Series Oman.

He carded a 5-under 67 at Al Mouj Golf in Muscat to take pole position at 12 under with Mexico's Carlos Ortiz, who shot a 68.

Thailand's Prom Meesawat, in with the best round of the day - a 65 - is one shot back in a tie for third with Justin Quiban (67), Travis Smyth (68), Chinese amateur Sampson Zheng (68) and Peter Uihlein (70).

Mito Pereira, who led after Round 2, had a poor day, signing for a 76 to tumble down the leaderboard. He is 7 under and in a tie for 15th.

South Africa's Oosthuizen won the Alfred Dunhill Championship and AfrAsia Bank Mauritius Open back-to-back in December and made his move today clearly enjoying the challenge that Al Mouj Golf - voted by the Asian Tour players as the joint best course last year - offers.



Louis Oosthuizen

fers.

"I played well," said Oosthuizen, winner of The Open in 2010 and also a runner-up in six other majors and third in two more. "The greens are very firm. It's good, they are running true.

You need to really focus on where you want to land that second shot, so hitting fairways is very important."

Ortiz has also kept a remarkably clean sheet with the only blemish coming on his very first

hole on Thursday, where he made a double.

The appearance of Prom on the leaderboard has been accompanied by a roar of applause on the Asian Tour.

The popular 39-year-old is a

two-time winner on the Asian Tour, but his last win came back at the 2014 Yeangder Tournament Players Championship.

He said: "Playing 7-under for me on this golf course when it is windy is great."



Khalid Walid Attieh

Attieh's heroics evidence of talent in the region

Oman - Khalid Walid Attieh made history in Oman this weekend by becoming the first ever Saudi amateur to make the cut in a pro golf tournament, emphasising the important role The International Series is playing for golf in the region.

Attieh's one-under round of 71 was enough to earn a priceless place in Saturday's third round at a star-studded International Series Oman, just a week after earning his spot in the field by winning the Oman Masters.

Attieh was one of four Saudi players in the field along with Othman Almulla, Saud al Sharif, Faisal Salhab, while Omani amateurs Azzan al Rumhy and Ahmed al Wa-

haibi also gained invaluable experience over the first two days in their home event at Al Mouj Golf.

Dubai-based youngster Joshua Grenville-Wood, Jordanian-English golfer Shergo Al Khurdi and the Moroccan duo of Ayoub Lguirati and Ayoub Id-Omar completed a healthy representation of the region in the US\$2 million event at Al Mouj Golf, the first of the season on The International Series.

Rahul Singh, Head of The International Series, said: "Khalid has given us an excellent example of the talent that is emerging from the region, and it will be interesting to see the impact that this has on golf in the region.

Oman U19 cricketers ready to battle for glory at ICC Division 2 Asia event

Muscat- Oman U19 cricketers are all geared up to put up a good performance at the upcoming ICC U19 Men's CWC Division 2 Asia 2024 event, which will be held in Thailand from February 26-March 5.

Oman, coached by Syed Aamir Kaleem, will be hoping to book a spot in the ICC U19 CWC Men's Division 1- Asia as one of the two finalists from the eight-nation tournament in Thailand.

Oman have been placed in Group B along with Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and Bhutan while Group A comprises Bahrain, Thailand, Kuwait, and Malaysia.

Rahil Habibulla has been named skipper and his deputy will be Saumya Sampat. Oman launch their campaign against Saudi on February 26 and play Hong Kong on February 28 and Bhutan on March 1.

Oman U19 head coach Aamir



Oman under 19 squad

Kaleem said, "We have had quite fresh bunch of boys forming the squad on this tour. We have had our camp since early January, working on various aspects such as skill, fielding, strength and conditioning."

SQUAD:

Rahil Habibulla (captain), Saumya Sampat (vice-captain),

Prathiesh HR, Jeet Shah, Varshith Dinesh, Thineeth Sumanasekera, Gaurav Dinesh, Aneek Chakraborty, Arya Sampat, Omidu Medagoda, Siddharth Shankar, Rohan Ramachandran, Nitish Nadendla, Wajih Abbas.

Officials: Head Coach: Syed Aamir Kaleem, assistant coach: Syed Amir Ali, manager: Sher Mohammed al Balushi.

Regional players grab their golden chance

Oman - The International Series Oman has given local and regional players an incredible opportunity to learn from some of the best players in the world.

The International Series is renowned for providing a pathway for golfers from all round the world onto the LIV Golf League. The set of 10 elevated events on the Asian Tour also offer a real platform for emerging local talent to gain valuable experience and develop, in each of the territories visited over the course of the season.

At International Series Oman, local amateurs Azzan al Rumhy and Ahmed al Wahaibi were in the field this week alongside the Saudi quartet of Othman Almulla, Saud al Sharif, Faisal Salhab and Khalid Walid Attieh.

Promising Dubai-based youngster Joshua Grenville-Wood also started with Jordanian-English Shergo al Khurdi



(L-R) Ahmed al Wahaibi of Oman, Othman Almulla of Saudi and Azzan al Rumhy of Oman at the International Series Oman at Al Mouj Golf

and the Moroccan duo of Ayoub Lguirati and Ayoub Id-Omar.

The home hopes and talented regional players had the chance to rub shoulders with the top names on the Asian Tour, and global golf superstars including Joaquin Niemann, who received a special invite to this year's first Major, the Masters at Augusta

National, just before the first round in Oman.

Other heavyweights in the field include major winners Charl Schwartzel and Louis Oosthuizen, and LIV Golf League stars such as Fireballs GC youngster David Puig, the winner on the Asian Tour last week at the IRS Prima Malaysian Open.

Azzan, who also competed in the event last year, said: "I am delighted that we are hosting this interesting event in our home, Oman, I can't be happier and prouder than this. This event had given me the chance to meet with local and international colleagues from the same field. I am looking forward to be involved in such event locally and internationally.

"Also, hosting The International Series in Oman is significant in elevating the golf reputation among Omanis."

Al Wahaibi, who is making his debut this year, added: "These events are very important for the Omani sport in general and golf in particular.

"The International Series shows how Oman can host world-class events, and also gives us the opportunity to practice and play with international golfers from around the world."

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FROM A LEMON SHARK SHARING A TOOTHY GRIN AT DUSK, TO A GREEN-BLUE MAHI-MAHI AMBUSHING SARDINES, THE 2024 UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR (UPY) AWARDS SHOWCASE THE STUNNING BEAUTY AND DIVERSITY OF OUR WORLD'S OCEANS

UNDERWATER SHOTS

WET LENS

Photographers from around the world submitted roughly 6,500 photographs for 13 contest categories that celebrate both technical craft and creative eyes - including the esteemed 'Underwater Photographer of the Year' title for the 2024 Underwater Photographer of the Year (UPY) Awards. In total, 130 photographs were distinguished with awards or commendations.

The competition is based in the United Kingdom, which, according to UPY, has a rich history of underwater photography contests. In 1965, the Brighton Underwater Film Festival was organised in the country for the first time. Two years later, the British Society of Underwater Photographers was founded, inspiring decades of undersea image-making.

"Since these only cater for underwater images of wildlife, 50 years after the original Brighton Festival, we decided to bring a dedicated and international underwater photography contest back to Britain," as per the UPY website. In addition to photos of animals, the contest honours images featuring wrecks, divers, and human impact on the environment. The inaugural UPY Awards took place in 2014 and 2015.

Here are some fantastic images of some of this year's award winners and runners-up:

Swedish photographer Alex Dawson imaged a diver in the frigid waters off Tasilaq, Greenland, holding her breath as she explores the skeleton of a whale. The diver's wetsuit and torch give the image what contest judge Peter Rowlands describes in a statement as a 'visiting alien' feel.

"My buddy Anna von Boet-



At twilight, a lemon shark swims at the surface of the water. This image took third place in the contest's Marelux Wide Angle category

ticher... she's brave enough to jump in a wetsuit in this minus-two degree water," Dawson says in a video, speaking about the diver in the image. "She's the tough one, I promise you."

French photographer Rodolphe Guignard's 'face-to-face encounter' with a lemon shark off the island of Grand Bahama is a moody, terrifying moment in time, backdropped by the beauty of a sunset's pastel swipes.

Guignard captured the image from the swim-step on a dive boat, partially submerging both his body and his camera to take a shot that included the view above and below the water's surface.

"On this day the sea was rough, it was almost dark and the sharks were lively and very curious," he says in a statement.

"The grin and the eye contact inject a sinister undercurrent to the picture," says chair of the contest jury Alex Mustard in the statement.

For several frigid hours

snorkeling on Canada's Vancouver Island, things 'were not very exciting', Canadian photographer Shane Gross says in a statement. But then, millions of western toad tadpoles began their migration from the lake's depths to the lily pads and shallows above, to feed on the algae.

"My goal was to try and tell as much of the story as possible in one frame where we see, of course, the cute little animals, but also the lily pads and the forest-covered mountains in the background," Gross adds in the statement.

On a warm April day, dozens of beachgoers near Lisbon, Portugal, were shocked to see a wounded sperm whale struggling to swim after it had been hit by a ship. The creature had become stuck on the sand, and they did their best to push its massive body back out to sea, to no avail.

During their struggle - and the final hours of this whale's life - Portuguese photographer Nuno Sa captured this interest-

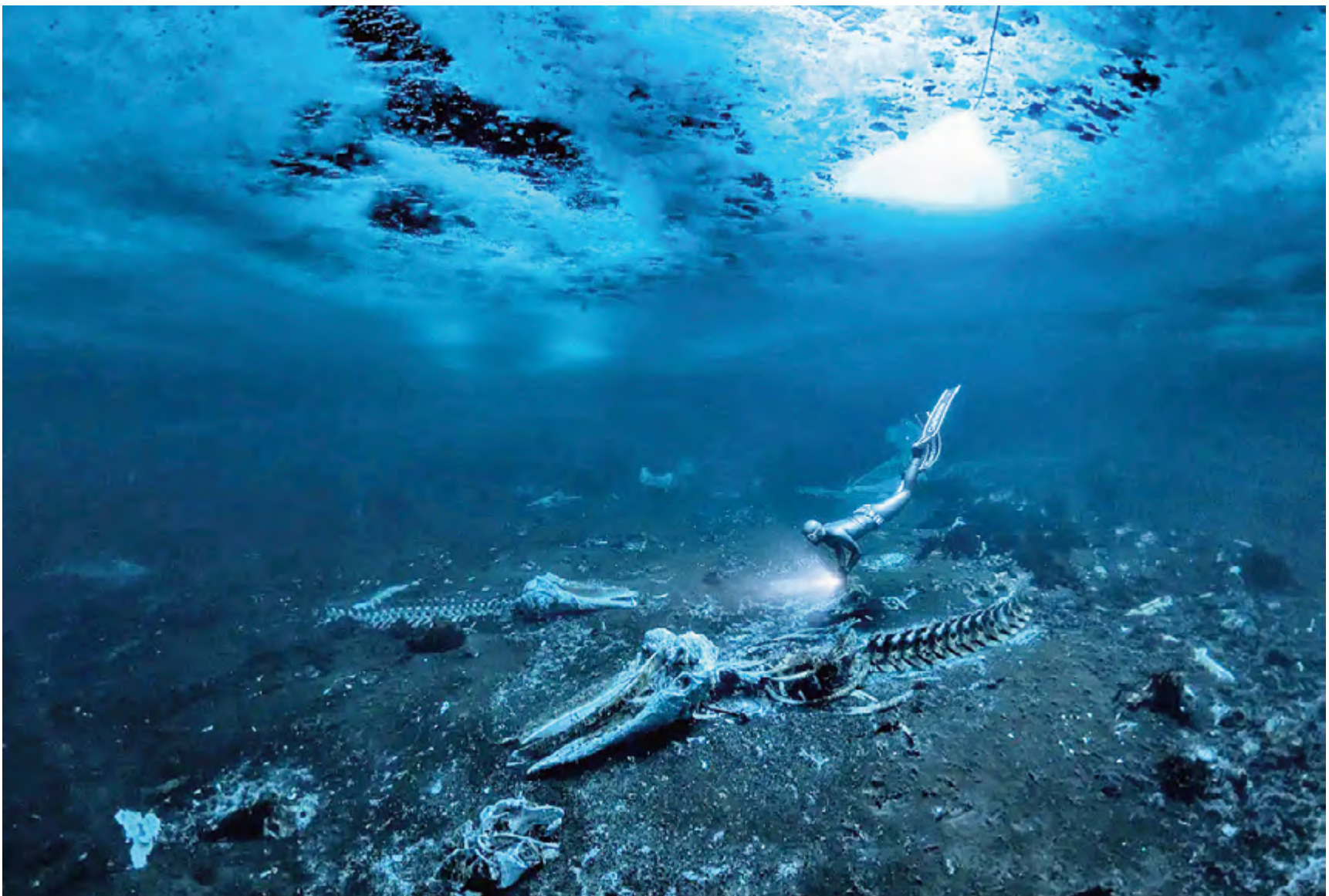
ing scene, which played out near his home.

"This is a situation that tells a lot about how we are impacting the oceans," Sa says in a video about the image. "Over 20,000 whales die of collisions with ships every year. If you think about the several species of whales that are known to last from 100 to 200 years, in their lifespan they've gone from an ocean of safety and silence to a chaos of noise and ocean pollution."

For this photograph, Sa won the title of Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year, sponsored by the Save Our Seas Foundation.

In another photo, in a final effort to survive - when fish are threatened by predators - they swim in a spherical formation known as a bait ball. This strategy conceals most of the fish inside the ball and exposes as few as possible. Many more intriguing shots can be seen in the contest gallery online.

(Courtesy: smithsonianmag.com)



A diver swims among whale bones in this photograph that won the Underwater Photographer of the Year award



Western toad tadpoles swim to the surface of a lake in search of algae to feed on in this highly commended image in the Marelux Wide Angle category



In this Behaviour category-winning photograph, a Bryde's whale devours fish that had been swimming in a defensive bait ball formation



Beachgoers attempt to push a stranded and wounded sperm whale back into the water, highlighting threats to the marine mammals' survival. This image took home the Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year award

Two dolphins interact in the waters off Toshima Island, Japan, in this highly commended image in the contest's Portrait category





Baosheng and friends pose with a golden dragon in the field path, Huozhuang Village

RURAL DISCONNECT

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S FANTASTICAL PORTRAIT OF RURAL CHINA DURING LUNAR NEW YEAR – THE RAPIDLY URBANISING COUNTRY RENDERS TRADITIONAL CRAFTS UNDER THREAT, HE OBSERVES



Festival participants wearing a two-person lion dance costume in Huozhuang, a village in China's Henan province

COMMUNITY FIRE

In photographer Zhang Xiao's images of the Shehuo festival, an ancient celebration still observed in parts of northern China during the Lunar New Year, rural life comes alive with something altogether more fantastical.

Villagers dressed as cranes, roosters and mythical lions pose for portraits standing amid crops or in fallow farmland. Costumed performers parade past brick houses against hazy backdrops, the eyes of their masks seemingly lost in thought. In a harvested wheat field, a group of almost a dozen men line up to hold aloft a colourful dragon puppet.

In his new book 'Community Fire', Zhang said he wanted to capture the surreal 'disconnect' between people's everyday lives and the mythical personas they assumed.

"Their characters seemed to come from the sky itself, and... formed a huge theatrical stage that transcended the confines of reality, transporting a collective of sleepwalkers to a dream world," he wrote. "I wandered among them and photographed them quietly, because I did not want to wake them up."

Rooted in millennia-old agricultural practices of worshipping fire and the land, the folk rituals of Shehuo (often translated as 'earth and fire') traditionally entailed praying for good fortune and bounteous harvests, or to drive away demons. Festivities vary between regions but now typically see various performers, from stilt walkers to opera singers, parading through the streets or staging shows.

Celebrations coincide with the Lunar New Year, which started last Saturday. As such, they have come to encompass many of the traditions — such as temple fairs and lion dances — practised around China during this period. (Lunar New Year celebrations usually last more than two weeks, with Shehuo festival taking place on the season's 15th and final day.)

Shehuo celebrations have been recognised by the Chinese government in its UNESCO-style list of 'intangible cultural heritage'. But the festival's place in a rapidly urbanising country remains under threat, said Zhang, adding that most of the performers he encountered had mi-



Shehuo performers reenact a battle between China's Eighth Route Army and Japanese forces from the Second Sino-Japanese War

In some villages, virtually the entire population has been mobilised to produce and sell Shehuo props

ZHANG XIAO

grated to cities and only returned to their villages for the holiday.

"The significance of traditional customs can no longer meet the needs of modern lives," the photographer told

CNN via email. "Today's young people are more concerned about the internet and games. They are not even willing to try and understand traditional cultures. I think that's sad."

E-commerce and the death of craft

Hoping to document the festival's disappearing traditions — and the costumes and props associated with them — Zhang spent over a decade photographing Shehuo events at villages in Shaanxi and Henan provinces.

A selection of the images, which were shot between 2007 and 2019, is currently on show in the US at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology (and over 100 of them were published in 'Community Fire').

As well as capturing rites, rituals and folklore, the photos speak to the proliferation of mass-produced paraphernalia that has transformed the festival since the turn of the 21st century. One image depicts a stack of expressionless plastic masks, a set of 12 eerie pictures shows smiling prop heads hanging from trees in flimsy carrier bags.

Several pages of Zhang's book are dedicated to screengrabs of Alibaba-owned shopping platform, Taobao, where Shehuo items can be purchased at bargain prices. They range from an elab-

orate two-person lion dance costume, offered for just 360 yuan (US\$50), to a selection of headaddresses priced under 17 yuan (US\$2.40).

The rise of cheap goods and e-commerce has been a mixed blessing for these villages. Some of them — including Huozhuang, in Henan province, which features heavily in Zhang's project — have taken advantage of the opportunity. The photographer visited and documented several small family workshops that buy semi-complete products in large quantities online before hand-finishing them and selling them on platforms like Taobao for profit.

"In some villages, virtually the entire population has been mobilised to produce and sell Shehuo props," the photographer writes in his book.

But with economic opportunity comes a loss of traditional skills and customs. Materials like paper and bamboo have been replaced by cheap wire frames, plastic and synthetic fabrics, said Zhang, who grew up in a rural area of China's Shandong province but is now based in Chengdu, one of the country's largest metropolises in the southwest.

A third-generation prop maker told Zhang that, in the photographer's words, that he "lamented the gradual disappearance of traditional crafts." But most of the villagers the photographer encountered were indifferent to the loss of cultural heritage, he claimed.

And while Zhang, as a documentarian, assumed the role of a 'quiet spectator' while on assignment, he nonetheless expressed regret at the festival's rapid commercialisation.

"People are not focused on how to improve product quality and craftsmanship," said the photographer, who is currently working on a documentary about life in rural China. "Instead, they are obsessed with how to manufacture these products as quickly as possible, and at the lowest cost, so as to gain an advantage against the competition. This has led to a gradual decline in product quality, and the entire industry has fallen into a vicious cycle of price wars." (Courtesy: cnn.com)



A girl waits to change into full costume ahead of festivities in the village of Huanghuayu, Shaanxi province

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