

HM issues two Royal Decrees

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued two Royal Decrees on Thursday.

Royal Decree No 34/2023 on conducting military promotions, reading as follows:

Article 1 promotes Brigadier Abdulaziz Abdullah Badr al Manthri and Brigadier Sultan Mohammed Nassir al Ma'amari to the rank of Major General.

Article 2 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 35/2023 appoints a Permanent Representative for the Sultanate of Oman to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), reading as follows:

Article 1 appoints Sheikh Mohammed bin Ahmed bin Salim al Shanfari, Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia, as the Sultanate of Oman's Permanent Representative to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Article 2 says that this Royal decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

ONA

Blocks granted for three green hydrogen projects worth \$20bn

Muscat - Hydrogen Oman SPC (Hydrom), a subsidiary of Energy Development Oman (EDO), signed three agreements on Thursday granting the first green hydrogen blocks in Oman with a total investment exceeding US\$20bn.

The first block was awarded through Phase A Round 1 public auction process, and the other two were awarded following the earlier signing of commercial term sheets. The signing of these agreements signifies another key milestone in Oman's journey to becoming a global hub for green hydrogen production.

H E Eng Salim Nasser al Auli, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Hydrom, signed the agreements with the winning bidders from Denmark, the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Kuwait, Singapore and Oman during an event held in Muscat.

The three projects were signed with the consortia of Amnah, Green Energy Oman (GEO) and BP Oman.

These contracts are expected to yield a total production capacity of 0.5mn tonnes of green hydrogen per annum from more than 12GW of installed renew-



Oman is at the forefront of taking its first serious steps towards green hydrogen production. Oman is poised to become one of the leading countries in green hydrogen production

H E ENG SALIM NASSER AL AUFI

able energy capacity at three sites, each covering an area of 320sqkm in Al Wusta governorate.

The first of two blocks (Z1-01) in the public auction process launched last year was awarded to Amnah consortium, comprising

Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners (CIP), Blue Power Partners (BPP) and Al Khadra, part of Oman's Hind Bahwan Group.

The consortium will develop around 200 KTPA of green hydrogen from 4.5GW of installed renewable energy capacity for

planned green steel plants located in the Port of Duqm, within the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD). This groundbreaking project demonstrates the potential of harnessing renewable energy in supporting the diversification of the national economy and contributing to a low-carbon future.

The second agreement was signed with BP Oman for a project to produce green hydrogen for ammonia production and export. The anticipated annual production for this project is 150 KTPA of green hydrogen from

3.5GW of installed renewables capacity in Block Z1-03.

The third agreement was signed with the consortium of GEO for the development of green hydrogen and its derivatives. The consortium includes Oman's integrated energy company OQ, Oman Shell, Kuwait's energy investor EnerTech (ETC), InterContinental Energy (ICE) and Golden Wellspring Wealth for Trading (GWWT). This project is expected to produce up to 150 KTPA of green hydrogen from 4GW of installed renewables capacity in Block Z1-04.

The signing of these project agreements with both BP Oman and GEO follows the earlier signing of commercial term sheets, which regularised the legacy initiative projects under a regulatory framework.

During the event, a head-lease usufruct agreement was signed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Hydrom.

This agreement provides for the granting of land rights to Hydrom for the purposes of renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects.

The agreement was signed by H E Dr Khalfan Said al Shuaili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning; H E Auli, Minister of Energy and Minerals; and Dr Firas al Abduwani, Acting Managing Director of Hydrom.

During the event, Hydrom announced the formation of an advisory board to oversee the development of common utilities infrastructure, orchestrated by Hydrom in coordination with the lead developers of green hydrogen projects, national utility operators and international developers of green hydrogen infrastructure.

Continued on Page 03

THREE-TRAIN COLLISION KILLS 288 IN INDIA



Rescue workers search for survivors at the accident site of a three-train collision near Balasore, about 200km from Bhubaneswar - the capital of the eastern Indian state of Odisha. At least 288 people were killed and over 900 stated to have sustained injuries after the horrific collision on Friday late night (APF)

HM CONDOLES

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has send a cable of condolences and sympathy to President Droupadi Murmu of India over the train crash in the eastern state of Odisha

Jokha shortlisted for major British literary award

Our Correspondent Muscat

Celebrated Omani author Jokha al Harthi, who made history by winning the Man Booker International Prize for her novel *Celestial Bodies* in 2019, has bagged yet another noteworthy recognition. She has been nominated for the prestigious James Tait Black Prizes, Britain's oldest and most esteemed literary award.

Bitter Orange Tree by Jokha, translated from Arabic by Marilyn Booth, is among four novels shortlisted for the £10,000 fiction prize.

Marilyn also translated *Celestial Bodies*.

The shortlist for this year's literary prizes features a selection of books exploring themes such as belonging, travelling across borders and overcoming personal struggles. Presented by the University of Edinburgh since 1919, the awards are the only major British book prizes judged by literature scholars and students.

Apart from *Bitter Orange Tree*, other shortlisted books include *Demon Copperhead* by Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara Kingsolver, *Bolla* by Pajtim Statovci, translated from Finnish by David Hackston, alongside Selby Wynn Schwartz's *After Sappho*.

The shortlist for the £10,000 biography prize features *Home-sick* by Jennifer Croft and *A Line in the World: A Year on the North Sea Coast* by Dorte the Nors, translated from Danish by Caroline Waight.

Come Back in September: A Literary Education on West Sixty-Seventh Street, Manhattan by Darryl Pinckney also made the list, as did *A History of Water: Being an*



Jokha al Harthi

Account of a Murder, an Epic and Two Visions of Global History by Edward Wilson-Lee.

The shortlists will be reread, annotated and discussed by students and scholars to decide the winners of both the prizes, which will be announced by the University of Edinburgh in July.

Fiction judge Dr Benjamin Bateman, of the University of Edinburgh, said, "The only thing more impressive than the historical and emotional range of these works is the way they centre their storytelling in elegantly and movingly rendered characters."

Biography judge Dr Simon Cooke, of the University of Edinburgh, said, "Absorbing, resonantly voiced and beautifully realised, these life-writings open fascinating and various worlds, and searchingly inquire into the transformative relations between literature and life."

The annual prizes are for the best work of fiction and biography written in or translated into English published in the previous 12 months.

Since the prizes' inception 100 years ago, the list of winners has included Angela Carter, Graham Greene and Ian McEwan.

Oman mediates release of three Europeans from Tehran

Our Correspondent Muscat

In compliance with the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Omani authorities have succeeded in mediating the release of two Austrians and a Danish citizen from detention in Iran.

The three were transferred from Tehran to Muscat onboard a Royal Air Force of Oman plane, and repatriated to Belgium early Saturday.

"Oman values the cooperation of authorities in Iran and their positive response in making



Hadja Lahbib of Belgium and the officials from Austria and Denmark welcome the trio on their arrival in Belgium on Saturday early hours

these repatriations possible,' stated Oman's Foreign Ministry.

The government of Austria

and Belgium thanked Oman for its role in the release of the detainees.

In a telephonic conversation, Hadja Lahbib, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs, Foreign Trade and the Federal Cultural Institutions, conveyed her gratitude to H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, for "the precious role played by the Sultanate of Oman in the liberation of our European citizens. I eagerly anticipate our upcoming bilateral meeting in Oman next week."

Alexander Schallenberg, Austrian Foreign Minister, said he was "extremely grateful to our friends in Oman who played a crucial role in releasing two Austrian-Iranian citizens from impris-

onment in Iran. Our long-standing diplomatic commitment has paid off."

"Extended my heartfelt thanks to my counterpart H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi for Oman's support," he added.

Taking to twitter, H E Sayyid Badr said, "Delighted to see this positive outcome. Our thanks to Iran, Belgium and all those who helped. We are grateful for the spirit of cooperation and good faith. Oman, as always, will continue to assist in any way possible, through encouraging dialogue and building confidence."

Dhofar gears up for khareef tourism boom

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Salalah Airport is all set for an influx of travellers with a projected over 2,670 flights to touch down on its tarmac during the khareef season 2023.

Eng Zakariya bin Yaqoub al Harasi, Executive Vice President of Oman Airports at Salalah Airport, revealed that this impressive number comprises 1,456 domestic flights and 1,223 international flights expected from June 21 to September 21 this year.

The Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for making available direct fuel price subsidies at Salalah Airport, matching those at Mus-



Salalah Airport is actively preparing to receive tourists for the ensuing khareef season. It is projected to receive 1,077 direct flights originating from various capitals and cities across the GCC countries

ENG ZAKARIYA BIN YAQOUB AL HARASI



cat International Airport, will result in a surge of air traffic at Salalah Airport, Harasi asserted.

"The Royal Directives exemplify His Majesty's diligent oversight, and his unwavering commitment to reinvigorating travel and tourism in Dhofar governorate," he went on adding.

The increase in flights, Harasi said, was expected from existing operators as well as new airlines introduced recently. Potential introduction of new airlines in the region is expected to foster healthy competition in both civil flights and air freight sectors.

In collaboration with strategic partners, Harasi disclosed that Salalah Airport is actively preparing to receive tourists for the ensuing khareef season. The airport

is projected to receive 1,077 direct flights originating from various capitals and cities across the GCC countries.

Giving a breakdown of the number of expected flights from key GCC nations, Harasi informed that there will be 536 direct flights from Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.

Notably, Wizz Air and Air Arabia will operate 87 and 93 flights respectively from Abu Dhabi, while Air Arabia will operate an additional 175 direct flights from Sharjah Airport.

Dubai-based flydubai will offer 181 direct flights from Dubai Airport.

Salalah Airport is also set to receive 188 flights from Saudi

Arabia, courtesy flynas. They will originate from Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, and Buraidah.

Qatar Airways will provide 270 direct flights from Hamad International Airport on the outskirts of Doha in Qatar.

Kuwait International Airport will have 83 direct flights, which include 57 by Jazeera Airways and 26 by Kuwait Airways.

Moreover, Salalah will receive 40 flights from Air India Express and 54 from Pakistan Air.

"The airport has already witnessed a notable 43.1% increase in the number of international and domestic flights as of January 2023. The total number of flights reached an impressive 774, carrying over 105,719 passengers," Harasi informed.

Over 57,000 students to sit for GED second semester exams

Our Correspondent
Muscat

All together 57,034 students are sitting for the second semester of the general education diploma (GED) examinations beginning on Sunday.

An official at the Ministry of Education said that the students will commence their exams with the maths subject on the first day. To ensure a smooth and conducive environment for examination, officials from the directorates general of education in the governorates will meticulously inspect all examination centres. Their aim is to guarantee a seamless execution of the ex-

amination, besides ensuring that the students have an appropriate setting for their assessments, the official added.

This year, the GED second semester exams will be conducted across 361 centres throughout the sultanate.

Four centres have been designated for the evaluation process. "Additionally, the ministry has appointed 6,000 teachers to supervise the exam, while 800 teachers have been selected for the task of checking the answer sheets. The evaluation process will commence on June 5 and conclude on July 3."

The ministry urged all students to arrive early at their re-

spective examination centres and strictly adhere to the examination rules, which include refraining from bringing mobile phones, and strictly following the instructions provided by the exam committee chairpersons.

Students must carry their personal identity cards, and necessary study tools, the ministry added.

The Higher Education Admission Centre at the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation reported that a significant number of GED students, totalling 47,717, registered through the electronic admission system for the academic year 2023-24.

Initiative launched to explore AI role in improving government performance

Muscat - The Ministry of Labour on Thursday unveiled an initiative aimed at exploring the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in government departments.

This initiative seeks to harness AI technology to improve the functioning of various institutions and better the overall efficiency of the government.

The announcement was made during the opening of the second forum of the National System for Innovation and Change Management (NSICM), a key programme aligned with Oman Vision 2040.

The NSICM programme is designed to elevate government performance and enhance serv-



ice quality within the Administrative Apparatus of the State.

The event's chief guest, H H Sayyid Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Assistant Secretary-General at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers,

officially launched the Guide for Strategic Planning of Human Resources in the government sector. This guide aims to provide a comprehensive framework for optimising human resources in alignment with strategic goals.

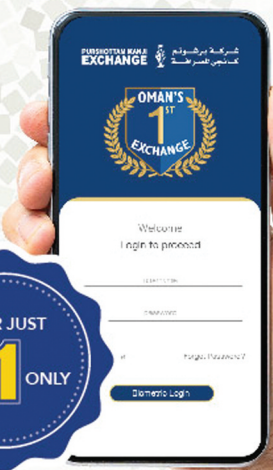
Additionally, the Ministry of Labour announced the introduction of a series of projects planned for the second edition of the NSICM. These projects will be implemented in collaboration with various government and private sector entities, further driving innovation and progress.

The initiative to explore AI roles in government settings signifies a major step towards leveraging cutting-edge technology to enhance government operations and service delivery. By embracing AI, the government aims to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in its functioning, which will subsequently benefit the nation and its citizens.




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VAISHALI HAMLAI

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

BEYOND WORDS

When was the last time you felt good about yourself? When was the last time that you felt enthused to do something by yourself out of your own volition? When was the last time you did something that was out of the ordinary? When did you stop following the rat race? When was the last clean meal you had? When was the last time a negative comment didn't affect you? When was the last time you went out in nature to breathe fresh air? When did you get appreciated, and didn't post it on your insta story? When was the last time you felt light in your heart, almost featherweight? When did you truly feel happy?

More times than less this was when you were alone on your own path seeking your meaning and space on earth. Having to build your own path is an ongoing long tire-some process. We discover and rediscover ourselves for the lifetime. Everyday is different and puts you closer to finding your path.

The path doesn't change but situations change.

However, the human tribe, being one of the most flexible tribes on earth, also need to take a back seat and relax.

During this relaxing and resting period, we burden ourselves with the fallacies of an ideal life. We want to be included. In every life stage we go through, we see a big divide

CHASING JOY..

in the way we treat people, and the way people treat us. Instinctively we want to be included and be accepted by those who we look up to. We want to be like them; and we want to walk like them; and we want to talk like them, because we aspire to be like them. And the ladder keeps going on.

'I want to be like that friend who is always talking to girls. I want to be like that kid who gets the best scores in his grade. I want to talk like that TV reporter on screen.'

We always want to be 'like someone' and rarely want to be ourselves. Maybe because we don't watch ourselves, we watch others. We look at aspirations in others, demeaning our potential. Everyone has a talent waiting to be unleashed. But throughout our life if we ape others, we are doing a huge disservice to our gifted life. We would always feel like we don't fit it; be it academically; be it professionally or even spiritually. But the only reason we don't fit in, is because we don't belong there, our paths are different.

Each one of us has a unique bar code that we are born with, all we need to learn is our pattern. But one might argue that I don't want to unleash my inner beast, I don't wish to find that deeper meaning in my life, what I am made for, what I was meant to do. Which itself is a path.

Finding peace within yourself spreads peace. Some paths are distorted and confusing, some paths are clearer than light, but surely there is a path. Let's try to unleash our paths to peace and happiness.

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



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SAYYID THEYAZIN ATTENDS WEDDING IN JORDAN



Stemming from the distinguished fraternal relations binding the Sultanate of Oman and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said attended the wedding of Jordan's Crown Prince Al Hussein bin Abdullah, on Thursday. The wedding reception and dinner took place at Zahran Palace in Amman. During the reception, Sayyid Theyazin conveyed greetings and best wishes of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein and the Jordanian people (ONA)

Oman affirms collaboration, rule of law in maritime security

Singapore - Oman has affirmed that the rule and respect for international law and collective co-operation are two main keys to the sustainability of security in the seas.

This was conveyed by H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, which began in Singapore on Friday. The dialogue, which will end on Sunday, is discussing geopolitical issues and security in the Indian Ocean region.

In his speech, H E Sayyid Badr stressed on the importance Oman attaches to sovereignty, respect for international law and collective cooperation as key elements in maintaining maritime security. He said that cooperation, information exchange and



building trust between the Indian Ocean rim countries and specialised agencies would ensure the safety of maritime navigation, the smooth flow of international trade and transport and its impact on supply chains, stability and global development.

The Minister stressed that the shared challenges facing the Indian Ocean rim countries require

strong cooperation and effective coordination between states to counter common threats and ensure maritime security. He added that Oman is open to co-operation and partnership with all countries, organisations, companies and investors.

H E Sayyid Badr explained how Oman is developing special economic zones in its ports overlooking the Indian Ocean, in Duqm, Sohar and Salalah.

The Shangri-La Dialogue is an annual forum, held in Singapore, where security and political issues are discussed, with the participation of senior leaders, officials, defence and foreign ministers, besides other important individuals from across the world.

World Environment Day: Say no to plastics

Our Correspondent Muscat

Each year, the world produces over 400mn tonnes of plastic, with nearly half of it designed for single-use purposes. Of that, less than 10% is recycled.

Led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and held annually on June 5 since 1973, World Environment Day this year is calling for global solutions to combat plastic menace with a campaign #BeatPlasticPollution.

For the occasion, experts and citizens are getting united in their call to reduce plastic usage in our daily lives.

Dr Mohammad Majid al Kasbi, director, Department of Chemical Materials, Environment Authority (EA), emphasised the need for expediting the process for transition to a circular economy. The authority has already taken a big step by banning the use of single-use plastic bags below 50 microns from January 1, 2021.

Plastic is non-biodegradable substance that cannot be decomposed by micro-organisms. When plastic bags perish under sunlight, they release toxic substances into the soil, and burning them results in the emission of toxic fumes, Dr Kasbi explained.

The sultanate has made a notable progress in the environmental field through the authority's programmes and initiatives. "EA is focused on continuous planning and development to enhance the quality of environmental work and ensure its sustainability," Dr



400MN
TONNES OF PLASTIC
PRODUCED EVERY YEAR

19-23MN
TONNES END UP IN WATER BODIES

50,000
PLASTIC PARTICLES CONSUMED
PER YEAR BY EACH PERSON

*UNEP FIGURES FOR WORLD

Kasbi informed.

To further reduce the use of plastic bags and manage plastic waste, EA - through an administrative decision (No. 61/2021) in April 2021 - established a team to support the transition to environmentally friendly bags.

Cooperation with relevant authorities, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), Consumer Protection Authority (CPA), and Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), has been crucial in raising awareness and promoting the use of eco-friendly bags.

Additionally, MoCIIP issued a decision (No 519/2022), effective from January 1, 2023, to ban the import of plastic bags.

"This decision aims to shift

from plastic-intensive industries to environment-friendly alternatives. The authority is working alongside concerned departments and ministries to define specifications for manufacturers and suppliers, ensuring a smooth transition away from plastic bags."

Dr Kasbi highlighted various projects undertaken by the authority for the protection of the environment, conservation of nature, and maintenance of air quality, while encouraging reuse and recycling of various items that we use on a day-to-day basis.

EA is also actively involved in a movement to ensure clean and green energy, better carbon management, and efforts to reduce the risk of climate change and global warming, so as to achieve the net-zero emissions by 2050.

Ahmed al Balushi, a private sector employee, spoke about the significance of individual actions in addressing plastic pollution.

"World Environment Day is a reminder that people's actions on plastic pollution do matter. The steps governments and businesses are taking to tackle plastic pollution are the consequences of this assertion."

Hammoud al Hadrami, another private sector employee, acknowledged the long-term impact of plastic on the environment and the human race. "Banning plastics from the market will have a positive effect, contributing to an eco-friendly environment, cleaner seas and beaches, and improved survival chances for marine animals. It is time to Beat Plastic Pollution."

Dr Kasbi urged people and companies to take national responsibility by reducing the use of plastic bags and opting for environmentally friendly alternatives.

"We have a plan, along with concerned authorities, to eliminate all types of plastic bags in commercial activities by the end of 2026."



Four agreements signed to develop Ain al Kasfa project

Muscat - Falha Investment Company signed four memoranda of understanding (MoUs) to advance the development of the Ain al Kasfa project in the wilayat of Rustaq, South Batinah.

The agreements were signed on Thursday with Le Furo Tokyo Company, renowned for its expertise in extracting minerals from hot water springs; Iran's New Golden Solutions, specialising in construction projects within Oman and Iran; Kalout Company; and Al Bahja Group.

Falha Investment Company aims to introduce world-class hot spring practices in Oman, and the collaboration with Le Furo Tokyo will enable it to establish the first mineral extraction centre in Ain Al Kasfa. Additionally, Le Furo will work on

the development of aromatics in the area.

Under their MoU, New Golden Solutions Company will undertake the task of designing and developing the Ain al Kasfa project, ensuring its alignment with sustainable principles and harmonious integration with the surrounding natural environment in the wilayat.

For marketing, an MoU was signed with Kalout Company, a global marketer of hot springs that attracts tourists seeking the therapeutic benefits of such natural springs.

The MoU with Al Bahja Group will focus on maximising the local value of the governorate through the optimal utilisation of heritage and antiquities present in the area.

Blocks granted for first three green hydrogen projects worth \$20bn

Continued from Page 01

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was also signed between Hydrom and OQ Gas Networks (OQGN), the exclusive operator and owner of Oman's natural gas transportation system.

The MoU aims to establish collaboration between the parties for the development of pipelines for green hydrogen.

In addition, EDO signed an MoU with Siemens Energy for research and development. This agreement aims to establish collaboration in the fields of green hydrogen technology, innovation, and expertise exchange.

"Today, with the completion of the regulatory framework, sector structure, first investment opportunities, and block award

ing mechanisms, Oman is at the forefront of taking its first serious steps towards green hydrogen production among other nations," said H E Eng Salim Nasser al Auqi, Minister of Energy and Minerals. In the coming years, he expects Oman to become one of the leading countries in green hydrogen production. "There is a significant demand from major international companies to invest in the Omani hydrogen sector, and we look forward to collaborating with our partners to establish a strong and resilient presence in this promising sector over the next few decades."

According to H E Dr Khalfan Said al Shuali, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, Oman has allocated over 50,000sqkm in the governorates of Al Wusta and Dhofar for green hydrogen

projects to be awarded in stages.

"These achievements will solidify Oman's position in this promising sector. Oman is well-positioned for green hydrogen production and export thanks to its abundant renewable resources, existing energy and transport infrastructure, industrial ports, and established international partnerships," stressed Eng Mazin al Lamki, CEO of EDO.

"The development of the green hydrogen economy presents a strategic opportunity for both Omani and international companies to participate and collaborate, driving local and global energy security and economic diversification. This is in line with EDO's objectives to generate investment opportunities in Oman's energy sector and maximise financial returns."

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Dhofar International makes offer for merger with OIFC

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dhofar International Development & Investment Holding Company (DIDIC) – which revealed its intention to explore a merger with Oman Investment & Finance Company (OIFC) in February – has submitted a final offer for the merger with OIFC.

"The board of directors decided to submit the final offer for the merger between DIDIC (the merging company) and OIFC (the merged company)," DIDIC said in a disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange on Thursday.

In its final offer, DIDIC proposed the merger through the consolidation method.

The offer includes an agreement on the swap ratio of the shares of the merging and merged companies, which will be disclosed subsequently.

According to the terms of the offer, DIDIC will also increase its capital and allocate it to the shareholders of OIFC.

"The board of directors of DIDIC believes that the merger is in the interests of the company's shareholders by increasing its market share, optimising the cost of operations, and expanding business in new geographical



Dhofar International Development & Investment Holding Company and Oman Investment & Finance Company both are listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (Muscat Daily)

areas in Oman," DIDIC said.

The merger is subject to obtaining necessary approvals from regulators and fulfilling other applicable requirements, the company added.

In a separate disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange, OIFC confirmed that it received a letter from DIDIC expressing its desire to merge with OIFC through incorporation.

"We would like to inform our shareholders that the company received a detailed merger offer from DIDIC on May 31, 2023, which includes the swap ratio of

the shares of the merging and merged company. The board of directors will discuss the merger offer and will disclose any decision that could be taken in this regard in due course," OIFC said.

The proposed merger is subject to applicable laws, approval from relevant regulatory authorities, and approval from the shareholders of both companies, OIFC added.

DIDIC is one of the largest investment holding companies in Oman. Its main activities include investment in businesses, marketable securities, and promo-

tion of new projects.

The company holds investments in subsidiary and associate companies.

On the other hand, OIFC is Oman's leading organisation in billing and collection of utilities, providing a centralised collection point for customers to pay for their electricity, water, and telecom utilities.

It is also involved in the collection of Public Authority for Social Insurance subscriptions and investments in the banking, finance, and electricity contracting sectors.

Ooredoo Oman plans to sell passive tower infrastructure

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani Qatari Telecommunications Company (Ooredoo Oman) is preparing to sell and lease back its passive tower infrastructure in the sultanate.

Ooredoo Oman has issued a tender to sell and lease back its passive tower infrastructure, as stated in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange by the company.

According to Ooredoo Oman, several companies with expertise in telecommunication towers have been invited to submit bids for the purchase and leaseback of their passive tower infrastructure. The company is currently evaluating the offers it has received.

Ooredoo Oman said that the proposed transaction is in the early stages, and it is not possible at this point to determine its financial impact on the company.

"Ooredoo will provide updates to the market regarding any significant developments in the project. The winning bid will be disclosed once a final decision is reached by the company, subject to approval from the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority and other relevant authorities in compliance with the law and the company's internal regulations," Ooredoo Oman said.

In a similar move, Ooredoo



Several companies with expertise in telecom towers have been invited to submit bids for the purchase and leaseback of Ooredoo Oman's passive tower infrastructure. The company is currently evaluating the offers it has received

Oman's competitor, Omantel, completed the sale of its passive tower infrastructure in Oman to Helios Towers Company in December 2022. Omantel sold its passive tower infrastructure consisting of 2,519 sites to Helios Towers for a gross consideration of \$495mn.

During the first quarter of

2023, Ooredoo Oman's net profit declined by 37.8% to RO2.8mn from RO4.5mn in the same period last year, primarily due to higher expenses. However, the company's revenue for the first three months of 2023 increased by 1.9% to RO65.9mn compared to RO64.7mn in the corresponding period of 2022.



Oman completes restructuring project for electricity firms

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In efforts to optimise energy efficiency and enhance the performance of electricity sector, Oman Investment Authority (OIA) on Saturday announced the completion of the restructuring project for the electricity supply and distribution companies.

As part of the restructuring, Nama Group's distribution and supply companies have been merged into two entities. The first company, Nama Electricity Distribution, will primarily focus on distribution functions, meter reading, low voltage networks, as

well as building lines and transformers.

On the other hand, the second company, Nama Supply, will be responsible for handling billing and collection services.

"The restructuring project is expected to improve performance and services of these electricity companies by reducing operational costs and making it more convenient for customers," OIA said in its announcement.

"Nama unified services will now offer integrated electricity distribution and supply services as well as water services in one location, saving time and effort for customers", OIA added.

China's iDreamSky seeks collaboration in Oman's gaming payment industry

Muscat – iDreamSky, a China-based leading gaming and digital entertainment company, is actively exploring avenues for potential partnerships in the MENA region and collaborations in Oman's gaming industry. iDreamSky is keen to explore opportunities that will revolutionise the gaming payment landscape in Oman.

While iDreamSky acknowledges the significance of forging strategic alliances to drive industry advancements, the company is engaging in serious exploratory discussions and evaluating potential synergies that may arise from various collaborations, according to a press release.

By exploring opportunities in Oman, iDreamSky aims to leverage its expertise to create a seamless and secure gaming payment platform that caters to the evolving needs of the next generation of gamers.

In Oman, iDreamSky has signed a partnership with leading Omani fintech firm Mamun. Through this groundbreaking collaboration, iDreamSky and Mamun aim to enhance the



gaming experience, foster innovation, and support the growth of Oman's gaming ecosystem.

"We are excited to begin exploring the potential collaborations and opportunities in Oman's game payment landscape with Mamun. We see lots of similar pain points that the industry and players are suffering. Our discussions with Mamun have been very productive. I am looking forward to solidifying it further with Mamun as our main local partner as we

secure more infrastructure partners within Oman," said Jeff Lyndon, president and co-founder of iDreamSky.

This cutting-edge platform aims to meet the surging demand from gamers, developers, and publishers in the region. By leveraging the expertise and resources of iDreamSky and Mamun, in conjunction with strategic partnerships with leading telcom firms, this joint initiative seeks to revolutionise the gaming payment landscape

in Oman. The platform will offer a comprehensive suite of secure and seamless financial services tailored specifically for the gaming industry.

"In the dynamic gaming payment ecosystem, we see significant challenges that hold immense potential for growth. Our unwavering commitment lies in positioning Oman at the forefront of this vertical, and Mamun's fintech infrastructure platform technology will serve as a crucial conduit to seize these opportunities. With iDreamSky's prominent operating position in Asia and global reach of game developers, they are the perfect partner. It's essential for the sector to recognise that payments transcend mere gateways; the future entails a comprehensive financial services experience, and fintechs are poised to deliver much more than vanilla payment services," said Mohammed al Tamami, co-founder and chief commercial officer at Mamun.

Commenting on the new partnership between iDreamSky and Mamun, H E Dr Ali

Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communications and Information Technology at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, said, "We are thrilled to witness the collaboration between local Omani startup, Mamun, and renowned international game development player, iDreamsky, as they join forces to pave the way for a thriving future in game development and the digital economy in Oman.

This partnership marks a significant milestone in fostering growth and innovation within the Omani gaming industry, showcasing the immense potential and opportunities that lie ahead."

iDreamSky and Mamun extended their heartfelt gratitude to the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology in Oman for their unwavering commitment to fostering the growth of the gaming industry in the country.

The ministry's emphasis on developing and promoting this sector has created an environment conducive to innovation and collaboration.

Ajay Banga starts work as new World Bank Group president

Washington, US – Ajay Banga began his first day at the helm of the World Bank Group on Friday, taking charge of the development lender as it grapples with questions about its future direction.

"We are at a critical moment in the arc of humanity and the planet," Banga wrote Friday morning in an email to staff obtained by AFP, calling on the bank to "evolve" to meet the challenges it now faces.

An Indian-born, naturalized US citizen, Banga was nominated to the position by US President Joe Biden after a successful business career which included a

long stretch running the payments company Mastercard.

Banga, 63, has taken over from David Malpass as the bank's 14th president on a pledge to expand the role of the private sector in addressing the world's development needs.

"The scale and diversity of our challenges – poverty and development, pandemics, climate change, conflict, and fragility – are deeply intertwined and threaten our collective ambitions, as decades worth of hard-won progress erode," Banga said in his email.

"The World Bank's challenge is clear: It must pursue both cli-



Ajay Banga

mate adaptation and mitigation, it must reach out to lower income countries without turning its back on middle income countries, it must think globally but

recognize national and regional needs, it must embrace risk but do so prudently," he added.

"Change is appropriate for the World Bank," he said. "It isn't a

World Bank's challenge is clear: It must pursue both climate adaptation and mitigation, it must reach out to lower income countries without turning its back on middle income countries

AJAY BANGA



symptom of failure or drift or irrelevance, it is a symptom of opportunity, life, and importance."

Debt transparency

Banga took over the top job at the World Bank from Malpass, who stepped down early from his five-year term amid questions about his stance on climate change.

Under an increasingly contentious unwritten arrangement, a US citizen has historically held the presidency of the Washington-based development lender, while the International Monetary Fund has been run by a European.

In his final message as World Bank president on Thursday, Malpass touted the World Bank's role in "quickly" mobilizing resources to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine, and highlighted the doubling of climate financing for developing countries under his watch.

"One of my key priorities while at the Bank has been to foster more debt transparency and sustainability – both essential to bolster investment and growth in developing economies," he wrote in the statement posted on LinkedIn. AFP

Biden hails averting 'catastrophic' default

Washington, US – President Joe Biden told Americans on Saturday in a rare Oval Office address that the debt ceiling bill passed by Congress after weeks of wrangling saved the country from “economic collapse.”

Speaking from behind the historic Resolute Desk on live primetime television, Biden said that the deal resolving the standoff between Democrats and Republicans was a compromise where “no one got everything they wanted.”

“We averted an economic crisis and an economic collapse,” he said, adding that “the stakes could not have been higher.”

Biden said he will sign the bill, which authorizes the government to extend the so-called debt ceiling and renew borrowing, into law on Saturday.

The US Treasury Department had warned that if the debt ceiling was blocked beyond Monday, the country could default on its \$31tn debt. A default would have likely triggered market panic, huge job losses and a recession, with global implications.

“Nothing would have been



US President Joe Biden appears on a television screen in the Brady Press Briefing Room as he speaks during an address to the nation about the debt ceiling bill from the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, on Saturday (AFP)

more catastrophic,” Biden said. Biden used the occasion to project a reassuring, calm tone. Sprinkling his speech with chuckles and smiles, he praised his opponents for negotiating in good faith and promised Americans that he had never felt more optimistic.

Biden said that Congress has now preserved “the full faith and credit of the United States.”

But even with the House and Senate putting aside differences to finally rush through an agreement over the last week, the US economy’s reputation took a hit.

Ratings agency Fitch said Friday that it is keeping the United States’ “AAA” credit rating on negative watch, despite the deal.

Campaign boost?

The debt ceiling is usually an uncontroversial accounting maneuver approved yearly by Congress. It allows the government to keep borrowing money to pay for bills already incurred.

This year, hard-right Republicans dominating their party’s narrow majority in the House of Representatives, decided to use the must-pass vote as leverage for forcing Biden into accepting cuts to many Democratic spending priorities.

This triggered a test of political strength that threatened to end in chaos before the two sides agreed this week on raising the debt ceiling while freezing some budgetary spending in return – yet stopping well short of Republican demands for cuts.

Kevin McCarthy, the speaker of the Republican-led House, had touted the compromise bill as a big victory for conservatives, although he faced a backlash from hardliners on the right who said he made too many concessions.

But Biden, who is campaigning for re-election in 2024, sees the dramatic resolution to the crisis as a win, showcasing his negotiating powers and his pitch to be the moderate voice in an increasingly extreme political landscape.

He burnished those credentials in the speech by going out of his way to praise McCarthy, a politician long loyal to former president Donald Trump – the man Biden defeated in 2020 and who is seeking his own return in 2024.

“I want to commend Speaker McCarthy. You know, he and I, we and our teams, were able to get along, get things done,” Biden said, calling the Republican negotiators “completely honest and respectful of one another.”

AFP

Eurozone inflation dips but ECB likely to keep hawkish monetary policy

Brussels, Belgium – Sliding energy prices helped lower eurozone inflation more than expected in May but underlying pressures suggest the European Central Bank will still be inclined to raise interest rates, officials and analysts said Thursday.

Headline inflation for the 20 EU countries using the euro dipped to 6.1% in May, according to Eurostat data.

That was a drop from the 7.0% figure for April that had reversed five months of declines, and below analysts’ consensus forecast of 6.3%.

But inflation remains well above the 2.0% target set by the European Central Bank, which indicated another round of monetary tightening in two weeks’ time.

“Inflation is too high and it is set to remain so for too long,” ECB chief Christine Lagarde told a banking congress in Germany.

She suggested that a smaller rate increase was to come, following ECB hikes since July that have pushed up the official borrowing rate an unprecedented 3.75 percentage points.

“We are approaching our cruising altitude,” Lagarde said.

Core inflation, which strips



out volatile energy, food, alcohol and tobacco prices, is the key signal for the ECB.

In May, that figure came in at 5.3%, lower than the 5.6% recorded in April.

“The persistent nature of core inflation means that the ECB is expected to extend their unprecedented tightening cycle with another 0.25 basis points rise in two weeks, despite signs of slower growth and the potential for increased pressure on the financial system,” said Richard Flax of the investment advisory

firm Moneyfarm.

Households squeezed

Eurostat said energy inflation in the eurozone dipped into negative territory in May, falling by 1.7%.

That reflected a glut on the natural gas market as Europe, now less dependent on Russian fossil fuels since supply cuts over the war in Ukraine, heads into summer.

Inflation in services also slowed slightly, to 5.0%, but higher prices for food and alcohol, while slowing a bit, were the main prop for headline inflation and a problem for European household budgets.

That component rose 12.5% in May, compared with 13.5% in April. It was also largely responsible for the surprise 7.0% reading in April that reversed five months of declines.

Back in October, the eurozone was struggling with overall inflation of 10.6% as it confronted the fallout from Russia’s war in Ukraine and supply bottlenecks related to the post-Covid recovery.

While inflation has since eased, slowing economic growth and higher loan costs were starting to bite.

Germany, the European Union’s economic powerhouse that is now in recession, saw its inflation rate drop to 6.3% in May from 7.6% in April.

France, the bloc’s second-biggest economy, saw inflation dip to 6.0% in May from 6.9% the previous month.

“I’m aware of the risks that weigh on our growth and the French economy,” French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire said Wednesday, in response to signs of tepid growth and cutbacks by consumers.

The ECB rate increases have flowed through into mortgages, making home loans more expensive and harder to secure for would-be buyers in Europe, weakening some real estate markets.

The ECB said in a report this week that demand for mortgages fell sharply in the first quarter of 2023, leading to a “correction” that risked becoming “disorderly” if recession fears widened.

“The tightening monetary policy is testing the resilience of households and businesses” in the eurozone, Moneyfarm’s Flax said.

“Looking ahead, both headline and core inflation will keep falling,” said Jack Allen-Reynolds, a eurozone economist for analysis firm Capital Economics.

“But the labour market still looks very tight... As a result, we suspect that the core inflation rate will come down only slowly and it will be a long time before it hits 2 percent.”

Like other analysts, he predicted the ECB would raise interest rates by 25 basis points on June 15 “and probably once more at the July meeting”.

AFP

Pakistan inflation rockets to record 38%

Islamabad, Pakistan – Pakistan’s year-on-year inflation hit a record 37.97% in May, official data revealed Thursday, with the nation on the brink of economic collapse and crucial bailout talks stalled.

Non-perishable foods and transport costs climbed more than 50% over May 2022, while average inflation for the past 12 months was 29.16%, the latest Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data showed.

“This level of inflation badly affects poor and middle-class families of the country, whose income is evaporating with each percentage point,” said Mohammad Sohail, a financier in Karachi.

Years of financial mismanagement have pushed Pakistan’s economy to the limit, exacerbated by a global energy crisis and devastating floods that submerged a third of the country in 2022.

A political crisis has added another layer of uncertainty – with opposition leader Imran Khan’s brief arrest last month sparking deadly street violence and a days-long state-ordered mobile internet

blackout.

In the background, negotiations to unlock a crucial tranche of a \$6.5bn loan deal agreed with the International Monetary Fund have been deadlocked for months.

Pakistan needs billions of dollars in financing to service staggering levels of external debt, and foreign exchange reserves have dwindled to just \$4.2bn, barely enough for a month of imports.

Elections are due no later than October, and the government has already bowed to IMF demands to end popular subsidies on gas and electricity which cushioned the cost-of-living crisis.

“Everyone is worried,” said 42-year-old Muhammad Safer in an Islamabad bazaar. “Where will we get the money from? Personal debt can only go up.”

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s government is due to present its annual budget next week, and the nation has already downgraded its growth forecast for the year ending June 30 from five percent to 0.3%.

AFP

California law would make US tech giants pay for news

San Francisco, US – A proposed law requiring internet giants to pay for news stories moved forward in California on Friday, despite Facebook owner Meta threatening to pull news from its platform if it passes.

The California Journalism Preservation Act (CJPA), which cleared the state assembly on Thursday and was in the hands of the state senate, would mandate that large online platforms pay a monthly “journalism usage fee” to news providers whose work appears on their services.

The bill is designed to support local news organizations, which have been decimated in recent years as ad revenue bled away to Google and Facebook, both advertising behemoths.

Meta spokesman Andy Stone on Friday told AFP that if the bill becomes law, Meta “will be forced to remove news from

Facebook and Instagram rather than pay into a slush fund that primarily benefits big, out-of-state media companies.”

The bill has to make its way through the state senate and be signed by Governor Gavin Newsom to become law.

The CJPA is like other legislative texts pending across the globe.

In Australia, Facebook in 2021 briefly blocked news articles over a similar law and Google threatened to pull its search engine from the country before they made deals to pay several media groups.

In the European Union, tech giants can be asked to pay a copyright fee to publishers for links posted in search results or feeds.

“The CJPA is riddled with holes, the biggest of which is that the bill primarily funds na-



tional media outlets that spread misinformation,” said Chamber of Progress chief executive Adam Kovacevich.

“It’s sad the Assembly is

cludes Amazon, Apple, Google, and Meta.

A study posted by the chamber concluded that “disinformation outlets” including Fox News would benefit most from the California law.

The bill defines online plat-

Money for reporters?

Fees paid would be based on the number of views and news providers would be required to spend it on journalism and support staff, according to the text of the bill.

Stone noted that the wording

The bill is designed to support local news organisations, which have been decimated in recent years as ad revenue bled away to Google and Facebook, both advertising behemoths

forms as those having at least 50mn monthly active users in the United States; a billion monthly users worldwide, or be valued at more than \$550bn based on its stock price.

of the bill means revenue from the law would not have to be spent on reporters covering news.

The California state assembly website indicated the bill was

sent to a senate committee responsible for scheduling debates and votes on legislation, with no indication of when it would go to a vote.

“Meta’s threat to take down news is undemocratic and unbefitting,” trade group News Media Alliance said in a posted statement.

“We have seen this in their playbook before.”

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau last month slammed Meta after executives said it would block news for Canadian Facebook and Instagram users in response to the proposed law there.

The Canada law builds on Australia’s New Media Bargaining Code, which was a world first, aimed at making Google and Meta pay for news content on their platforms.

AFP

OAB floats 'Ruwad Al Arabi' internship

Oman Arab Bank (OAB) is set to contribute to the sultanate's workforce by introducing a new internship programme - Ruwad Al Arabi (Leaders of Tomorrow).

In line with the aims outlined in the sultanate's Vision 2040, the programme aims to foster economic competitiveness and stimulate growth, a pres release said.

The one-year internship targets university and college graduates and is designed to provide its participants with meaningful work experience and the skills required to bolster employment prospects within, or outside, the sector.

Applicants who display enthusiasm, a strong work ethic and a willingness to learn will be considered for the programme. The ultimate goal is to improve the employability of young Omani nationals while growing the Omani workforce.

Sulaiman al Harthi,



CEO of OAB, said, "With the announcement of Ruwad Al Arabi, we are sending a strong message to the Omani workforce of tomorrow that we support their ambitions and want to continue giving back to our community, while matching the sultanate's economic objectives."

He added, "The youth of the nation, who are our leaders of tomorrow, have an excellent opportunity to kick-start their careers and upskill themselves thanks to the initiative, which will not only strengthen the banking sector, but also the workforce as a whole, as we move toward to fulfilling the goals set by Vision 2040."

Participants will be introduced to staff, systems and values of OAB and will have the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in various banking departments, such as customer experience and customer service, digital banking, fintech, marketing and finance.

Wizz Air organises mystery flight

Wizz Air, Europe's fastest growing and most sustainable airline, embarked on its most exciting adventure yet with a mystery flight from Venice, Italy to an unknown destination.

The adventurous group of #GetLostwithWizz' competition winners, influencers and travel bloggers boarded the once-in-a-lifetime mystery flight to explore and experience Saudi Arabia, which has emerged as one of the most exciting, year-round destinations in the world today, a press release said.

Departing from Venice Airport Marco Polo, the adventure seekers seized the moment and embraced the unexpected upon arrival in Riyadh, Al Ahsa and Dammam, discovering fascinating, centuries-old history, a plethora of unmissable attractions and tasty local gastronomic delights.

The lucky competition winners had the opportunity to discover historical and archaeological sites, majestic palm trees and natural beauty and feed their adrenaline with energizing activities like dune bashing in the awe-inspiring desert or visiting the Boulevard Riyadh City. Highlights include visits to the historical Al Masmak Fort in Riyadh, the world's largest palm oasis of Al Ahsa a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the cultural and scientific landmark of Ithra in Dhahran.

Bank Muscat facilitates online bill payments

Bank Muscat has called upon customers to take full advantage of its powerful omnichannel Internet and Mobile banking platform for their daily transactions and bill payments.

The platform, which is being continuously upgraded, has been recording a massive rise in popularity with well over 1.6 million customers using 'Mobile and Internet Banking' to conduct a wide variety of banking transactions

including utility and educational fee payments. Being available 24/7, 365 days a year, this service provides customers the convenience of banking from the convenience of their homes or offices without having to visit a branch, a press release said.

Abdullah Hamood al Jufaili, assistant general manager, Digital Banking, said, "In line with our customer-centric vision, Bank Muscat is continuously launch-



Abdullah Hamood al Jufaili

ing new features to enhance banking convenience for customers, and the consistent rise in active customers reflects the popularity of Mobile and Internet Banking. We thank our customers for their strong confidence and trust in the bank and request them to use the constantly upgraded platform for their banking transactions conveniently any time and from anywhere. In particular, the platform

will be very useful in making utility bill and fee payments to a number of institutions in the country."

Bank Muscat's continuously upgraded Internet and mobile banking services offer customers a fast, comfortable and secure banking experience. Today, retail banking customers use various features like real-time bill payments for utilities in Oman, such as electricity, water, telecom,

mobile top ups, instant credit card bill payments, educational institutions fees payments etc. It is important to note that Mobile and Internet banking allows customers to securely manage and pay all their bills from one place.

Also, both mBanking and Internet banking are able to show the outstanding bill amounts and also payment history with the functionality of date-based searches.



Modern College students win CTF competition

Modern College of Business and Science student team wins first place at the 'Capture the Flag' (CTF) competition organised by the National Technology Group (NTG) Hacktivate. The CTF competition finals were held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Center in Muscat - the largest annual information security contest in the sultanate.

The Dean of Modern College of Business and Science, Dr Moosa al Kindi, expressed his appreciation to National Technology Group. "The win affirms that Modern College of Business and Science reinforce students' skills in the field of cybersecurity and increase their employment opportunities in the information technology sector aligning with the growth of the country's digital economy and the objectives of Oman Vision 2040," he said.

In March 2023, college and university students were

invited by NTG to learn about the programme and the competition. More than 64 teams from over 30 higher educational institutes across the sultanate participated in the competition. NTG ran the competition in two stages - an online first-stage competition and an additional speed-running stage for the best 12 teams.

"We were pleasantly surprised that our efforts during the challenge were well-rewarded. We really enjoyed participating in the CTF Competition, where we got to apply our wide breadth of knowledge and showcase our skills in various cybersecurity categories. We are grateful for the chance to engage in hands-on challenges and put our expertise to the test. Thank you for organising such an enriching event that contributed to our growth and development in cybersecurity," said Ibrahim al Malki, MCBS Student Team Leader.

ISG basketballer bags 'most promising player' trophy

Hanisha Chawla, captain of the Indian School Ghubra Girls's Basketball team, clinched the trophy for the Most Promising Player at the International and Private Schools Basketball League held at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, Bousher, on May 17.

Al Zubair Mohammed Al Zubair (Zubair Corporation) was the chief guest at the tournament organised by Oman Schools Sports Association (OSSA) in cooperation with Azan Bin Qais



School which hosted the matches, a press release said.

Of the six Girls' teams that participated in the tournament, the ISG Girls team comprising Aarya Malhotra, Aarya Singh, Akshitha Sai Ravi Kumar, Evangelia Joby Mathew, Hanisha Chawla, Himani Vekariya, Isha Sirona, Kiara Denise Frank, Nikita Katherine Frank, Pahal Chaddha and Sruthi Maria Jose made it to the finals of the tournament and was declared the runners-up Up.



Ooredoo fetes its dealer partners in Dhakliyah

Committed to meeting the needs of customers across Oman by partnering with local businesses, Ooredoo invited its dealer partners and main distributors in the Al Dhakliyah region to celebrate solid results and honour top sales performers.

These leading partners are an integral part of Ooredoo and have played a crucial role in providing customers with a seamless experience that speaks to their individual needs. In addition to Ooredoo's top performing local partners, the event was at-

tended by Bassam al Ibrahim, CEO of Ooredoo, Ahmed Diwan, chief commercial officer, Saoud al Riyami, acting chief business and wholesale officer, and other key stakeholders, a press release said.

Ooredoo works with select partners across Oman to upgrade the world of its customers. With their knowledge of local markets and close relationships with customers, dealer partners are able to offer the company's fantastic range of products and services, including after-sales,

while building new revenue streams for themselves.

Ooredoo's dealer network has a strong value proposition as it continues to thrive on close relationships, quality and on trust. It is just one of the many ways Ooredoo supports local businesses, while building and maintaining relationships with customers in areas where it aims to expand. On top of this, local partners also support Ooredoo in gaining insight into how it can further upgrade and expand its many value-added products and services.

Deloitte grows leadership team in the Middle East

Deloitte, the largest professional services network in the world, grows its leadership team with 60 partner admissions in the Middle East, enhancing its capabilities across a range of offerings including Artificial Intelligence, Analytics, ESG, e-commerce, cybersecurity, M&A and more.

This milestone marks the highest number of partner admissions in a single year in Deloitte's history in the Middle East, a press release said.

Mutasem Dajani, CEO, Deloitte Middle East, said, "The recognition of our next generation leaders not only reflects our commitment to the region, but also to our clients, markets and people as we respond to the social and economic transformation we are witnessing today.

The pace of technological development, particularly within the Artificial Intelligence and Analytics space, demands agility as well as capability allowing us to best support our clients to seize opportunities and face new challenges."

Spanning across all Deloitte

offerings, including Audit & Assurance, Consulting, Financial Advisory, Risk Advisory, and Tax, the new partners offer Deloitte's comprehensive and integrated multidisciplinary model that addresses the diverse needs of clients in the region.

The new partners bring a wealth of skills and expertise to strengthen Deloitte's services in the Middle East as a leading advisor for governments, sovereign wealth funds, and corporations across the region.

The organization's growth comes as a natural response to the region's growing need for world class professional services, particularly in relation to the Middle East's Giga Projects and the broader ongoing socioeconomic transformation.

Rana Ghandour Salhab, People and Purpose Partner, Deloitte Middle East, said, "Deloitte strives to make gender balance the norm across our organization and increase female representation in both partnership admissions and other leadership roles.

Bank Nizwa celebrates double wins at Banking Summit 2023

Bank Nizwa showcased its commitment to driving digitalisation and revolutionising the FinTech landscape at the highly anticipated New Age Banking Summit 2023.

The bank's unwavering commitment to innovation and exceptional service has earned it the esteemed title of 'Best Bank in the Mid-Size Banks' category, as recognised by the renowned OER Report on the Best Banks in Oman, a press release said.

Additionally, the bank was also awarded the 'Industry Leadership in Innovative Islamic Banking Services' title. Hosted by H E Shaikh Salim Bin Mustahail al Mashani, at Sheraton Oman Hotel, the keynote speaker was H E Tahir al Amri, executive president of the Central Bank of Oman who presented Bank Nizwa with the esteemed awards.

As the 'Islamic Banking Partner' of the summit, Bank Nizwa solidified its position as a trailblazer in the financial sector by actively participating in the event.

The New Age Banking Summit, renowned for its focus on cutting-edge banking practices and disruptive technologies, provided an ideal platform for Bank Nizwa to highlight its innovative solutions and contributions to the industry.



The bank's involvement included a panel discussion on the topic of 'Navigating the Digital Age of Banking' featuring Mujahid al Zadjal, general manager of IT & Operations, as a prominent speaker.

Additionally, Sadiq al Lawati, head of Digital, eSales and Payments, delivered a presentation on the collaboration of FinTech with banks, shedding light on Bank Nizwa's efforts in this area. Khaled al Kayed, Bank Nizwa's CEO, said, "We are thrilled to have received these prestigious awards at the New Age Banking Summit 2023. These accolades underscore our commitment to delivering ex-

ceptional banking experiences and driving digital transformation. At Bank Nizwa, we continuously strive to enhance our digital services, adopt the latest technological updates and provide innovative solutions to meet the evolving needs of our customers. These awards serve as a testament to the dedication and hard work of our team.

"As part of its ongoing efforts to digitise our operations, Bank Nizwa has implemented advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analytics, enabling the bank to gain deeper insights into customer preferences and behaviours.

By harnessing the power of these technologies, Bank Nizwa can offer personalised financial solutions, optimise its operations and deliver unparalleled customer satisfaction."

Bank Nizwa's FinTech efforts are evident in its integration of technology with Islamic banking, allowing clients to bank from the comfort of their own homes.

The bank is committed to maintaining healthy customer relationships across every banking channel by developing trust, relevance and convenience.

Advanced security mechanisms secure these channels, ensuring the safety of all private information.

National Finance wins two awards at Banking Summit

National Finance announced its resounding success at the eighth edition of the New Age Banking Summit (NABS) 2023 Oman. The event, which was conducted at the Sheraton Oman Hotel in Muscat, celebrated National Finance's achievement as the winner of the prestigious 'New Corporate Identity of the Year' award.

In addition, National Finance achieved another remarkable feat by also receiving the esteemed title of 'Best Non-Banking Finance and Leasing Company', a press release said.

Juma al Khamisi (COO), general manager at National Finance, graciously accepted the awards on behalf of the company. H E Tahir al Amri, executive president of the Central Bank of Oman, was present as chief guest and keynote speaker. The summit was hosted by H E Shaikh Salim Bin Mustahail al Mashani and supported by the Oman Banks Association.

These recognitions further solidify National Finance's position as a leader in the financial industry, showcasing its exceptional performance, innovation and commitment to providing top-notch financial solutions to its valued customers. The dual triumph highlights National Finance's

outstanding achievements and unwavering dedication to excellence in all facets of its operations.



Khamisi said, "We are incredibly honoured to receive these prestigious awards at NABS 2023. This esteemed recognition underscores the dedication and tireless pursuit of excellence demonstrated by our exceptional team across all aspects of our operations. It also affirms our strategic vision to adapt and grow alongside the dynamic financial landscape. We remain steadfast in continuously enhancing the value we provide to our customers, as we strive to set new benchmarks and re-

fine the standards of excellence in the industry."

Through a comprehensive rebranding strategy, National Finance successfully positioned itself as a dynamic and forward-thinking financial institution, showcasing its commitment to innovation, excellence and customer-centricity.

These accolades not only acknowledge National Finance's remarkable transformation but also solidifies its position as a prominent player in the financial services sector.

Oman Air re-introduces Maldives

Oman Air, the national carrier of the Sultanate of Oman, has announced the return of its popular Maldives flight, starting 24 June 2023.

With four weekly direct flights to the capital and easy access to the islands, it's the perfect opportunity to explore one of the world's most beautiful destinations. Starting from just OMR 149 per person, guests can plan a quick weekend getaway or a relaxing summer holiday with a choice of the following times:

Oman Air has increased a number of its flights for the peak summer season, including Moscow, Bangkok, Istanbul and Kuala Lumpur, offering guests excellent value, convenient timings, and seamless connectivity.



Moreover, guests can have their entire trip taken care of with a

range of tailored packages from Oman Air Holidays.



IRES, Al Maha conclude graduate training initiative

Integrated Real Estate Services Company (IRES), in cooperation with Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company, concluded its first initiative on the Real Estate training programme aimed at teaching real estate skills to fresh graduates and job-seekers.

The five-day workshop focused on foundations and proce-

dures. It received positive participant reviews, who described the experience as 'A journey that opened the doors to the real estate sector', a press release said.

The programme content was lauded for its content richness and embedding of real estate skills. Hand in hand with gaining real estate know-how, the event proved to be an excellent social

networking opportunity for personal growth.

"Integrated Real Estate Services Company looks forward to growth and progress.

Thus, we encourage other companies and organisations to support and fund such training programmes. It can help facilitate young Omanis' reintegration into the labour market and con-

tribute to economic development." IRES shared.

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company believes human capital investment is valuable for business processes and growth.

And conducting CSR activities helps to empower and create a significant change in an individuals' life.

TAISM honours 36 graduates at Annual Commencement

On June 1, 36 grade 12 students from The American International School of Muscat (TAISM) made a proud walk across the Bosch Center for the Performing Arts stage and received their diplomas at the school's annual graduation ceremony.

More than 500 parents, faculty, and students attended the ceremony, which was followed by a celebratory reception, a press release said.

As per TAISM tradition, the ceremony was led by the student Master of Ceremonies, and featured speakers from the graduating class.

"I am incredibly proud of our students who led the ceremony tonight.

Their confidence and wisdom is an inspiration to us all," says Dr Kevin Schuttinger, High School principal.

"The students' desire to step up and take on the responsibility of leadership is a moving example of the confidence and character instilled in them throughout their time at TAISM."

TAISM's Class of 2023 will be attending universities around



the world. Students were accepted to over 300 universities in 10 different countries, with the US, Canada and the UK being the most popular. Students are pursuing a broad range of studies including Economics, Film and Television Production, Business Management, Engineering, Health and Sciences, Finance, Business Administration and Entrepreneurship, Life Sciences and Psychology, Computer Sci-

ence, and Artificial Intelligence.

Fawzi Mushantaf, chairperson of TAISM's Board of Directors, and Kevin Schafer, TAISM director, awarded the diplomas to the graduates.

The students were lauded for their outstanding achievements and personal attributes, which they embody as lifelong learners. "It is important to honour these students for their growth, and for the diligence shown in their studies," said Schafer.

"These graduates rose to the challenge while at TAISM, and have bright futures ahead of them."

Dr Schuttinger presented special awards to the graduates.

The award for Academic Excellence (Highest Honors) was given to seniors Eva Bonde, Liliana Castiblanco Guzman, Rami Idris, Shyaam Lakshmanan, Nilanjana Sha Sudha, Jayani Singh & Nandika Singh.

The Master of Ceremony for

this year's graduation ceremony was Ekaterina Nadezhkina and the Graduation Speaker was Nandika Singh. Both of these important roles were determined through an audition process of interested students who earned "Academic Honours" and "Highest Academic Honours" respectively.

Nandika said, "My hope, not only for myself but also for the rest of my class, is even though there is a certainty in endings

and an uncertainty about the future, that we let our awareness of the timer and our appreciation for time guide the way we spend each second."

The recipient of the Outstanding Senior Award distinguished herself through academic achievement, participation in a variety of extracurricular activities, and significant contributions to the TAISM community through acts of service, leadership and charac-

ter. The award was received by Liliana Castiblanco Guzman.

The TAISM Concert Band, under the direction of Kristina LaMarca, conductor, performed the prelude and processional music, including Edward Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance'. In honour of the graduating seniors, the TAISM High School Choir, with some alumni, performed the choral anthem, 'Like an Eagle', directed by Mira Boyadzhieva.

SINGAPORE SUMMIT

Talks with China ‘essential’ to curb chance of conflict: US

Singapore - Dialogue between the United States and China is ‘essential’ to avoid miscalculations that could lead to conflict, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Saturday, after Beijing rejected a formal meeting between him and his Chinese counterpart.

Austin and Li Shangfu shook hands and spoke briefly for the first time at the opening dinner of the Shangri-La Dialogue defence summit in Singapore on Friday, but the interaction fell short of the Pentagon’s hopes for a more substantive exchange. Tensions between Washington and Beijing have soared this year over issues including Taiwan and an alleged Chinese spy balloon that was shot down by a US warplane after traversing the country.

The US defence chief is on a tour of Asia that previously took him to Japan and will also include a visit to India - part of a push by top American officials to shore up alliances and partnerships in the region to help counter Beijing.

“The United States believes that open lines of communication with the People’s Republic of China are essential - especially between our defence and military leaders,” Austin told the summit.

“The more that we talk, the more that we can avoid the mis-



US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin (4th L) with China's Defense Minister Li Shangfu (centre R) and their counterparts attending a ministerial luncheon at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore on Friday (AFP)

understandings and miscalculations that could lead to crisis or conflict.”

The United States had invited Li to meet on the sidelines of the summit but Beijing declined, with a spokeswoman saying ‘the US knows clearly why there are currently difficulties in military communication’.

The Chinese delegation swiftly responded to Austin’s speech, with Senior Colonel Tang Hefei, spokesperson for China’s defence ministry, saying that the Pentagon chief ‘made several false accusations’ in his

remarks.

“We oppose that,” Tang told reporters in Singapore.

Another Chinese delegation member, Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo, said Washington had no business telling China what to do.

“What we do in the Chinese military is based on maintaining the core interests of China’s security, which is fundamental,” he told reporters.

Defence minister Li, who will address the meeting on Sunday, was sanctioned by the US government in 2018 for buying

Russian weapons, but the Pentagon says that does not prevent Austin from conducting official business with him.

Zhao said removing the sanctions is ‘one of the pre-conditions for substantial talks’ with Austin.

Austin said he was ‘deeply concerned that (China) has been unwilling to engage more seriously on better mechanisms for crisis management between our two militaries’, expressing hope that would soon change.

The US defence chief also took aim at Beijing for conduct-

ing ‘an alarming number of risky intercepts of US and allied aircraft flying lawfully in international airspace’, including one last week.

‘Critical information’

In that incident, the US military said a Chinese fighter pilot had performed an ‘unnecessarily aggressive manoeuvre’ near an American surveillance aircraft operating over the South China Sea. Video footage released by the US military showed a Chinese fighter plane crossing in front of the American aircraft, which could be seen shaking from the resulting turbulence.

But China’s military said the US plane ‘broke into’ a military training area.

Another recent flashpoint in China-US relations has been high-end microchips, with Beijing saying in May that US semiconductor giant Micron had failed a national security review and would not be allowed to sell to operators of ‘critical information infrastructure’.

The announcement came after Washington and its allies took measures in recent months that China claimed were designed to restrict its ability to purchase or manufacture cutting-edge chips and curb its rising global power.

AFP

US, Japan, South Korea aim to share North Korean data

Singapore - The United States, Japan and South Korea aim to share North Korean missile warning data before the end of 2023, the three countries said in a statement following a Saturday meeting of their defence chiefs in Singapore.

The announcement followed a North Korean attempt to launch a spy satellite that ended with it crashing into the sea after a rocket failure earlier in the week, the latest in a string of banned tests conducted by Pyongyang.

The three sides ‘recognised trilateral efforts to activate a data sharing mechanism to exchange real-time missile warning data before the end of the year in order to improve each country’s ability to detect and assess missiles launched’ by North Korea, their joint statement said.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Japanese and South Korean counterparts Yasukazu Hamada and Lee Jong-sup met on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue defence summit.

They ‘discussed the growing nuclear and missile threats from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) as well as efforts to enhance trilateral security exercises and address common security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region’, the state-



South Korea's Defence Minister Lee Jong-sup (AFP)

ment said.

South Korea’s defence ministry said in a separate statement that they ‘committed to making further progress in the coming months towards the activation of a real-time sharing mechanism for missile warning information’.

Hamada told a news conference the initiative ‘will improve the ability of countries to detect and assess the threat of missiles launched by North Korea, and we will work firmly to achieve this as soon as possible’.

A senior US defence official said ahead of the announcement that the planned data sharing is ultimately about ‘strengthening trilateral cooperation, which we believe is in all three of our countries’ interests, which we believe strengthens deterrence, and which we believe also institutionalises this cooperation’.

AFP

Indonesia proposes peace plan for Russia-Ukraine war

Singapore - Indonesia’s defence minister proposed a plan on Saturday to end the war between Russia and Ukraine at a defence summit in Singapore, an initiative that drew quick criticism from attendees.

“I call on Russia and Ukraine to embark on an immediate cessation of hostilities,” Prabowo Subianto said, noting that the more than 15-month conflict had a severe impact on Asian nations’ economies and food supplies.

In a speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue defence summit,

Subianto proposed a ceasefire ‘at present positions’, and demilitarised zones that would be guaranteed by observers and United Nations peacekeeping forces. He also suggested an eventual ‘referendum in the disputed areas’ organised by the UN.

“Indonesia is prepared to contribute units to a potential UN peacekeeping operation,” he added.

China has presented its own peace plan to end the war - a vague list of proposals to which European Union

politicians have reacted with scepticism. While Beijing says it is a neutral party to the conflict, it has been criticised for refusing to condemn Moscow’s invasion.

In contrast, the United States and Western allies have delivered billions of dollars in weapons and other aid to Ukraine since Russia’s invasion. Jakarta, which favours non-aligned diplomacy, had previously attempted to mediate peace.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo travelled to Kyiv and

Moscow and met the nations’ leaders last year, while his country chaired the G20 bloc of major economies.

But defence chief Subianto’s proposal was criticised at the summit on Saturday, with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell saying peace in Ukraine had to be achieved on ‘just’ terms.

‘We need to bring peace to Ukraine’, but it must be a ‘just peace, not a peace of surrender’, Borrell said, commenting on the Indonesian proposal.

AFP

ASSIGNED TO DEFEND THEIR NATIONS



US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin (3rd from right) posing for photos with Southeast Asian defence ministers at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore on Saturday (AFP)

Germany: AfD scales new heights in national polls

Berlin, Germany - Long an anti-immigration party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has scaled new heights in national polls as discontent with the government in Berlin and its climate agenda grows.

The far-right party would receive 18 per cent of the vote if elections were held tomorrow, according to the most recent survey by national broadcaster ARD.

The figure is the AfD’s best in the closely watched election monitor, putting it level with Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democrats and behind only the conservative CDU-CSU on 29 per cent of the vote. The AfD was also topping polls in the eastern regions of Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg.

While the party continues to leverage anti-immigration sentiment, it has also increasingly sought to capitalise on dissatisfaction with Scholz’s ruling coalition with the Greens and the pro-business FDP.

In particular, the AfD has taken aim at the government’s plans to clean up the Germany’s energy system amid a painful



This file photo shows supporters attending a rally of AfD party, in Schwerin, northern Germany, on August 10, 2021 (AFP)

cost of living crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

“The AfD has discovered the topic of climate protection for itself,” said Ursula Muench, political scientist at the Bundeswehr University Munich.

‘Heating hammer’

The AfD started out as an anti-euro outfit in 2013 before capitalising on public anger over former chancellor Angela Merkel’s 2015 decision to allow in a wave of asylum seekers from conflict-

torn countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

It took nearly 13 per cent of the vote in the 2017 general election, catapulting the party into the German Bundestag, before it fell back to 10 per cent in the last national vote in 2021.

The recent polling rebound owed much to the fact that Scholz’s three-way coalition was ‘always at odds on very central points such as climate’, said Hajo Funke, a political scientist at the Free University of Berlin.

The coalition members have traded blows of late over a plan put forward by the Green-led

Voters are seeing where the politics of the Greens is leading us, namely, to economic war, inflation and deindustrialisation

TINO CHRUPALLA

economy ministry to ban new fossil-fuel boilers and reduce emissions.

Concern over energy-led inflation has allowed the far-right party make hay with criticism of the government’s climate policy - slammed by well-read tabloid Bild as a ‘heating hammer’ for consumers.

“Voters are seeing where the value-based politics of the Greens is leading us, namely, to economic war, inflation and deindustrialisation,” AfD co-leader

Tino Chrupalla told the Funke media group.

‘Resentment’

The AfD is succeeding in ‘mobilising and creating a mood’ by targeting the government’s supposedly costly climate agenda for criticism, political scientist Muench told AFP.

The far-right faction in the Bundestag had done better than the main opposition CDU at capitalising on ‘resentment and lack of understanding about the heating law’, she said.

The government had not done enough to address concerns of rising bills and ‘does not communicate well’ around the issue, Funke told AFP.

The discord at the heart of the government has hurt the public image of the ruling parties. Only one in five voters said they were satisfied with the work being done by Scholz’s coalition in the ARD poll.

The AfD ‘will continue to thrive as long and only as long as politics gives this bad impression of itself’, Funke said.

AFP

One dead, three missing in Japan after heavy rain

Tokyo, Japan - Heavy rain across parts of Japan has killed one person, left three missing and injured dozens more, authorities said on Saturday, with thousands of residents issued evacuation warnings.

The inundation has been caused by the remnants of former Typhoon Mawar, now downgraded to a tropical storm. A rescue team in central Aichi region’s Toyohashi, where the country’s highest-level evacuation alert was issued Friday, ‘found a man approximately in his 60s in a submerged car, but he was later confirmed dead’, a city official told AFP.

In western Wakayama, where several rivers burst their banks, officials told AFP that they had resumed the search for one man and one woman missing in the region.

Dozens of rescue workers also searched for a resident who could not be reached after his house was engulfed by a landslide in central Hama-

matsu city. A total of six people were seriously injured and 29 suffered minor injuries as of Saturday afternoon, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency said.

In central and western Japan, many evacuation orders - which are non-compulsory, even at the highest level - were being downgraded as rains eased.

Warnings issued in areas close to Tokyo in the early morning due to flooding risks were later lifted.

With several cities including Aichi’s Toyohashi and Koshigaya near Tokyo reportedly seeing the highest 24-hour rainfall on record, the Japan Meteorological Agency urged residents to ‘be on high alert for landslides, overflowing rivers, and flooding of low-lying areas’. Some 4,000 households in regions close to Tokyo suffered power outages early on Saturday, the Tokyo Electric Power Company said.

AFP

Iran frees 1 Dane, 2 Austrian-Iranian citizens

Belgian FM Hadja Lahbib, as well as Danish and Austrian diplomats, welcomed them at the airport

Brussels, Belgium - Three Europeans released from detention by Iran arrived in Belgium early on Saturday, the latest in a series of prisoner swaps.

One Dane and two Austrian-Iranian citizens landed shortly before 2:45am (0045 GMT) at Melsbroek military airport just outside Brussels. They had flown from Muscat, the capital of Oman, which helped broker their release.

Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib welcomed them at the airport, as well as Danish and Austrian diplomats.

The trio's release, as well as that of a Belgian aid worker a week earlier, were part of a prisoner swap in which Tehran got back an Iranian diplomat convicted and incarcerated in Belgium on terrorism charges.

Vienna reacted with relief at the release of its two citizens, named as Kamran Ghaderi and Massud Mossaheb, who it said had been arrested 'unjustly' by Iran in January 2016 and January 2019, respectively.

Thanking Belgium, Austrian



Three hostages released from detention by Iran being received by officials upon their arrival at Melsbroek military airport, outside Brussels on Saturday (AFP)

Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg said: "Our years of diplomatic efforts to secure their release have borne fruit... Today is a very emotional day for all of us." The Danish man, who was not immediately identified, had been arrested in Iran in Novem-

ber 2022 on the sidelines of a demonstration for women's rights, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said.

'Operation Blackstone'

Melsbroek is the same airport

that Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele arrived at on May 26 upon being freed by Iran after 15 months in captivity.

His liberation was obtained in exchange for Belgium freeing Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi, who had been impris-

oned for a 2018 plot to bomb an Iranian opposition rally outside Paris.

Iran had levelled charges of 'espionage' at Vandecasteele but

We are especially happy for the brave families who have suffered so much in recent years. Now they can finally embrace their husbands, fathers and grandfather again in freedom

ALEXANDER SCHALLENBERG

his family, the Belgian government and rights groups all say that was a fabricated case used to pressure Brussels for Assadi's release.

Belgian government officials said the release of Vandecasteele, the Dane and the two Aus-

trian-Iranians were all part of 'Operation Blackstone', in reference to an 18th-century English jurist William Blackstone, who was known for declaring: "It is better that 10 guilty escape than one innocent suffer."

The exiled Iranian opposition group the National Council of Resistance in Iran, the target of the 2018 bomb plot, has criticised Assadi's release, saying it violated a Belgian court order requiring them to be consulted first.

Critics of the exchange said it would encourage Tehran to take more Europeans hostage as bargaining chips to seek the return of agents like Assadi arrested for terror offences in the West.

De Croo stressed his government 'continues to fight for the respect of human rights and the release of European citizens unjustly detained by Iran'.

Dozens still held

The exact number of foreign passport holders held by Iran is thought to be in the dozens but is not precisely known, as the

families of some detainees opt to negotiate out of the public eye.

Belgian government officials said at least 22 'innocent' Europeans remained detained in Iran. France last week gave a figure of more than 30 EU citizens held.

Austria's Schallenberg said of his two freed compatriots: "We are especially happy for the brave families who have suffered so much in recent years.

Now they can finally embrace their husbands, fathers and grandfather again in freedom."

The Gulf sultanate of Oman has emerged as a key interlocutor between the West and Iran.

In 2016 it also played a mediator role in the release of Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian and three other US citizens who had been held by Tehran.

In May, Iran released a Frenchman and a French-Irish citizen, both of whom had gone on hunger strike to protest their detention and conditions.

AFP

US Secretary of State Blinken to visit Saudi Arabia

Washington, US - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Saudi Arabia next week at a time of touchy relations between Washington and its longtime Middle East ally, the State Department announced on Friday.

The Sudan and Yemen wars, the continued Islamic State threat, and building Riyadh's relationship with Israel are on the menu for Blinken's June 6-8 trip.

It comes as both the United States and Saudi Arabia are seeking to broker a durable cease fire between Sudan's warring generals in talks in the Red Sea city of Jeddah.

"There is just a tremendous amount of work that we're trying to do' with the visit, said Daniel Benaïm, a senior State Department official dealing with Arabian Peninsula affairs.

"We're focused on an affirmative agenda here and the great deal of work our countries can do together."



Antony Blinken will participate in a ministerial meeting on Wednesday with the GCC, and on Thursday he will join a meeting in Riyadh of the 80-strong coalition of countries fighting the IS

Countering IS

Blinken will participate in a ministerial meeting on Wednesday with the Gulf Cooperation Council, and on Thursday he will join a meeting in Riyadh of the 80-strong coalition of countries fighting the Islamic State group.

That meeting will home in on the spread of militant extremism outside the Middle East, according to Ian McCary of the Department of State's Counterterrorism Bureau.

"We're focusing in particular on Africa, where violent groups have adopted ISIS's ideology and are attacking innocent people, destroying local economies, burning schools and healthcare centers, extorting communities, and preventing the creation of jobs," McCary said, using another acronym for the Islamic State.

The Riyadh gathering 'underscores that the international community remains united in its determination to keep ISIS weak, fractured, and ultimately destroyed', he said.

The coalition will raise hundreds of millions of dollars to support community-level stabilisation projects, said McCary, and Blinken will announce a 'significant' new US contribution, he said.

Sudan, Yemen talks

The continued fighting in Sudan will also be a focus.

Efforts to produce a sustained cease fire between forces under two rival generals fighting since April have failed so far in the talks in Jeddah, where hundreds of diplomats and Sudanese citizens fled to from Khartoum after the fighting erupted.

Washington slapped sanctions on companies tied to the two generals on Thursday, but that had no impact on the shelling and bombing that has left scores dead in the Sudanese capital and other areas.

The US and the Saudis are also directly involved in efforts to bring a halt to the lengthy conflict in Yemen between the Iranian-backed Huthis and government forces backed by a Saudi-led coalition.

Yemen, the poorest country on the Arabian Peninsula, has experienced a period of calm since a truce negotiated by the United Nations in April 2022.

The trip follows a recent visit to Saudi Arabia by White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and comes nearly a year after President Joe Biden's visit.

AFP

180 dead from Sudan fighting buried unidentified: Sudanese Red Crescent

Khartoum, Sudan - Persistent fighting in Sudan's twin flash-points of Khartoum and Darfur has forced volunteers to bury 180 bodies recovered from combat zones without identification, the Sudanese Red Crescent said.

Since fighting between Sudan's warring generals erupted on April 15, volunteers have buried 102 unidentified bodies in the capital's Al-Shegilab cemetery and 78 more in cemeteries in Darfur, the Red Crescent said in a statement on Friday.

Both regular army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his deputy-turned-rival, paramilitary commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, have issued repeated pledges to protect civilians and secure humanitarian corridors.

But Red Crescent volunteers - supported by the International Committee of the Red Cross - have found it difficult to move through the streets to pick up the dead, 'due to security constraints', the Red Crescent said.

In ceasefire talks in Saudi Arabia last month, the warring parties had agreed to 'enable responsible humanitarian actors,



Patients undergo a dialysis treatment at Soba Hospital in southern Khartoum on Saturday (AFP)

such as the Sudanese Red Crescent and/or the International Committee of the Red Cross to collect, register and bury the deceased in coordination with competent authorities'.

But amid repeated and flagrant violations by both sides, the US and Saudi-brokered truce agreement collapsed.

Entire districts of the capital no longer have running water, electricity is only available for a few hours a week and three quarters

of hospitals in combat zones are not functioning.

The situation is particularly dire in the western region of Darfur, which is home to around a quarter of Sudan's population and has never recovered from a devastating two-decade war that left hundreds of thousands dead and more than two million displaced.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed, villages and markets torched and aid facilities

Three Israel soldiers, 'assailant' killed: Army

Jerusalem - Two Israeli soldiers were killed in a rare shooting on the Egyptian border on Saturday, triggering a manhunt in which a third soldier and the 'assailant' were killed, the army said.

A fourth soldier, a non-commissioned officer, was lightly wounded and evacuated to hospital, it added.

The army had initially declined to confirm media reports of the first two deaths, which happened in early morning, while families were notified.

The two soldiers, one man and one woman, were 'killed by live fire adjacent to the border', it said in a statement.

The deadly shooting triggered a manhunt in the border area during which the third soldier and the assailant were killed, the army later added.

AFP

UN, AU urge calm after deadly clashes in Senegal

Dakar, Senegal - The United Nations and African Union called for calm in Senegal on Friday after an outbreak of deadly violence that prompted authorities to deploy the army.

Nine people were killed on Thursday after popular opposition politician, Ousmane Sonko, was sentenced to two years in jail, which may take him out of the running in 2024 presidential elections.

Another person died in new clashes on Friday in the restive southern region of Casamance when demonstrators attacked police barracks, a government spokesman told TFM television.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the violence and 'urged all those involved to... exercise restraint', a spokesman said.

The African Union said its commission president, Moussa Faki Mahamat, strongly condemned the violence and urged leaders to avoid acts which 'tarnish the face of Senegalese



Police fire tear gas from the back of a pickup truck at protesters in Dakar on Thursday, during unrest in Senegal (AFP)

democracy, of which Africa has always been proud'.

The Community of West African States (ECOWAS) called on all parties to 'defend the country's laudable reputation as a bastion of peace and stability'.

The EU and Senegal's former colonial power France also expressed concern over the vio-

lence. Spokesman Abdou Karim Fofana said the violence was not fuelled by 'political demands' but 'acts of vandalism and banditry'.

"These are difficult times for the Senegal nation that we will overcome," he told TFM.

Eligibility questions

Sonko was convicted for 'cor-

rupting' a young woman, in a case which has deeply divided Senegal, usually a bastion of stability in West Africa.

After some of the worst political violence in years on Thursday, tensions remained high on Friday, with sporadic clashes reported in the capital and soldiers deployed on the streets.

Sonko, who was tried in absentia, has yet to be taken into custody for his jail term, which is likely to cause further tensions.

The streets of the capital were largely deserted, AFP journalists observed.

The government acknowledged that it had restricted access to social networks such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter in order to stop 'the dissemination of hateful and subversive messages'.

There was extensive destruction on the main university campus, where prolonged clashes took place on Thursday.

Students with suitcases lined the streets outside the university,

struggling to find transportation after being told to leave campus.

"We didn't expect this, political affairs shouldn't concern us," said Babacar Ndiaye, a 26-year-old student. "But there is injustice," he added, referring to Sonko's conviction.

Since 2021, when Sonko was initially arrested, around 30 civilians have been killed in unrest largely linked to his legal affairs.

The government and the opposition blame each other for the violence.

Sonko was initially charged with rape and issuing death threats against an employee of a beauty salon where he said he received massages.

However, the court acquitted him on these charges and convicted him for 'debauching' a person under the age of 21, without clarifying the immoral acts he is alleged to have committed. Under the electoral code, the verdict would appear to render him ineligible for next year's election.

AFP

RAIL DISASTER

AT LEAST 288 DEAD, HUNDREDS HURT IN INDIA TRAIN CRASH

The horrific three-train collision is the country's deadliest rail accident in more than 20 years



People gathering at the accident site of a three-train collision near Balasore, about 200km from the state capital Bhubaneswar in the eastern state of Odisha on Saturday (AFP)

Balasore, India - At least 288 people were killed and hundreds more injured in a horrific three-train collision in India, officials said on Saturday, the country's deadliest rail accident in more than 20 years.

Wreckage debris was piled high at the crash site near Balasore, in the eastern state of Odisha, where some carriages had been tossed far from the tracks and others flipped over entirely.

Smashed train compartments were torn open in the impact late on Friday, leaving blood-stained holes in their sides.

Researcher Anubhav Das was in the last carriage of one of the trains when he heard 'screeching, horrifying sounds coming from a distance'.

His coach stayed upright and he jumped out unhurt after it ground to a halt.

"I saw bloodied scenes, mangled bodies and one man with a severed arm being desperately helped by his injured son," the 27-year-old told AFP. "I lost count of the bodies before leaving the site. Now I feel almost guilty."

The disaster began when an express train running north from India's tech hub Bengaluru to Kolkata derailed, falling onto the adjacent southbound track.

Minutes later, the Coromandal Express heading from Kolkata to Chennai smashed into the wreckage, some of its coaches also colliding with a goods train parked

I saw bloodied scenes, mangled bodies and one man with a severed arm being desperately helped by his injured son

ANUBHAV DAS

alongside. Residents nearby rushed to help the victims even before emergency services arrived.

"There were severed arms, legs, and even some partially severed heads - while the unlucky ones

died in pain, too much pain," said Hiranmay Rath.

Over the next few hours the 20-year-old saw 'more death and grief' than he could have 'ever imagined', he told AFP.

The rescue effort was declared over on Saturday evening after emergency personnel had combed the mangled wreckage for survivors and laid scores of bodies out under white sheets beside the tracks.

"All the dead bodies and injured passengers have been removed from the accident site," said an official from the Balasore emergency control room.

Sudhanshu Sarangi, director general of Odisha Fire Services, said the death toll stood at 288 but was

expected to go higher, potentially approaching 380.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the crash site and injured passengers being treated in hospital and said 'no one responsible' for the train crash would be spared.

"It's a sad moment," he told state broadcaster Doordarshan. "I pray that we get out of this sad moment as soon as possible."

India has one of the world's largest rail networks and has seen several disasters over the years, the worst of them in 1981 when a train derailed while crossing a bridge in Bihar and plunged into the river below, killing between 800 and 1,000 people.

AFP

'Horror show': The carnage of India's train crash

Balasore, India - When India's worst train accident in more than 20 years happened just outside his home, Hiranmay Rath said it felt 'like the sky was falling on us or the earth was cracking open'.

What followed was an unimaginable nightmare of corpses, body parts and suffering.

The college student stopped scrolling Facebook on his phone and rushed outside, to be confronted by the sight of bodies falling out of toppled carriages.

"I came out scared and heard loud wailing screams, which only got louder within seconds," Rath



Wounded survivors rescued from a carriage wreckage sit at the Soro government hospital in India's eastern state of Odisha, on Saturday (AFP)

told AFP.

Rath is not clear on the exact sequence of events, but he and other residents rushed to try to help the victims.

Over the next few hours he saw 'more death and grief' than he could have 'ever imagined'.

It was a 'horror show' that he 'couldn't have imagined watching even in the most scary movie ever'.

He and four or five neighbours managed to pull one sari-clad woman out of the toppled carriage closest to his house.

"A police official told us to carry her, as she still had some life, to a

common area from where survivors could be transported for treatment.

"She just kept asking for water in a very weak voice as we carried her on a long piece of cloth. 'The moment we placed her on the side of the road, she lost all movement and died in front of our eyes.'"

In all, his group pulled around 25 people out of the wreckage - some of them struggling to breathe, many of them already dead.

"These are images I'll never forget," he added. "Imagine watching - or pulling out - a person's squished body, one severed arm or a leg."

AFP

WORST RAIL DISASTERS OF THE LAST DECADE

Greek collision

On February 28, 2023, a head-on collision between a freight train and a passenger train on the route between Athens and Thessaloniki claimed 57 lives.

Stowaways derailed

On March 10, 2022, a freight train loaded with stowaways derailed in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Lualaba province, killing at least 75 people and injuring 125 others.

Pakistan farmlands

On June 7, 2021, at least 63 people died when a train hurtling through farmland derailed and collided with another passenger service in Pakistan's southern Sindh province.

Taiwan tragedy

On April 2, 2021, at least 49 people were killed and 200 injured when a passenger train collided with a truck that slid down an embankment near the city of Hualien.

Pakistan pilgrims

At least 74 people died and more than 40 were injured on October 31, 2019, when a fire broke out on an overcrowded passenger train carrying pilgrims to a religious gathering near Lahore.

Crowds on tracks

A speeding train ran over revellers watching fireworks during a Hindu festival in northern India on October 19, 2018, killing at least 60 people.

Indian express disaster

At least 146 people died when an Indore-Patna Express train with around 2,000 people on board derailed in Uttar Pradesh on November 20, 2016.

Speeding Cameroon train

A train travelling from the capital Yaounde to the economic hub of Douala derailed on October 21, 2016, killing at least 79 people and injuring around 550 others.

Congo accident

A goods train carrying hundreds of illegal passengers flew off the rails in a swampy and inaccessible part of the south of the Democratic Republic of Congo on April 22, 2014, killing at least 136 people. Many had to be buried in mass graves nearby.

AFP

Recep Tayyip Erdogan sworn in for third term as Turkish president

Ankara, Turkey - Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan was on Saturday sworn in for a third term as president, promising to serve 'impartially' after winning a historic runoff election to extend his two-decade rule.

The inauguration in parliament will be followed by a lavish ceremony at his palace in the capital Ankara attended by dozens of world leaders.

Turkey's transformative but divisive leader won the May 28 runoff against a powerful opposition coalition, despite an economic crisis and anger over a February earthquake that killed more than 50,000 people.

Erdogan won 52.18 per cent of the vote while his secular rival Kemal Kilicdaroglu scored 47.82 per cent, official results show. "As president, I swear upon my honour and integrity, before the great Turkish nation ... to work with all my power to protect the existence and independence of the state ... and to fulfil my duty impartially," Erdogan said in parliament after a ceremony outside the building where he saluted soldiers under pouring rain.

Supporters in parliament gave Erdogan a minute-long standing ovation after his swearing in, while some opposition lawmakers refused to stand up. In his

oath, Erdogan also promised not to deviate from the rule of law and the secular principles of the republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 100 years ago.

Turkey's longest-serving leader now faces significant immediate challenges in his third term, including the slowing economy and tensions with the West.

"From a geopolitical point of view, the election will reinforce Turkey's recent pursuit of an independent foreign policy," said Matt Gertken, chief geopolitical strategist at BCA Research.

"This policy aims to extract maximum economic and strategic benefits from eastern and au-



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan takes oath of office after his election win at the parliament in Ankara, Turkey, on Saturday (AFP)

tocratic states while still preventing a permanent rupture in relations with western democracies,"

he said. "Tensions with the West will likely increase again," Gertken added.

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Iran's vice president Mohammad Mokheer, Hungary's right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban and the speaker of the lower house of Russia's parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, are among the foreign guests expected at the ceremony later on Saturday. Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will also be present, his office said, the latest sign of a thaw between the two arch foes.

Addressing the country's economic troubles will be Erdogan's first priority, with inflation running at 43.70 per cent, partly due to his unorthodox policy of cut-

ting interest rates to stimulate growth.

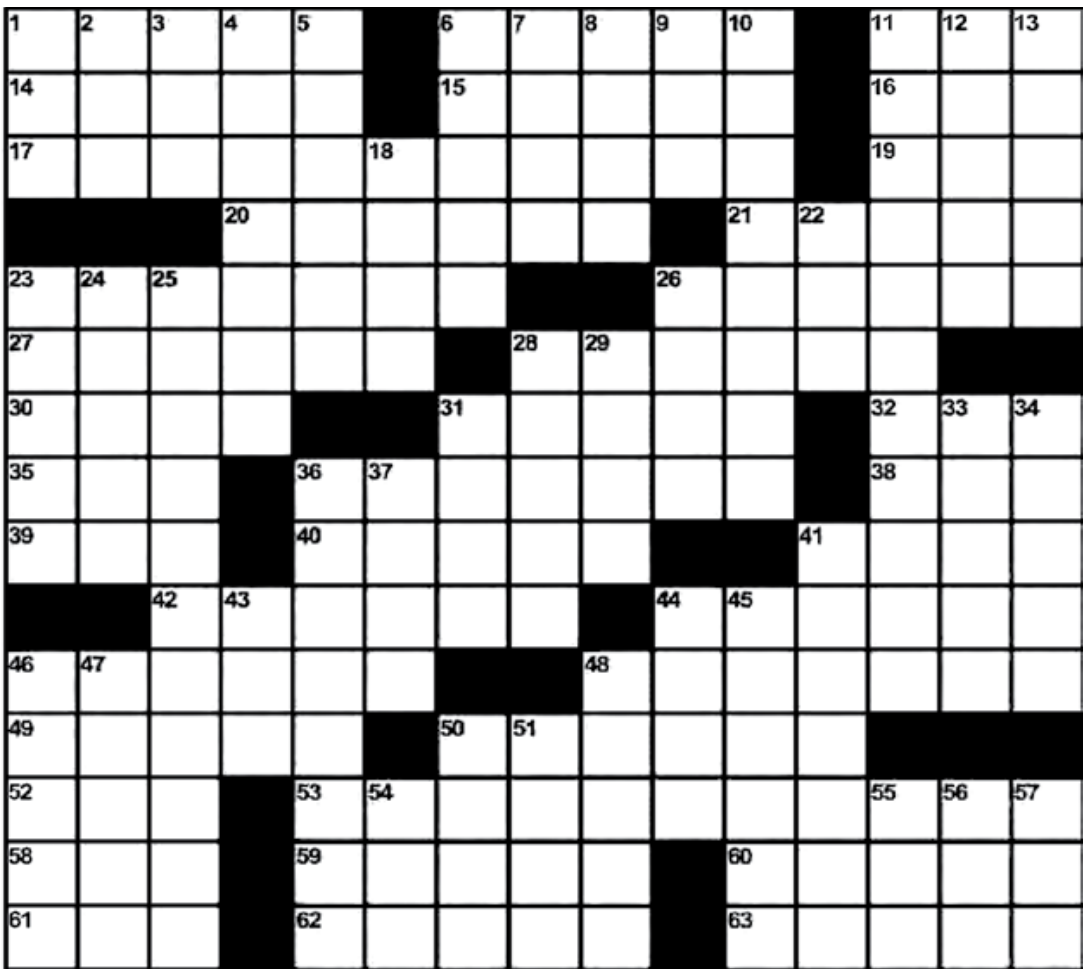
The president is due to unveil his new cabinet on Saturday, with media speculating that former finance minister Mehmet Simsek, a reassuring figure with international stature, could return.

A former Merrill Lynch economist, Simsek is known to oppose Erdogan's unconventional policies.

He served as finance minister between 2009 and 2015 and deputy prime minister in charge of the economy until 2018, before stepping down ahead of a series of lira crashes that year.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Great divide
- 6) Making waves on the Atlantic
- 11) Aswan structure
- 14) Type of race
- 15) Rice dish (var.)
- 16) Part of a post-work plan
- 17) Leave for additional military duty
- 19) Moo_pork (Chinese dish)
- 20) Evening gala
- 21) Of base eight
- 23) Best way to drive
- 26) Common sense
- 27) Wise goat in "Animal Farm"
- 28) Deli offering
- 30) Elevator man
- 31) Diamond unit
- 32) Baseball necessity
- 35) Part of prime time
- 36) Alpine abodes
- 38) "... as directed"
- 39) Fraction of a joule
- 40) Muddies up
- 41) Eyelid affliction

DOWN

- 1) Old computer screen
- 2) Not him
- 3) In the style of, on menus
- 4) Third-generation Japanese-Americans
- 5) Indian industrial city
- 6) Impersonator's shtick
- 7) Wheelbarrow necessity
- 8) _gin fizz
- 9) All the water in France
- 10) Fast-food ventures of yore
- 11) Dishes out
- 12) Enlightened one, in Buddhism
- 13) Really roughs up
- 18) Jam-pack
- 22) Sky_ (TV news vehicle)
- 23) Clobbered, biblically
- 24) Inner's opposite
- 25) Causes
- 26) Blind part?
- 28) Noted explorer La_
- 29) Aphrodite's man
- 31) Adam's boy
- 33) Heretofore
- 34) Young people
- 36) Absolutely necessary
- 37) Some males on the farm
- 41) Leave the office temporarily
- 43) Sphere
- 44)_up rage
- 45) Serving no purpose
- 46) Vampire repeller
- 47) Asian capital
- 48) Clothesline alternative
- 50) It may be set in the woods
- 51) Persuade

- 54) "Much_ About Nothing"
- 55) Cosmetic safety org.
- 56) Deadly snake
- 57) "The Catcher in the_"

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

If you are getting sick of doing the same thing every day, look in the mirror to find the solution. It's time for you to use some of your fabulous ingenuity. Brighten up your blah daily routine by coming up with a new avenue to explore (you might find you've been missing out on an obvious option that's right in front of your face). Take things where you want them to go today, whether anyone else is on board with your idea or not. You don't need other people's permission to live your life.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Today, you might find yourself in an introverted mood as the day gets started. You won't be too interested in connecting with other people until later on in the day when you're feeling more confident. You've got to ask yourself what you want out of one of your newer relationships, and in order to find the answer, you need to think. No one else can tell you what you want. Asking people what they think about your situation will only confuse you, so don't bother.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You think you're all ready to move forward on something today, but you aren't quite ready yet, so don't rush ahead. There are quite a few details that still need to be taken care of, and you need to finish them before you can run off to the next new thing. Plus, someone is standing in your way. Although they're not trying to hold you back on purpose, they will be an obstacle. The good news is that this pause in the action will make the end result that much better.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Feed your hunger for more creativity in your daily routine by taking time to experience some art, today in all its forms. Music, poetry, dance, even graffiti can offer you some new ideas and give your brain new ways of thinking. Check out a few music apps and find out what's new on the scene that you might like. Expand your music collection with things from other cultures. Voices singing in unfamiliar languages will transport you to another place and time.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

A common misconception about you could be that you love conflict so much that you often go out of your way to create it. That's sometimes true, but it's true for everyone! For the most part, it's your boldness that inspires others to see how far they can push you. Anyone who tries that today should receive a rude surprise. You don't need to tone it down either.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

There is favorable energy pulsing around your financial health right now, but you have to do your part to ensure that it stays that way a while longer. As boring or tedious as it may be, you have to do the research required to make an informed decision about your money so you won't be sorry five or ten years from now. Think about what you want for your future and give it more weight than whatever gadget or new toy you want right now. Delayed gratification is something to explore.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

It's time for you to got a little more creative with the things you do for fun. Your entertainment budget was blown long ago! You don't need things to be first class, top shelf or super exclusive to be enjoyable. It is possible to spend absolutely no money and still have a good time, you know. Put your noggin to work coming up with free fun ideas. And if you need help coming up with inexpensive ideas, ask a frugal friend for their advice. They have some great ideas.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your optimism is legendary. You can find the silver lining in almost any cloud. Unfortunately, there's one particular person in your circle who can bring you down, make you doubt what you're doing, and start you wondering if your life is really where you want it to be. Avoid this person, but it doesn't have to be permanent (they do have an important role to play).



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Just because a few things are up in the air regarding an upcoming event or adventure doesn't mean that you can't let yourself get all jazzed up about it! Uncertainty is its own kind of excitement, and you should get comfortable with it. Sure, things could fall through and your plans might not come to fruition, but so what? At least you enjoyed that happiness and anticipation. Plus, you will feel more grounded and comfortable about not knowing every little thing in the future.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Why pressure yourself into taking on more than you can handle right now? Sure, you may feel up for the challenge, but you're not seeing all of those small details, and they add up to quite a workload! You would be much wiser to focus on one project. How can you finish it as perfectly as possible? Getting yourself involved in too many things will only frustrate you and wear you down. Today, the best way to move forward is to pick a path and proceed slowly.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Secrets are for keeping, so if you're privy to any private information today, keep it to yourself! Avoid the people who can get you to spill the beans, and zip your lips. You won't have to stress about it for too long, though, because by the end of the day the secret will either be irrelevant or spilled by someone else. You've built up a reputation for being trustworthy, so don't ruin it by letting something slip in the heat of the moment.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Are you being too critical of yourself? Giving yourself grief accomplishes nothing. It doesn't help build your ego, it doesn't solve any problems, and it most certainly does not help make you happier. If you did something wrong, then try to fix it. If you can't fix it, then at least learn from it and move on. Dwelling on a failure is unproductive, and it's unattractive to the people in your life. No one likes to see you beat yourself up about stuff that doesn't really matter.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. What does the Greek word "Eureka" mean?

- A. I am dripping on your shoes
- B. It's a sudden and unexpected discovery
- C. The volumes match
- D. I have found it

2. In the United Kingdom, what is "The Solent"?

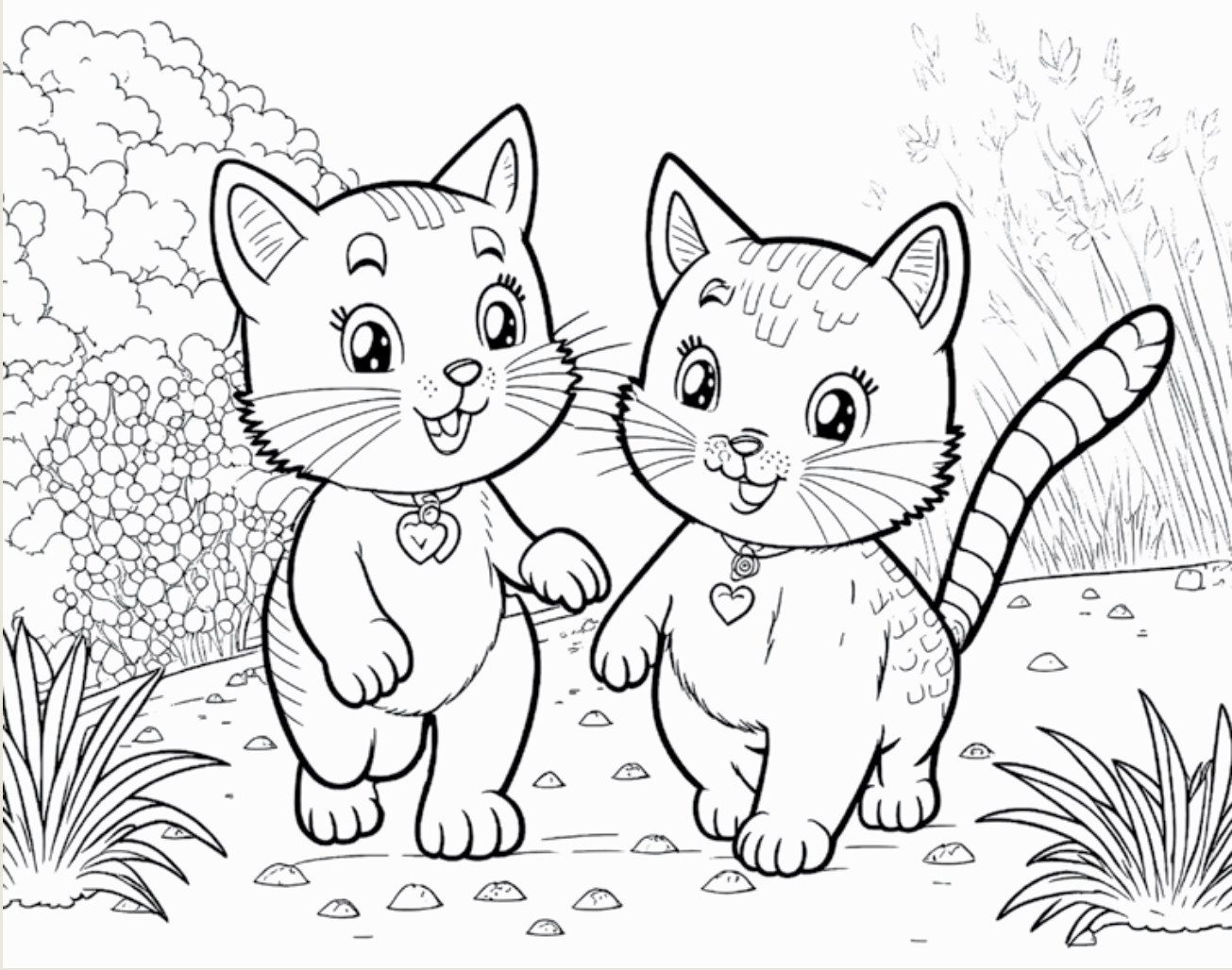
- A. A bay
- B. An island
- C. A desert
- D. A strait

3. What name is given to the neuropsychiatric disorder in which a person holds a belief that they are dead, do not exist, are putrefying, or have lost their blood or internal organs?

- A. Zombie Disorder
- B. Necropsy
- C. Therianthropy
- D. The Cotard Delusion

Answers: 1. D 2. D 3. D

KIDS COLOURING

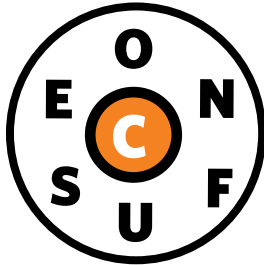


BOGGLER

E	T	R	N
J	O	A	S
K	E	R	E
S	C	R	S

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long. **Solution** 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

WORD BUILDER



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

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

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

STATEMENT

VICTORY

Swiatek thrashes Wang

6-0, 6-0 to reach

French Open last 16

Paris, France - Iga Swiatek sent out a message to her French Open title rivals by thumping Chinese player Wang Xinyu without losing a game to reach the fourth round on Saturday.

The world number one, aiming to become the first woman to successfully defend the trophy at Roland Garros since Justine Henin in 2007, won 6-0, 6-0 in just 51 minutes on Court Philippe Chatrier.

"It was a really solid performance from me. It's not easy to stay disciplined and keep your focus," said Polish star Swiatek.

"I took care of everything and I'm pretty happy with my performance."

Swiatek, who also won the title in 2020 and is targeting a fourth Grand Slam triumph, will face either 2019 US Open champion Bianca Andreescu or Ukraine's Lesia Tsurenko on Monday for a quarter-final berth.

Her path to the final was made easier earlier Saturday by the withdrawal of Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina, a possible last-four opponent, due to illness.

That news did not put the 22-year-old off her stride, as she smashed 21 winners past her bewildered 80th-ranked opponent.

Swiatek has now secured bagels in four of the six sets she has played in the tournament so far.

Earlier world number four Rybakina said she made the right decision after not feeling well.

"I was not feeling good yesterday and the day before. I didn't sleep last night," said the 23-year-old Wimbledon champion, who had been due to face Sara Sorribes Tormo of Spain in the third round. "I had fever and a headache and it's difficult to breathe. I tried to play in the warm-up but I feel it's the right decision to withdraw."

Rybakina had swept into the last 32 without dropping a set and had been seeded to face two-time champion Swiatek in the semi-finals.

The Russian-born Kazakh was seen as a potential champion having arrived at Roland Garros with the prestigious Italian Open clay court title under her belt.

"I guess with my allergy that my immune system just went down and I picked up something," said Rybakina. "The doctor said there's a virus in Paris."

Rybakina said she will focus on recovery ahead of defending her title at Wimbledon which gets underway on July 3.

Sorribes Tormo, ranked 132 in the world, will be playing in the second week of a Grand Slam for the first time. She will face either Ekaterina Alexandrova of Russia or Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia for a place in the quarter-finals.



Poland's Iga Swiatek plays a backhand return to China's Wang Xinyu during their third-round match at French Open in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

'Sloppy shots'

World number four Casper Ruud, the runner-up to Rafael Nadal in 2022, dropped the first set before easing to a 4-6, 6-4, 6-1, 6-4 win world number 71 Zhang.

The 26-year-old Zhang was

bidding to become the first Chinese man since 1936 to reach the fourth round in Paris.

"It was very tough in the first set, he was hitting many winners and I couldn't find a hole in his game," said Ruud.

"At 5-4 in the second set, he played some sloppy shots and that gave me the set, maybe the match," said Ruud who hit 36 winners and saved seven of 10 break points. Ruud, playing in the third round for a fifth successive

year, will face either Nicolas Jarry of Chile or Marcos Giron for a place in the quarter-finals.

Coco Gauff came back from a set down to end 16-year-old Mirra Andreeva's magical French Open debut to reach the last 16.

World number six Gauff, the runner-up to Iga Swiatek in 2022, won 6-7 (5/7), 6-1, 6-1 against her 143rd-ranked opponent who came through qualifying and was the youngest player to make the third round since 2005.

Verstappen claims maiden Spanish GP pole as Perez, Leclerc flop

Montmeló, Spain - Defending double world champion Max Verstappen claimed his maiden Spanish Grand Prix pole position with some ease on Saturday after a topsy-turvy qualifying saw both his Red Bull team-mate Sergio Perez and Ferrari's Charles Leclerc fail to progress.

In changeable conditions at the Circuit de Catalunya, the series leader recorded an early fastest lap of one minute and 12.272 seconds to outpace nearest rival and local hero Carlos Sainz of Ferrari by 0.462 seconds.

Lando Norris was third for McLaren with a thrilling late lap to go ahead of Pierre Gasly of Alpine and Mercedes' seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton.

It was the 24th pole position of his career for Verstappen.

"Not bad," said Verstappen, with his customary understatement. "It's very nice to come



Max Verstappen

It's very nice to come here and get my first pole. I like the circuit and I have a lot of good memories here

MAX VERSTAPPEN

here and get my first pole. I like the circuit and I have a lot of good memories here."

Gasly faces a stewards' investigation into two blocking incidents and may face a grid penalty. Lance Stroll was sixth for Aston Martin, the first time this year that he had out-qualified two-time champion Fernando Alonso, ahead of Esteban Ocon of Alpine and Haas's Nico Hulkenberg.

Alonso was ninth and Oscar Piastri 10th in the second

McLaren.

After earlier showers, the track was damp and the conditions warm under a partly-cloudy sky - allowing for slick tyres - when the session began.

"It's spitting," said Russell as he pulled away for the first session. "But only lightly."

Yuki Tsunoda immediately lost control of his Alpha Tauri at Turn 12, but continued before Bottas went off at the same corner prompting a red flag.

AFP

Nadal faces 'five months recovery' after keyhole surgery on hip

Madrid, Spain - Rafael Nadal's keyhole surgery on his injured hip was "positive" but he will require a five-month recovery period before playing again, his spokesman said Saturday.

The 22-time Grand Slam title winner, who celebrated his 37th birthday on Saturday, could in theory be back in time for the Davis Cup finals in November.

However, it is likely he will sit out the rest of the season before resuming in 2024 which he has already said will be the last year of his career.

"The surgery was positive," said his spokesman of the procedure which was carried out in Barcelona.

"The normal recovery process is estimated at five months."

Nadal said last month that the hip injury had not healed as well as he had hoped and therefore he was taking more time out of the sport.

The Spaniard missed the ongoing French Open, which he has won 14 times, for the first time



Rafael Nadal

since 2004.

He will also sit out Wimbledon, where he is a two-time champion, next month.

Nadal had hoped the injury he suffered in a second round loss to Mackenzie McDonald at the

Australian Open in January would heal in six weeks.

While he recovers, old rival Novak Djokovic has the chance to break out of the tie for 22 majors by winning a third French Open.

On Friday, Djokovic reached the last 16 in Paris for the 14th successive year and will face Juan Pablo Virillas, the 94th-ranked Peruvian, on Sunday for a place in the quarter-finals.

AFP



Kenya's Faith Kipyegon celebrates as she wins the women's 1500m event with a new world record at the Wanda Diamond League 2023 Golden Gala in Florence, Tuscany on Friday (AFP)

World record-setter Kipyegon warns of more to come

Florence, Italy - Faith Kipyegon warned there is more to come after adding the women's 1500m world record to a stellar career path that has already seen her bag two world and two Olympic golds over the distance.

The 29-year-old Kenyan clocked 3:49.11 in Florence on Friday to shatter the previous record of 3:50.07 set by Ethiopia's Genzebe Dibaba in Monaco in 2015.

Kipyegon, considered the greatest ever woman in the discipline, crushed the rest of the field in Tuscany, finishing more than eight seconds ahead of reigning European champion Laura Muir, while Jessica Hull set an Aus-

tralian and Oceania record of 3:57.29 in third.

Coming into the Golden Gala meeting, Kipyegon had said that the world record was in her heart and on her mind.

And she duly delivered at the third leg of the Diamond League circuit in a city that last saw a world record when World Athletics president Sebastian Coe broke the 800m mark there in 1981.

"I said yesterday that I wanted to run a beautiful race, run my race, and see what is possible, and this was possible," said Kipyegon, who came agonisingly close to breaking the record at

the Monaco Diamond League meet last year.

Aided by wavelight technology, whereby lights light up around the track to show world record pace, the race's pacemakers had been asked to take the field through in 3:54 pace.

It looked ambitious on a damp track after early rain, but that pace merely left Kipyegon full of running when she took the lead in the penultimate lap, as she blazed through the final 600m at unprecedented speed.

"When I crossed the finish line, I knew I broke the world record because I had a good finish and felt very very strong at the

end," she said. "After 1km, when the pacemaker went out, I just pushed myself towards the finish line. And that was what my manager told me - anything is possible - after the pacemaker, just run your race."

"And that is what I did. I am excited - my family was watching. I told them that this would be an amazing day for me, I am well prepared and I really trusted in me."

Kipyegon added: "I am going back to celebrate with my daughter. This was really important because this was something I was still missing in my career."

AFP

TWO DOWN, ONE TO GO

Man City beat United to win FA Cup, edge closer to historic treble

London, United Kingdom - Manchester City are one game away from a historic treble after Ilkay Gundogan scored twice to beat Manchester United 2-1 in the FA Cup final on Saturday.

Pep Guardiola's men completed a domestic double at Wembley and can become just the second side, after United in 1998/99, to win the Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League in the same season should they beat Inter Milan to become European champions for the first time on June 10.

Gundogan scored the fastest goal in FA Cup final history after just 12 seconds.

United levelled on 33 minutes through Bruno Fernandes' penalty after Jack Grealish was harshly penalised for handball.

But the City captain, in what could be his final game for the club on English soil with his contract expiring at the end of the season, volleyed home the winner six minutes into the second-half.

"Everyone knows the FA Cup is the most beautiful domestic club competition in the world, so to win this trophy again and



Manchester City players celebrate their FA Cup triumph in London on Saturday (AFP)

Everyone knows the FA Cup is the most beautiful domestic club competition in the world, so to win this trophy again and complete the double is amazing for us

ILKAY GUNDOGAN

complete the double is amazing for us," said Gundogan.

"We have a chance to do something special and win the treble and we do not want to let this opportunity pass us by."

The first ever major final between the Manchester giants had the most explosive of starts.

Most of the 83,000 crowd were still taking their seats from the pre-match festivities when Victor Lindelof's headed clearance sat up perfectly for Gundogan to volley home a stunning strike after just 12 seconds.

That appeared to set the tone for the Premier League champi-

ons. Rodri headed into the side-netting moments later before Erling Haaland failed to get a clean connection on Gundogan's enticing cross.

United were barely able to get across the halfway line in the first half hour, but got the break they needed to get back into the

game.

Aaron Wan-Bissaka's header back across the City box brushed the arm of Grealish and referee Paul Tierney was instructed to review the incident by VAR.

Despite City's protestations, Tierney pointed to the spot and Fernandes coolly sent Stefan Ortega the wrong way.

The Portuguese's celebrations in front of the City fans were met with a flurry of objects thrown from the stands, one of which struck Lindelof.

City boss Pep Guardiola was also showing his fury at the officiating as VAR did not intervene seven minutes before half-time when Kevin De Bruyne was wiped out by Fred inside the area and no penalty was awarded.

At the other end, United passed up a great chance to turn the game around before half-time when Raphael Varane fired high and wide at the back post from a corner.

Having fought so hard to gain a foothold, United were made to pay for another slow start in the second-half.

Gundogan was the goalscorer again as he fired home from De Bruyne's free-kick.

But more questions will be asked of whether David De Gea remains the right man to be United's number one goalkeeper after the 32-year-old Spaniard's sluggish attempt to keep it out.

De Gea did at least make a big saves to keep United in the game from De Bruyne and Haaland, while Gundogan was denied a rare FA Cup final hat-trick by the offside flag.

AFP

Messi at PSG: Flashes of genius but promise unfulfilled

Paris, France - Lionel Messi arrived in France to a hero's welcome, seen as the man who would deliver the Champions League for Paris Saint-Germain.

Two years on, the Argentinian is set to depart without having achieved that aim and having only produced his brilliant best in flashes.

It is difficult to qualify Messi's time at PSG as a success, even if the move to the French capital helped set him up for the crowning glory of his career at last year's World Cup and did no

harm to the Qatar-owned club as a sporting brand.

At his unveiling in Paris in August 2021, Messi said winning the Champions League for the fifth time in his career was his "dream" and that he was in "the ideal place" to do it.

That was seductive talk for PSG president Nasser al Khelaifi, sat next to him, and for fans of the club who were desperate to see their team win European football's greatest prize for the first time.

The previous season they had

There must be a reason why Pep Guardiola did not push to bring an ageing Messi to City, despite his former coach at Barca often describing him as the best player of all time

lost to Manchester City in the semi-finals, having been beaten by Bayern Munich in the 2020 final. Messi looked like the final piece in the jigsaw.

However, PSG have gone backwards with Messi. They were beaten in the Champions

League last 16 by Real Madrid last season with Mauricio Pochettino in charge and suffered the same fate this year at Bayern's hands with Christophe Galtier on the bench.

There must be a reason why Pep Guardiola did not push to

bring an ageing Messi to City, despite his former coach at Barcelona often describing him as the best player of all time.

Guardiola's side are through to this season's Champions League final and playing at a level PSG could not currently hope to match, despite having Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Neymar in the same side.

Having to accommodate those three attacking superstars has weakened PSG overall as a team.

AFP



Paris Saint-Germain's Lionel Messi at a team training session in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, west of Paris, last week (AFP)

Ramos joins Messi in leaving PSG

Paris, France - French champions Paris Saint-Germain announced on Friday that veteran former Spain defender Sergio Ramos will join Lionel Messi in leaving the club at the end of the season.

Ramos, 37, arrived in French capital in 2021 after a trophy-laden spell with Real Madrid, lifting the Champions League on four times.

"We would like to express our immense gratitude to Sergio Ramos for the two years he has spent with us," PSG president Nasser al Khelaifi said in a statement.

"Sergio's leadership, team spirit and professionalism, combined with his experience at the highest level, make him a true football legend, and it was an honour to have him in Paris. Everyone at the club wishes him all the best," Al Khelaifi added.

The announcement came less than 24 hours before PSG's final game of the Ligue 1 season as they host Clermont.

Ramos follows Argentina's 2022 World Cup winner Messi out of the Parc des Princes door with reports also linking Brazil's Neymar with a departure.



Sergio Ramos

"Tomorrow is a special day, tomorrow I will say goodbye to another stage of my life, goodbye to @psg," Ramos said on social media.

"I don't know in how many places one can feel at home, but without a doubt PSG, the fans, and Paris were one of them for me. Thank you for two special

years in which I was able play in every tournament and give my all," he added.

The ex-Sevilla defender won Ligue 1 twice in Paris, playing 57 games and his PSG contract will end on June 30.

44 of those appearances came this campaign after a first season, with Mauricio Pochettino in charge, was plagued by injury.

Ramos, who won the 2010 World Cup with Spain, and Messi arrived in the same summer eyeing a Champions League title with PSG but they were knocked out in the last 16 of both editions.

Later on Friday, newspaper L'Equipe claimed PSG boss Christophe Galtier will also say goodbye to the club after this weekend's fixture. Despite this year's league title win, the failure in European competition is what Galtier has been judged on.

Reports say PSG are interested in bringing in Real Madrid attacker Marco Asensio for next season as well as Inter Milan defender Milan Skriniar, as another summer of re-building is set to get underway.

AFP



Percy Tau

Ahly hope Tau will torment Wydad in CAF Champions League final

Johannesburg, South Africa - South African winger Percy Tau could be a key figure when Al Ahly of Egypt host Wydad Casablanca of Morocco on Sunday in the CAF Champions League final first leg.

It is the second successive title decider between the north African giants and third in seven seasons, with Wydad are seeking a hat-trick after two triumphs.

Ahly hope stars like Tau can turn the tide and give the Cairo Red Devils a record-extending 11th victory in the premier African club competition.

Tau, who joined Ahly from Premier League outfit Brighton two years ago, was outstanding in the semi-final victory over another leading north African outfit, Esperance of Tunisia.

He scored twice in a 3-0 away

victory and created the only goal of the return match for Hussein el Shahat with a superb pass from the centre circle.

While many South Africans were disappointed that the 29-year-old failed to make the grade in the Premier League after three loan spells in Belgium, Tau called the switch to Ahly a "dream move".

AFP

Biggest race of career awaits Al Harthy

Oman star ready for maiden appearance in Le Mans 24 Hours in FIA World Endurance Championship

Muscat - World motorsport's greatest and most prestigious race, the annual Le Mans 24 Hours, welcomes Ahmad al Harthy and the Oman Racing team for the first time this year - the huge event marking the fourth round of the FIA World Endurance Championship season.

Taking place on June 10-11 at the Circuit de la Sarthe in France, the build-up to the 24H Le Mans actually starts later this week ahead of the first official test sessions on Sunday. Notably too, Al Harthy's debut in the endurance classic will form part of the race's landmark centenary year. The crown jewel event of the FIA WEC calendar couldn't come at a better time for the Oman Racing with TF Sport team, the squad heading to France off the back of a season-best third place last time out at

Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium. Following two challenging races to begin Oman Racing's maiden season in World Endurance, at Sebring in America and Portimao in Portugal, a welcome change to the Balance of

performance track, Al Harthy then starred in the race along with team-mates Charlie Eastwood and Michael Dinan to secure a first WEC podium finish, mere tenths of a second shy of the runner-up position.

I truly cannot wait for Le Mans week to begin, this is such a huge event for everyone at Oman Racing with TF Sport and the biggest race of my entire career so far

AHMAD AL HARTHY

Performance rulings meant the No.25 Aston Martin Vantage was able to compete on an even footing at Spa.

After chalking-up his first GTE Am pole position in style with a superb performance at the Ar-

Climbing into eighth place in both the GTE Am driver and team standings as a result, the trio now head to Le Mans with confidence high and a determination to challenge strongly in the greatest and most



Ahmad al Harthy (R) with Charlie Eastwood (C) and Michael Dinan

spectacular race global motor racing has to offer.

While the 100th anniversary instalment of the 24H Le Mans will mark a career milestone for Oman's most successful racing driver, Al Harthy has, of course, raced as part of the Le Mans 24 Hours event previously in the 'Road to Le Mans' support races on two occasions. Back in 2017 he claimed a double victory, returning in 2021 and again finishing on the podium - that time alongside Dinan.

Competition in the GTE Am class will be fierce, with 14 entries from WEC joined by six other standalone entries. All told, including prototype cars from the Hypercar and LMP2 classes, the combined grid for this year's 24H Le Mans is expected to be north of 60 cars.

Al Harthy will be supported by

his prestigious portfolio of partners Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS, with huge numbers of fans also set to make the journey from Oman to France to cheer-on their home hero.

"I truly cannot wait for Le Mans week to begin, this is such a huge event for everyone at Oman Racing with TF Sport and the biggest race of my entire career so far," said Ahmad Al Harthy.

"Le Mans is such a famous event around the world, there is so much history associated with it and I am unbelievably proud to be representing Oman on the biggest stage of them all in endurance racing.

"Everyone has been preparing so hard behind the scenes and we head to Le Mans in very good spirits after the podium finish at Spa last time out in WEC."

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This image provided by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office shows the Zoroastrian Funerary Platform

NEW YORK

HUB OF ILLICIT ART

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART IS AMONG MAJOR INSTITUTIONS FORCED TO HAND OVER WORKS TO MORE THAN A DOZEN COUNTRIES IN ASIA, EUROPE AND AFRICA, TURNING NEW YORK INTO A HUB FOR ILLICIT ART TRAFFICKING



Alvin Bragg, district attorney

MORE THAN 950 PIECES WORTH US\$165MN HAVE BEEN RETURNED TO SEVERAL COUNTRIES INCLUDING CAMBODIA, PAKISTAN, EGYPT, TURKEY AND ITALY

The works had been seen from tombs in the 1990s, exported and then sold illegally. Well-known Manhattan-based collector Shelby White loaned them to the Met from 1998 until their seizure this year, Bragg's office said.

White, 85, is a billionaire philanthropist and Met trustee. Her home was subject to searches by Bragg's team in June 2021 and April 2022.

Bragg announced last that month 89 works with a total value of \$69 million had been seized from White, who prosecutors do not accuse of wrongdoing. He thanked her 'for her cooperation'.

Art Newspaper reported in December that White had returned pieces to Italy and Turkey, with the businesswoman telling the website: "I really don't have anything to say." AFP has not been able to contact her.

Tsirogiannis and Gill believe that White's acquisitions made with her late husband Leon Levy 'may have been unwise', especially those amassed after the 1970 UNESCO Convention to prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural property. Tsirogiannis points out that White returned ten works to Italy and two to Greece prior to 2008.

"So she should definitely have at least (had) serious doubts on the origin and the status of the rest and should have checked them all these years before the recent confiscations that took place," he said.

Gill cited White's only known public statement on the issue in an interview she gave in 2007 when she said, "If you go to Sotheby's or Christie's and buy something at a public auction, you don't think you are doing anything inappropriate."

The most recent restitution took place on May 19, when prosecutors returned to Iraq a

limestone elephant and an alabaster bull from the Sumerian civilization 'stolen during the Gulf War and smuggled into New York in the late 1990s'. The bull was found in Shelby's private collection and Bragg pledged he will not allow New York to be 'safe harbour for stolen cultural artifacts'.

Louvre

Other art dealers have been forced to return works. Collector Michael Steinhardt, who had a room named after him at the Met, handed back 180 antiquities worth US\$70mn following an out-of-court settlement in 2021.

Manhattan-based art dealer Subhash Kapoor was sentenced to ten years in prison in India in November following a decade-long international investigation.

In September, Bragg returned 16 pieces to Egypt, including five seized from the Met, as part of a twin investigation between New York and Paris authorities in which the former president of the Louvre, Jean-Luc Martinez, was charged.

Martinez denies ignoring warnings about false certificates that faked the origin of the works.

Without commenting on the case, Louvre president Laurence des Cars told AFP during a visit to New York in May that 'major museums should know the history of their collections' and that 'the history of the Met's collections was not that of the Louvre.'

Last month the Met announced it would examine the provenance of 'several hundred or more' objects that were possibly stolen from their country of origin, and then return them where necessary.

AFP

From an ancient Middle Eastern limestone elephant to seventh century Chinese sculptures, New York prosecutors have seized hundreds of priceless artefacts looted from around the globe that have earned it the reputation as a key global hub for art trafficking.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is among major institutions and collectors who have been forced to hand over works that the city has returned to more than a dozen countries in Asia, Europe and Africa.

The scale of the seizures and repatriations 'leaves no shadow of a doubt', said Christos Tsirogiannis, a forensic archaeologist and art historian specializing in stolen art works.

"New York is one of the world's hub cities for the illicit trafficking of antiquities," he told AFP.

Tsirogiannis of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, and David Gill, a professor at Britain's Kent Law School, have been helping the Manhattan district attorney's campaign to return stolen art to their country of origin.

Since 2017, prosecutors have repatriated pieces that were looted from around 20 countries between the 1970s and 1990s.

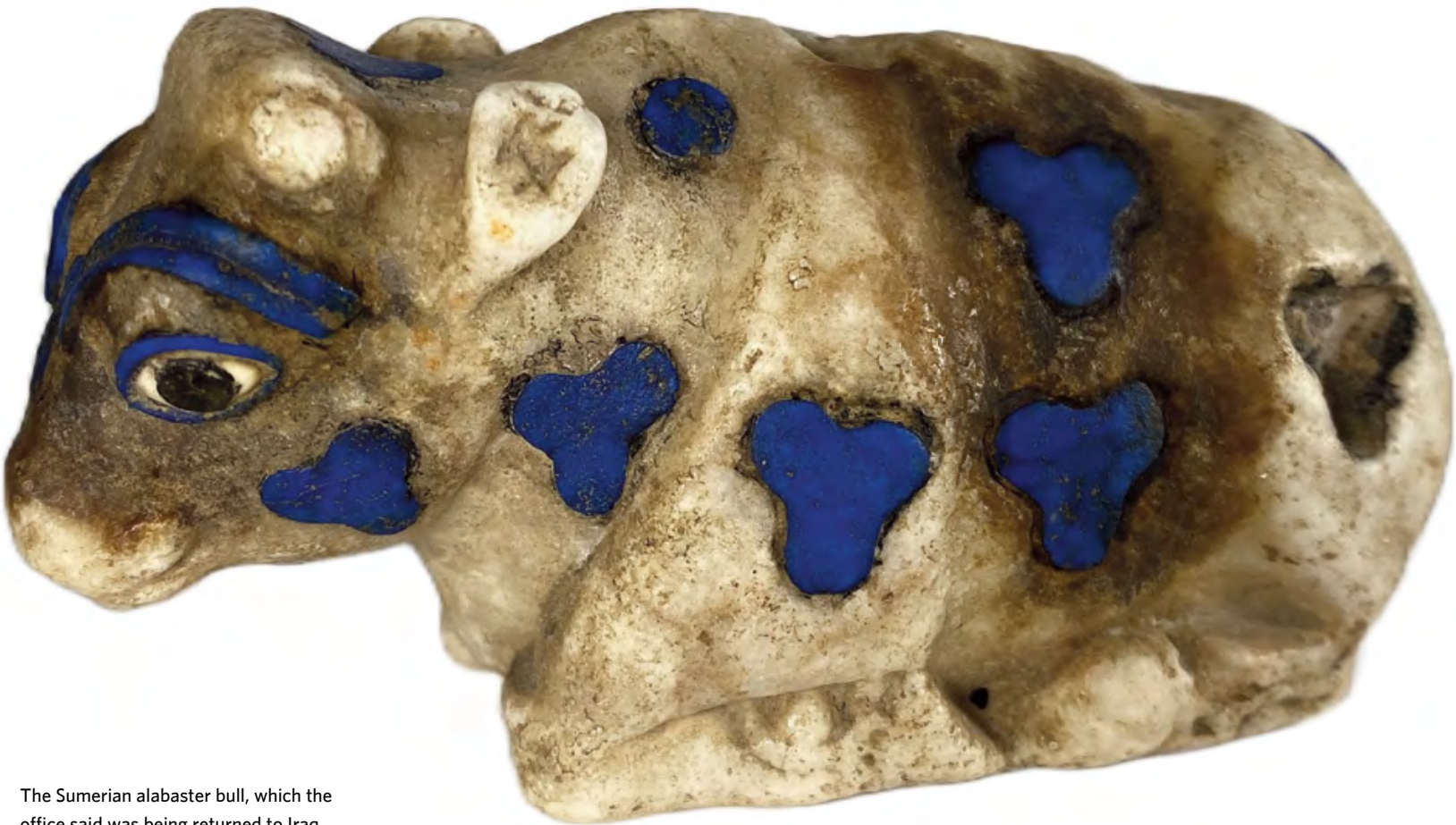
They have included works from ancient Greece, the Roman and Byzantine empires, Iraq, China, India and Southeast Asia.

Collectors

The pace has quickened in the last two years. Under Alvin Bragg, who became district attorney in January 2022, more than 950 pieces worth US\$165mn have been returned to several countries including Cambodia, Pakistan, Egypt,

Turkey and Italy.

At a ceremony at the Chinese consulate in New York last month, Bragg handed back to Beijing two 7th century stone sculptures valued at US\$3.5mn.



The Sumerian alabaster bull, which the office said was being returned to Iraq



People walk past a work of art by Pablo Picasso titled 'Woman in Grey'

Genius or misogynist - or both? Fifty years after art icon Pablo Picasso's death, his legacy is reassessed by comedian Hannah Gadsby in a Brooklyn Museum exhibition in New York, this time through a contemporary, feminist lens.

In her 2018 Netflix special 'Nanette', Gadsby expressed hate for the Spanish master of Cubism and the creator of works like 'Guernica' and 'Les Femmes d'Alger'.

In 'It's Pablo-matic: Picasso according to Hannah Gadsby' (June 2 through September 24) - one of the many eagerly awaited shows under the aegis of France and Spain marking the 50th anniversary of his death

- the approach, however, is more nuanced.

Picasso (1881-1973) remains one of the most influential artists of the modern world, often hailed as a dynamic and creative genius. But in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the reputation of this workaholic with a vast output of paintings, sketches and sculpture has been tarnished by accusations he exerted a violent hold over the women who shared his life and inspired his art.

In Gadsby's written and audio commentaries accompanying the pieces in the Brooklyn Museum, the Australian humorist refuses to separate the man from the artist, unearthing symbols of misogyny in Picasso's paintings and drawings.

She points to some aspects of his 1931 painting 'The Sculptor', proof in her view that Picasso 'couldn't even separate himself from his art in his art'.

Admiration and anger
Catherine Morris, chief curator of

the museum's Center for Feminist Art and a co-curator of 'Pablo-matic', offers a more measured assessment.

"You're dealing with a really complex and nuanced situation of an artist who is undeniably a genius, but also a less-than-perfect human," Morris told AFP at a media preview of the exhibit. Gadsby herself was not present.

"Admiration and anger can co-exist," warns a preface of the exhibition, which has been organised in collaboration with the Musee National Picasso-Paris in France.

Picasso is surrounded by women in the exhibition - not just his muses, but rather artists of his time, some of whom struggled to counter the prevailing masculine narrative of the modernist movement.

"They often didn't have the same support or access to the institutional structures that helped foster Picasso's genius," observed Lisa Small, senior curator of European Art at the Brooklyn.

Visitors can study nude drawings from the 1930s by American Louise Nevelson (1899-1988). 'Such images were revolutionary at the time because at that stage (it was) quite difficult for women to even be allowed into figure drawing classes,' Morris said.

Works by others in America's feminist art movement are on display, including by African-American painter Faith Ringgold and the Guerrilla Girls.

Also included are drawings by Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945), a German expressionist who was 'incredibly skilled, both technically and emotionally,' Small added.

AFP



Pablo Picasso

FEMINIST VERDICT

Pablo-matic

Picasso

A New York exhibit offers a feminist reassessment of legendary artist Pablo Picasso's work which appears to be overbearing with a masculine narrative

