

Council of Ministers and State Council hold joint meeting

Muscat – Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, and a few other ministers received Sheikh Abdulmalik Abdulah al Khalili, Chairman of State Council, and members of the council, on Sunday.

The meeting came within the joint coordination between the Council of Ministers and the Council of Oman. Such meetings

seek to come up with common ground among all state units with the primary objective of achieving integration to implement the desired national policies.

At the outset of the meeting, Sayyid Fahd underlined the government's appreciation for the role of the State Council in cooperating with the Council of Ministers to implement development plans and rendering the best



Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said (R) and Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said at the meeting with State Council members on Sunday

services to citizens.

The meeting underscored the importance of enhancing joint cooperation and exchanging views to serve the supreme interest of the country. Such cooperation will ensure the maximum utilisation of the competencies of the State Council's members in boosting the government's endeavours to execute development programmes and plans.

On their turn, the Chairman of the State Council and its members lauded their meeting with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and its outcomes which will contribute significantly to the work of the council.

The joint meeting with the Council of Ministers reviewed a set of topics, including means of supporting integration between government units to serve the

public interest. It also touched on ways of activating the role of the State Council in presenting studies and proposals that contribute to consolidating the values of society and preserving sustainable development and continue exerting sincere efforts to accomplish more achievements in the country under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham. ONA

NEW APP FOR PUBLIC TAXIS

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) will launch a mobile app for public taxis on June 1 to streamline taxi services in the sultanate.

The 'Aber' taxi mobile app for orange and white taxis will determine the tariff for each trip doing away the need of haggling over unreasonable taxi fares.

An official at MTCIT said, "The new app is in line with the ministry's plans to use modern digital technologies and implementation of the provisions of Ministerial Decision No 195/2018 issued on December 26, 2018, regarding public taxi tariffs."

The official added that through the 'digital meter', the ministry seeks to regulate activities of taxis in the country, thereby safeguarding the rights of passengers and taxi drivers.

The app will help taxi drivers



calculate the distance and time traveled per trip and estimate the total fare. The app is also an alternative to traditional meters used for calculating tariffs.

According to the official, as per the set tariff, fares begin at 300bz with the addition of

130bz/km; 50bz will be charged for each waiting minute after the lapse of five free minutes.

He added that in the event of multiple passengers, the total fare will be divided equally among them.

The official also informed

that the ride would be free if the driver fails to turn the app on.

The announcement of the app was welcomed by citizens and taxi drivers alike.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Nasser al Hosni, Director of Happy Line Transportation,

said, "Unfortunately, we are late in applying this system. Many countries already have it. The app will create a level of comfort between customers and taxi drivers because it leaves no scope for miscalculation and mistrust. I also believe that Aber will serve tourists very well as they will know tariffs in advance."

Describing the decision as excellent, taxi driver Sultan al Rawahi said, "It will organise the taxi business. I believe that the app will make it easier for us to transport customers quickly, easily and without complaints because the tariff is set."

Another taxi driver Rashid al Abri said considering that it is just a matter of downloading an app rather than installing a physical meter, all taxi drivers will readily adopt it. "It will ensure fair play for both taxi drivers and passengers."

Taxi drivers can download the app on Android and iOS devices.

TRA to conduct trial of phone weather alert service in S Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), in cooperation with Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), will start conducting trials for an early warning broadcast service (EWS) on weather conditions via mobile phones this week with the objective of ensuring weather alerts reach people as quickly as possible.

In a statement, TRA said, 'The trial will begin in South Batinah on May 3, followed by South Sharqiyah and Al Wusta on May 15, Muscat (May 16), Dhofar (May 17), North Batinah (June 13), South Batinah (June 14), and Musandam (June 15).'

In the trial, warning messages of emergency will be sent to Omantel and Ooredoo subscribers.

According to TRA, the service will help send warning messages

'All phones in Oman should be able to receive the warning messages in all modes – including silent mode'

to subscribers in a particular area using mobile communications networks to alert about emergencies in line with international standards.

These customised messages will have a distinctive tone when delivered.

'An emergency can occur at any time, therefore you should be attentive to any weather alert on your phone to protect yourself and your family in a time of crisis,' CAA stated.

The messages are automatic and supported by all generations of devices, including 5G.

Jordan to host regional meeting on Syria today

Amman, Jordan - Arab foreign ministers will gather in Jordan on Monday to discuss Syria's long-running conflict and ending Damascus's diplomatic isolation in the region, the foreign ministry in Amman said.

Syria's President Bashar al Assad has been politically isolated since the conflict in his country began in 2011.

However, recent weeks have seen a flurry of diplomatic activity after Saudi Arabia and Iran - a close ally of Damascus - resumed diplomatic ties in March, shifting regional relations.

Monday's meeting in Amman will bring together foreign ministers from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

The talks will "take stock of the contacts of these countries with the Syrian government to reach a political solution to the Syrian crisis", a foreign ministry statement said on Sunday.

It called the gathering "a continuation of the consultative meeting of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, which was hosted by Saudi Arabia" in mid-April.

That meeting saw nine Arab states meet in Jeddah to discuss ending Syria's long spell in the diplomatic wilderness and its possible return to the 22-member Arab League after Damascus was suspended in 2011.

The diplomats stressed the "importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis" in Syria, a statement by the Saudi foreign ministry said.

The UAE re-established ties

Iran's President Raisi to visit Syria on Wednesday

Tehran, Iran - Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi will go to Damascus on Wednesday at the official invitation of the Syrian president for a "very important" two-day visit, state media reported.

"Dr Raisi's trip to Damascus next Wednesday is a very important trip due to the changes and developments that are taking place in the region," IRNA state news agency on Sunday quoted Iran's ambassador to Syria, Hossein Akbari, as saying.

The visit comes against the backdrop of a rapprochement between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, and increased Arab engagement with Damascus.

with Damascus in late 2018. April also saw Syria and Tunisia announce they would reopen diplomatic missions in their respective capitals.

Regional opponents to Damascus's reintegration remain, however. Qatar, which has supported Syrian rebel groups, called the idea of Syria returning to the Arab League mere "speculation".

The 12-year war in Syria has claimed around half a million lives and nearly half of its population are now refugees or internally displaced.

AFP

MORE CITIZENS, SUDANESE RESIDENTS EVACUATED FROM STRIFE-TORN COUNTRY



Oman evacuated several citizens and their families, along with a number of Sudanese families residing in the sultanate, from Sudan and secured their arrival to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on Sunday. The Foreign Ministry appreciated Saudi Arabia and Egypt in facilitating the evacuation process. According to Saudi news agency SPA, the evacuation was conducted aboard HMS Al-Diriyah carrying 52 individuals from Oman, Pakistan, USA and Nepal (AFP)

Over 172,000 register on Shifa app launched in 2021: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A total of 172,279 people have registered on the Shifa app since its launch in 2021, the Ministry of Health (MoH) announced on Sunday.

A statement issued by MoH said that the unprecedented response to the app "is a quantum leap in the field of digital transformation in the sultanate".

The app is a special platform contributing to collating and exchanging medical information between patients and doctors.

Wissam Mohammed Abu Daraz, Director of Electronic Health Department in the Directorate General of Information Technology, informed that Shifa provides medical records of citizens and residents registered with the app which can be accessed by health institutions when the need arises.

He explained that the app displays 16 services and features which the user can benefit from, including medical records and history, family medical history, appointment bookings, medication, medical examina-

Shifa displays 16 services and features, including medical records, family medical history and immunisation status

WISSAM ABU DARAZ

tions, immunisation status, procedure reports, vital signs, organ donation, blood donation, and virtual clinics.

"It is also a platform to exchange information regarding consultations with health service providers. There is also a feature in the side menu of the application called 'What's New' that explains how to use each service," Abu Daraz added.

Some services will be further developed, including a chat feature with a doctor with options to share photos and audio clips. Self-registration, electronic payment, requesting a comprehensive report, booking appointments for blood donation, and support and assistance to

use the app will also be added.

According to Abu Daraz, a virtual clinic service has been activated in The Royal Hospital and Khoula Hospital. "This service will be rolled out in other hospitals according to a plan prepared by the Directorate General of Information Technology."

"The ministry has also activated a service for booking appointments in five health centres in various governorates. This service will also be provided in the remaining health centres according to a plan prepared by the directorate."

TENDER
NOTICE

The Internal Tender Committee of Emdad Logistics Company SAOC., hereby announces the following Tenders:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of receiving Specifications	Date of Bid Submission	Suppliers	Tender Fee OMR (Inclusive of VAT 5%)	Place of Submission
ITC/E/002/2023	Fence Lighting Supply & Installation – 55 HA plot - Duqm	11 th May 2023	22 nd May 2023	Only Specialized Companies	55 /- OMR Non Refundable	Emdad Logistics Company, 3rd floor

Taking into consideration the following:

All specialized companies that wish to participate in the tender must deposit the tender amount into the bank account of the Company (details of the bank account are set out hereunder) and submit the original payment receipt of the tender along with a copy of the Commercial Registration Certificate and the contact details of the authorized individual (business card) to the address presented below:

From 07:00 - 16:30 (Sunday – Thursday).

Payment Information:**Bank Transfer:**

Account Name	Emdad Logistics Co SAOC
Account Number	018020025780
Bank Name	Sohar International Bank SAOG
Branch	Al Khoudh Branch
Bank ID Code	BSHROMRUXXX

Complete Tender documents should be submitted in sealed envelope with red wax with tender number and title and addressed to the "Chairman of Internal Tender Committee". The envelope should not make any reference to the bidder details. All applicants are required to submit the Tender in the Tender box in the main office of Port of Duqm Company at or before 02:00 PM on the assigned date for submission of the Tender. Tenders submitted after the above-mentioned date and time shall not be considered.

* The company is not obliged to accept the lowest offer or any other offer without any justifiable reasons.
* The company reserve the right to issue the order either in part or full for the quoted items without any justifiable reasons.
* The company reserve the right to reject the tenders not complying with the tender documentation requirement.
For any clarification, please contact us through tenders@portofduqm.om

Emdad Logistics Company S.A.O.C.
PO Box: 2409, PC: 111, Sultanate of Oman,
Almashreq Building, 18 November Street, N. Azaliba
T: +968 25468666

Hayy al Sahil project starts selling residential units

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sales of residential units of the Hayy al Sahil project to come up in Quriyat was launched at Grand Millennium Hotel on Sunday under the patronage of H E Salem bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism.

The first integrated tourism project with comprehensive services and facilities in the wilayat of Quriyat with 400 housing units in the first phase will be spread on an area of 45,000sqm. The project grants foreign investors permanent residency.

To be built at an estimated cost of RO385mn (US\$1bn), including RO40mn allocated for the first phase, the project will include a four-star hotel consisting of 220 keys, a residential commercial district with greenhouses, bicycle path, halls for events, an aerobic park and a variety of restaurants.

On the occasion, H E Mahrouqi said, "The project is



(Supplied photo)

indeed of great importance for reviving tourism and economic movement in Muscat governorate. The project comes within the framework of implementing the Omani tourism strategy, in line with the sultanate's plan to diversify sources of income underlined in Oman Vision 2040, which aims to achieve optimal use of the tourism potential."

He added that the Hayy al Sahil project, upon its completion, will reflect positively eco-

nomically and socially, especially on the neighbouring areas of the project, which will benefit directly from the project with its many tourist facilities.

Sheikh Hilal bin Khalid al Maawali, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Qurayyat Development Company, owner of the project, added, "We will do everything required to contribute to the implementation of the pioneering tourism strategy that the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has developed in accor-

dance with a promising vision for the sultanate."

The second phase of the project will include development of 1,600 housing units on an area of 221,000sqm, in addition to a large mosque of approximately 10,000sqm, and a three-star hotel with 150 rooms spread over 50,000sqm. The third and final phases of the project include 3,000 housing units ranging from apartments to villas, as well as 36 luxury waterfront villas.

Three workers killed in landslide in Wakan

Muscat - Three workers died following a landslide in Nakhal, South Batinah, according to the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA).

In a statement, CDAA said, "Search and rescue teams of South Batinah governorate received a report of a landslide



(Supplied photo)

accident involving three workers when a company was carrying out maintenance work on the road leading to Wakan village in the wilayat of Nakhal.'

The authority added that the bodies of the three workers have been recovered.

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT Q1 2023

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of National Bank of Oman SAOG, I am pleased to present the first quarter 2023 report for the period ended 31st March 2023.

Oman's Economy & Financial Sector

Oman's economy has continued to perform quite well through the first quarter of 2023, and is expected to grow by not less than 3 percent in 2023, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). As per a report by World Bank, Oman is set to become the fastest growing economy among the six GCC nations in 2023 with a projected growth of 4.3 per cent.

The outlook is supported by a still-healthy fiscal surplus as although hydrocarbon prices have fallen, the output has increased at the same time. According to the IMF, inflation has risen to 1.9 per cent in Oman in February 2023, however, Oman owes the positive outlook to a sound and cautious macroeconomic policy and budgeting and, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, a solid outlook applies to Omani export revenue, following what was already a record year.

The financial year 2023 Oman Budget represents the third year of the 10th five-year development plan (2021-2025) which facilitated the implementation of the objectives laid out in the Oman Vision 2040. The Oman Government recently paid back \$1.5bn from a syndicated loan, reducing its public debt to around 38 per cent of GDP, according to a report published by Global Source Partners. Meanwhile, Fitch Ratings has revised Oman's credit outlook to Positive (BB) from Stable.

NBO's Financial Performance

Given this backdrop, Net Interest Income for Q1 2023 was OMR 28.7 million, showing an increase of 34.1 percent compared with the same period last year.

Fee Income for the same period was OMR 9.1 million compared to OMR 11.8 million, a reduction of 23.1 per cent, due to one-off gain on sale of Government development bonds, as per regulatory guidelines in Q1 2022. Operating Expenses for the three months ended 31 March 2023 was OMR 15.3 million, compared to OMR 14.5 million for the corresponding period in 2022, an increase of 4.9 percent.

Operating Profit, as a result, grew strongly by 20.7 percent year on year.

Net Impairment for the first three months of 2023 was OMR 6.4 million, compared to OMR 6.5 million for the corresponding period last year, a decrease of 17.6 percent.

As a result, Net Profit for Q1 2023 was OMR 14.3 million, a growth of 40.1 percent over corresponding period last year.

Gross loans and advances as at 31 March 2023 are at OMR 3.6 billion, showing growth of 6.9 percent over last year. Customer deposits correspondingly are at OMR 3.2 billion, with the bank continuing to maintain a healthy CASA mix.

The bank's Core Equity and Total Capital Adequacy Ratio stands at 11.9 percent and 16.9 percent respectively.

Key Updates and Highlights

This year coincides with National Bank of Oman (NBO) 50th anniversary, which was recently marked with a series of initiatives and events bringing together clients, team members and other stakeholders. During these celebrations, participants enjoyed a virtual showcase of NBO's 50-year journey highlighting our contributions and the opportunities we have unlocked and future plans, which was produced as the biggest digital show of its kind in Oman.

In Q1 2023, National Bank of Oman (NBO) acted as an Issue Manager and one of the Joint Global Coordinators for Abraj Energy Services' Initial Public Offering (IPO). The success of this IPO is a proud moment for National Bank of Oman and serves as a testament to the bank's leading advisory services backed by a team of passionate people with proven expertise in managing large transactions.

In keeping with our commitment to creating value for our customers, Private Banking held the Market Outlook 2023 event for our high-net-worth clientele at the bank's head office. The unique experience was part of NBO's comprehensive Private Banking proposition, which it created to guide clients towards long-term financial well-being. Tapping into its 50-years of experience, NBO welcomed an expert in asset management from a leading company, to share valuable insights and benchmark best investment practices during this interactive event.

Coinciding with Ramadan, we launched a specially designed car loan campaign, allowing both customers and non-customers to benefit from attractive rates and other benefits. Furthermore, we launched our cashback rewards to credit card holders.

On the Corporate side, we have concluded the funding of close to OMR 100 million and our participation was both local and regional. During Q1 2023, Corporate Banking focused on liability recovery through focused campaigns. Furthermore, the team was instrumental in structuring financial assistance to a local company by leading, among other banks, the efforts to find a new investor and provide the right funding needed.

Global Transaction Banking launched Remote Deposit Cheque solution (RDC). Offered to our corporate customer with large number of cheques, RDC will help clients to transmit cheque images from their office to NBO for clearance, eliminating the need to visit a branch.

Digital Capabilities

Adding accessibility and convenience, we opened Oman's first Digital Corner in the bank's head office in Al Azaliba to serve NBO and non-NBO customers alike at any time of day or night. The new NBO Digital Corner allows customers to make banking suit their life, how and when they want, at a time that best suits them.

In the corporate digital sphere, total income from digital channels has increased significantly in Q1 2023 by 22.85 per cent compared to corresponding Q1 2022. Overall number of transactions through our digital platform has increased by 7 per cent in Q1 2023 compared to the same period in 2022.

Partnerships

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary, we entered into a partnership with the telecom provider Vodafone Oman, to further facilitate the bank's services and digital solutions, while both entities will also cooperate in other initiatives benefiting customers and team members alike. In addition, the bank also signed an agreement with Abraj Energy Services, an integrated energy company in Oman. NBO also partnered with OTU, a Kuwait-based company offering Computer Integrated Solutions, to further streamline online payment processes for the bank's customers.

Another major milestone was the signing of an agreement to join the Buna Payment System. Buna is a cross-border and multi-currency payment system that allows customers to send and receive payments across the Arab region and facilitates remittances, trade and commerce between countries in the Arab World. This move reflects the Bank's efforts to meet the needs of its customers and make every experience simpler and more seamless.

We have also signed an agreement with Nesto Hypermarket on providing global transaction banking services to Nesto in Oman. As NBO is continuously seeking to optimize, automate and personalize its services, the

agreement will see the bank providing online direct debit and smart digital payment solutions to Nesto Hypermarket.

Muzn

This year, Muzn will mark its 10-year anniversary. Founded in 2013, Muzn was the first Islamic banking window in Oman and has been committed to fostering the development of the Sultanate's Islamic Finance sector by providing customers Sharia compliant services that are in line with their beliefs.

To mark this special occasion, Muzn rolled out its new brand identity, with enhanced look and feel. The new identity, aligned with the NBO's brand, revamped our values to reflect our strategic goals and aspiration for the group, and the way we communicate our products and services.

In Q1 2023, Muzn Islamic Banking continued to unlock opportunities for its customers by migrating all card services to Visa, the world's largest payment network. In addition to providing an enhanced banking experience with a Visa card, customers are now able to enjoy exclusive lifestyle and travel benefits, dining deals, preferential rates and discounts at over 70 million merchant locations worldwide, whilst proudly adhering to Sharia's law practices.

To streamline payment processes for its corporate clients, Muzn launched its Online Direct Debit processing service. Using cutting-edge technology, the secured service comprises a range of innovative digital solutions, which enable companies to efficiently monitor, control, manage and automate their payments.

Continuing to create secure and Sharia-compliant value propositions for our customers, Muzn has partnered with Oman Air Holidays to offer flexible financing plans for Umrah packages. Under the scheme, customers can tailor their pilgrimage with a host of great value flight, accommodation, transport, and add-on options and pay for it in monthly instalments according to the Service Ijarah concept, making it easier and more convenient to plan their Umrah.

People

During Q1 2023, we announced the launch of 'Murshid', NBO's mentoring program. The program was developed by a team that was part of the brand culture workshops "Rawabit" that were held last year. Murshid aims to provide guidance, support and valuable knowledge to help individuals grow personally and professionally.

Recently, eleven members of NBO's Direct Sales Agents (DSA) team received a certificate from the bank's Academy of Excellence upon completion of the 3-week Sales Star training programme. The capacity-building course had been designed for the DSA team, which is a main point of contact for potential clients, and covered specific topics while enabling participants to advance in their career careers.

Furthermore, Muzn has recently enrolled staff members in the Universal Banker Certificate Program. The training programme provides frontline banking professionals with the instruments and skills they require to deliver a seamless, convenient, and effective customer experience.

Community and Events

Cresting value that feeds into the overall progress of Oman, we announced an initiative with the Oman Charitable Organisation (OCO), in which NBO donated to the non-governmental organisation to support national social welfare projects and programmes benefiting children, orphans and disabled people.

As another part of its commitment to give back to its communities, we launched Shahr al Atta, the bank's annual campaign held during the Holy month of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr. We utilized this community outreach program to distribute food hampers to families in need.

We also organized Ramadan Bake Sale at the bank's head office, bringing the team together across the bank to raise fund for charity in collaboration with Nidaa Charity.

Marking the occasion of World Civil Defence Day, we partnered with the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority to raise awareness of the importance of its role and best practices in defence risk management for the sake of the general well-being of Omani citizens and residents.

Aiming to raise public awareness about financial fraud risks and prevention, we ran a series of financial crime workshops for higher education students and organisations in Oman. During the workshops that were held at Sultan Qaboos University and Muscat Duty Free, a team shared best practices on how individuals and organisations can protect themselves from financial fraud.

Local & Global Recognition

In Q1 2023, NBO has been awarded 'Excellence in Sustainability in Banking and Finance' by Alam Al Iktisad Sustainability Awards.

In recognition of its achievements in digital capacity building, the National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Academy of Excellence won the 'Best Practices for Internal Learning' Award. The accolade was presented by MEA HR (Human Resources) & Learning Achievement Awards. This acknowledgment highlights the bank's efforts to offer innovative and rewarding upskilling opportunities for its employees.

Highlighting our efforts in empowering women and the success of our strategy for people's growth, Salima Al Marzouqi, AGM and Chief Islamic Banking Officer, was ranked in the WOMANI 2022 Report for 'most influential women in the field of Islamic business and finance around the world, issued by the Cambridge Institute of Islamic Finance.

Appreciation

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to thank our customers, shareholders, executive management, and the entire team of NBO for their support and efforts in implementing the bank's strategy and in achieving its goals and objectives.

We would also like to express our appreciation to our regulators, the Central Bank of Oman, the Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates and the Capital Market Authority for their constant support and dedicated efforts to develop Oman's financial industry, especially the banking sector.

We pay tribute to His Majesty, Sultan Haitham bin Tank Al Said, for his visionary leadership and under whose wise guidance Oman steadfastly continues towards sustainable economic and social development.

Above all, be well and take care.

Amal Suhail Bahwan
Chairperson

INTERIM CONDENSED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION As at 31 March 2023 (unaudited)			
	31/03/2023	31/03/2022	Audited 31/12/2022
ASSETS	RO'000	RO'000	RO'000
Cash and balances with Central Banks	230,823	259,400	261,589
Due from banks and other money market placements (net)	226,235	105,726	119,260
Loans, advances and Islamic financing assets (net)	3,415,150	3,189,204	3,353,699
Financial investments (net)	410,720	567,361	404,387
Property and equipment	56,483	59,133	57,090
Other assets	94,961	77,344	90,655
Total assets	4,434,372	4,258,268	4,294,080
LIABILITIES AND EQUITY			
Liabilities			
Due to banks and other money market deposits	194,599	238,480	261,743
Customers' deposits and unrestricted investment accounts	3,249,036	3,133,512	3,047,422
Euro medium term notes	189,408	191,545	188,865
Other liabilities	138,772	120,506	139,235
Taxation	18,600	12,467	15,981
Total liabilities	3,790,415	3,696,510	3,653,246
EQUITY			
Share capital	162,595	162,595	162,595
Share premium	34,465	34,465	34,465
Legal reserve	54,198	54,198	54,198
Other reserves	7,198	7,410	6,390
Retained earnings	218,268	187,590	216,053
Total equity attributable to the shareholders of the bank	476,824	446,258	473,701
Tier 1 perpetual bonds	167,133	115,500	167,133
Total equity	643,957	561,758	640,834
Total liabilities and equity	4,434,372	4,258,268	4,294,080

INTERIM CONDENSED STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME For the period ended 31 March 2023 (unaudited)			
	Three months ended 31 March 2023	2022	
	RO'000	RO'000	RO'000
Interest income	54,461	40,890	
Interest expense	(27,110)	(20,757)	
Net interest income	27,351	20,133	
Income from Islamic financing and Investment	2,950	2,546	
Unrestricted investment account holders' share of profit	(1,559)	(1,241)	
Net income from Islamic financing and investment assets	1,394	1,305	
Net interest income and net income from Islamic financing and investment assets	28,745	21,438	
Fee and commission income (net)	5,301	5,567	
Other operating income	3,759	6,213	
Operating income	37,805	33,218	
Staff costs	(9,727)	(8,822)	
Other operating expenses	(4,061)	(4,250)	
Depreciation	(1,460)	(1,481)	
Total operating expenses	(15,248)	(14,553)	
Profit from operations before impairment losses and tax	22,557	18,685	
Total impairment losses on financial assets (net)	(5,382)	(6,539)	
Profit before tax	17,175	12,155	
Taxation	(2,829)	(1,912)	
Profit for the period	14,347	10,243	
Other comprehensive income			
Items that will not be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss			
Equity investments at FVOCI – net change in fair value	714	2,552	
Tax effect of equity investments at FVOCI – net change in fair value	94	(841)	
Items that are or maybe reclassified subsequently to profit or loss	-	(135)	
Debt instruments at FVOCI – net change in fair value	908	2,076	
Other comprehensive income for the period	15,155	12,319	
Total comprehensive income for the period	29,502	22,562	
Earnings per share:			
Basic and diluted, earnings for the period attributable to equity holders	0.009	0.006	

Talent discovery project launched in S Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To discover Omani talent in the field of innovation among school students, the Ministry of Education has launched a project called Tharwa in South Batinah.

Amna Mohammed al Balushi, Director of Department of Special Education and Continuous Learning in South Batinah, informed that the project targets 369 Grade 6 students from 19 schools in the governorate. Students took a creativity and innovation test for the project.

The project aims to spot students who have high mental capacity for creativity and innovation, determine their degree of intelligence, and educate



(Supplied photo)

the local community about the importance of identifying gifted students and nurturing them.

According to Dr Moza bint Hilal al Saadiya, Head of Department of Special Education and Continuous Learning in the governorate, there was smooth conduct of assessment tests as a result of early preparations for

the project coordinated by a special committee formed by representatives of various schools in the governorate.

“The committee held special workshops for students to develop their creative skills and innovative ideas and spread awareness on the project,” Moza said.

Value of real estate deals up 24.3% in March: NCSI

Muscat - The value of real estate transactions in the sultanate increased 24.3 per cent to RO730.1mn in March, compared to the same period in 2022, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Fees collected for legal transactions amounted to RO18.5mn at the end of March - an increase of 14 per cent compared to the corresponding period of 2022.

The value of sale contracts decreased 1.5 per cent to RO294.6mn and the number of



sale contracts also decreased 10.8 per cent to 17,191, compared to 19,265 in the same period of 2022.

The value of mortgage contracts increased 52.3 per cent in March to RO433.3mn compared

to RO284.5mn during the same period of 2022. The number of mortgage contracts increased 23.2 per cent to 5,813 from 4,717 in the same period of 2022.

The value of swap contracts decreased 45.1 per cent to RO2.1mn at the end of March compared to RO3.9mn in the same period of 2022.

The number of title deeds issued in March increased 1.9 per cent to 61,371, while the number of title deeds issued to citizens of GCC countries increased 54.2 per cent to 327 compared to 212 in March 2022.



Musandam Power Company SAOG

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THE COMPANY REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Musandam Power Company SAOG (the "Company"), it's a pleasure to present the Company's Report for the three months period ended on 31 March 2023.

Operational Results

The plant delivered 64.6 GWH to the Musandam grid compared to 63.3 GWH delivered by the end of the same period of the previous year with a growth in demand by 2%. The plant achieved 99.9% reliability during the period.

There were no Lost Time Accidents (LTA) during the period, resulting in 527 days of free Lost Time Accidents since the last incident, demonstrating our continued focus on Health, Safety, Environment, and Quality Management.

Financial Results



In YTD March 2023, there was an increase in revenue on account of electricity demand which resulted in higher Engine Running Hours (ERH) as compared to March 2022. Also, the Capacity Charge was higher compared to the previous period because of the increase in tariff resulting from price indexation. The first quarter result is also impacted by an invoice dispute regarding the connection fees. This has been resolved, the payment is expected in the quarter 2 - 2023.

The loss before interest and tax increased by 99% as compared to March 2022 mainly due to the nil realization of the fuel thermal efficiency gain and additional consultancy cost incurred during the period ending March 2023. There is also a seasonal impact when energy consumption is lower in winter months. The Company is expected to make profits as consumption increases in the summer months as has been the case in past years.

Overall, the net loss for the period increased by 17% during the period ending in March 2023 as compared to March 2022. This is mainly due to increase in finance cost. Finance costs during the period have increased by 8% compared to March 2022 resulting in an increase in the rate of interest on the senior facility loan from 4.6% to 5.25% with effect from October 2022.

The share price was Baizas 318 at the end of March 2023 (Baizas 332 at the end of March 2022).

Corporate Social Responsibility

The Holy month of Ramadhan fell during this period, MPC played an effective role in serving the community and supporting families with limited income by forming a campaign team to visit families in Bukha for food donations that targeted social security families.

Outlook

In terms of challenges and opportunities, the company was facing certain challenges like the availability of natural gas and higher dependency on diesel. The company was working closely with the government to find out solutions by materializing the options. In November 2022, MEM through OQ arranged Dolphin Gas to compensate for the Gas shortage from MGP. Due to this additional gas availability, dependency on diesel is reduced and the plant is currently operating fully on gas fuel and also in future months is expected to operate fully on Gas fuel.

All reasonable and prudent measures will be taken by the Company to ensure high standards of health, safety, environmental compliance reliability, and availability are maintained over 2023.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to extend our deep appreciation and gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik Al Said and His Government for their continued support and encouragement to the private sector by creating an environment that allows us to participate effectively in the growth of the Sultanate's economy and to dedicate our achievements to the building of a strong nation.

Unaudited statement of financial position as at 31 March 2023

	31 March 2023 RO '000	Audited 31 December 2022 RO '000
ASSETS		
Non-current assets:		
Property, plant and equipment	67,569	68,069
Current assets:		
Inventories	3,294	3,403
Trade and other receivables	17,289	23,648
Cash and bank balances	3,577	1,522
Total current assets	24,160	28,573
Total assets	91,729	96,642
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Equity:		
Share capital	7,039	7,039
Legal reserve	1,515	1,515
Retained earnings	1,339	3,133
Total equity	9,893	11,687
Non-current liabilities:		
Senior facility loan	52,607	52,590
Provision for asset retirement obligation	185	183
Lease liability	102	100
Deferred tax liability	3,524	3,672
Employees' end of service benefits	3	3
Total non-current liabilities	56,421	56,548
Current liabilities:		
Senior facility loan	3,249	3,249
Lease liability	3	3
Trade and other payables	17,663	20,655
Short term loan facility	4,500	4,500
Total current liabilities	25,415	28,407
Total liabilities	81,836	84,955
Total equity and liabilities	91,729	96,642
Net assets per share	0.141	0.166

Unaudited statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the three months period ended 31 March 2023

	31 March 2023 RO '000	31 March 2022 RO '000
Revenue	2,435	2,438
Operating costs	(2,381)	(2,265)
Gross profit	54	173
General and administrative expenses	(233)	(263)
Finance costs	(792)	(733)
Loss before tax	(971)	(823)
Tax expense	148	122
Loss and total comprehensive income for the period	(823)	(701)
Basic and diluted loss per share for the period	(0.012)	(0.010)



الشركة العمانية المتحدة للتأمين ش.م.ع.ع Oman United Insurance Co. S.A.O.G

COMPANY REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Oman United Insurance Company SAOG, I have the pleasure to present to you the Un-Audited Financial Statements of the company for the Three months' period ended on 31 March 2023.

Operation Performance Highlights:

Particulars	31st March 2023	31st March 2022	Change %
Gross Written Premium	10,313,828	10,695,168	-3.6
Gross Underwriting Results	669,252	1,361,007	-50.8
Realized Investment and other income	1,243,906	1,036,182	+20.0
Net Profit for the period (after tax)	842,664	1,097,041	-23.2

Gross Written Premium and Underwriting Results:

The gross premium income of all insurance lines of business amounted to R.O 10.3 Million compared to R.O 10.7 Million in the same corresponding period of the year 2022 depicting a decrease of (3.6%). This reduction was mainly due to non-renewal of certain project policies. The increased motor losses with increased frequency and severity has impacted the underwriting margins. The increased competition continues to keep the price under pressure. The gross underwriting profit of all lines of business amounted to R.O 669K compared to underwriting profits of R.O 1.3 Million in the corresponding period of last year depicting a decrease of (50.8%). As a result of our focus on the quality of business, certain measures would be implemented to continue the selective underwriting policy adopted by the management thereof.

Investment and other income Results:

We expect Muscat Stock Exchange to perform well

resulting in increased investment opportunities. We will accordingly realign our investment portfolio, swapping from fixed income instruments to equity investments in a phased manner in line with the Regulations of the Investment of the Assets of Insurance Companies.

The company achieved a total realized investment income of R.O 1.2 Million, compared to R.O 1.0 Million in the corresponding period last year depicting an increase of 20%. The net investment income after adjusting for unrealized investment losses amounted to R.O 1.5 Million compared to R.O 1.1 Million for the same period last year i.e. an increase of 38%.

Net profit:

The company's net profit after tax amounted to R.O 842K as against net profit after tax of R.O 1.1 Million in the corresponding period of last year, depicting a decrease of (23.2%), accordingly the earnings per share amounted to 8 Bzs against 11 Bzs in the corresponding period of last year.

Business risks:

Honorable shareholders: As you know, insurance business is exposed to natural calamities which are likely to influence the reinsurance costs. Additionally, the performance of the investment portfolio is very much influenced by the prevailing economic and political conditions. However, the management has been exerting its utmost efforts by adopting a conservative risk management mechanism that mitigates the effects of the risks related to the activity.

Changes in the Legislative and Regulatory reporting:

IFRS 9 & IFRS 17 for the insurance industry are under implementation effective from 1st January 2023. These changes entail intensive actuarial reserving methodology and reporting standards.

Acknowledgement:

On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank the shareholders, our loyal customers, reinsurers and employees. Our sincere thanks and appreciation also extended to Capital Market Authority for their tremendous support in regulating and developing the local insurance sector and for their assistance, which has led to the smooth functioning of operations.

Finally, our sincere thanks and gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq. We all pray to Almighty Allah to shower His Majesty with blessings, keep him in good health and give him long life. Our sincere thanks and appreciation extended to His Majesty's rational government and we wish to the Omani people always Progress and prosperity.

Thank You and Kindest Regards

Salim Bin Nassir Al Busaidi
Chairman
April 2023

UNAUDITED CONDENSED INTERIM STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE THREE MONTHS PERIOD ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

	3 months ended 31 March 2023 RO	3 months ended 31 March 2022 RO
Income		
Gross written premiums	10,313,828	10,695,168
Net underwriting result	669,252	1,361,007
Investment income - net	1,317,972	922,724
Other operating income	198,940	176,523
Total net income	2,186,164	2,460,254
General and administration expenses	(1,307,180)	(1,235,359)
Profit before taxation	878,984	1,224,895
Taxation	(36,320)	(127,854)
Profit for the year	842,664	1,097,041
Other comprehensive income		
Items that will be reclassified to statement of profit or loss:		
Net change in fair value of available-for-sale investments	203,887	33,402
Total comprehensive profit for the year	1,046,551	1,130,443
Earnings per share	0.008	0.011

UNAUDITED CONDENSED INTERIM STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 MARCH 2023

	Unaudited 31 March 2023 RO	31 March 2022 RO	Audited 31 December 2022 RO
ASSETS			
Non-current assets			
Property and equipment	1,037,795	1,143,245	1,047,113
Right-of-use asset	321,781	283,127	299,354
Investment property	2,007,578	2,062,628	2,020,658
Available-for-sale investments	963,461	768,202	759,575
Deposits	24,780,000	29,950,000	27,830,000
Reinsurance contracts	4,005,153	4,685,000	4,389,000
Total assets	33,115,768	38,892,202	36,345,700
Current assets			
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	9,501,783	5,746,720	7,781,983
Insurance and other receivables	8,922,399	11,696,823	6,272,374
Deposits	21,667,389	22,768,697	25,101,890
Reinsurance contracts	34,333,946	28,244,903	32,559,019
Bank balances and cash	5,264,144	2,245,996	519,077
Total assets	112,805,429	109,595,341	108,580,043
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
EQUITY			
Share capital	10,000,000	10,000,000	10,000,000
Share premium	871,519	871,519	871,519
Retained earnings	2,959,529	3,956,046	5,616,865
Legal reserve	3,333,334	3,333,334	3,333,334
General reserve	100,000	100,000	100,000
Fair value reserve	443,672	199,329	239,785
Contingency reserve	10,000,000	10,000,000	10,000,000
Total equity	27,708,054	28,460,228	30,161,503
LIABILITIES			
Non-current liabilities			
Insurance contracts	4,554,504	5,435,000	4,991,000
Employees' end of service benefits	832,575	783,529	797,300
Deferred tax liability	62,034	99,232	59,940
Lease liability	255,866	258,984	243,960
Total liabilities	5,704,979	6,576,745	6,092,200
Current liabilities			
Bank overdraft	-	-	181,071
Insurance contracts	58,175,880	52,188,594	55,302,823
Trade and other payables	20,644,261	21,419,083	16,315,914
Lease liability	89,851	40,370	78,354
Taxation	482,404	910,321	448,178
Total liabilities	79,392,396	74,558,368	72,326,340
Total equity and liabilities	112,805,429	109,595,341	108,580,043
Net assets per share	0.277	0.285	0.302

NOTE:
The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who request them in either Arabic or English within 7 days of receipt

Oman's gas consumption rises 7.4% in first quarter

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In line with growing economic activity in Oman, the sultanate's consumption of natural gas increased by 7.4 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2023 compared to the same period of last year.

Total consumption of natural gas rose to 12,924mn cubic metres (mncm) during the first three months of 2023 against 12,034mncm in the corresponding period of 2022.

The growth in total consumption was driven by increased natural gas demand in oilfields, power plants and industrial areas, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals' figures released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) showed.

Oman produced and imported nearly 13,000mncm natural gas to meet the country's



demand during the January-March period of this year, which is more than 7 per cent higher compared to the total of production and imports in the first quarter of 2022.

Industrial projects, the biggest natural gas consuming sector in the sultanate, recorded a total gas consumption of 8,065mncm in the first quarter of this year, which is 7.5 per cent higher as compared to 7,501mncm con-

sumption in the same period a year ago.

With an economic rebound since early 2022 Oman's industrial and manufacturing sector activities have picked up significantly, boosting demand for natural gas.

Gas usage in the oilfields increased by 6.2 per cent to 3,297mncm in the first three months of this year against 3,104mncm in the same period

Industrial projects, the biggest natural gas consuming sector in Oman, recorded 7.5% growth in consumption of natural gas in the first quarter of 2023 as compared to the same period a year ago

of 2022. Gas consumption in the power generation projects increased by 9.1 per cent to 1,492mncm in the first three months of 2023 compared to 1,367mncm in the same period of previous year.

'OPEC+ exerts extraordinary efforts to stabilise oil market'

Vienna, Austria - The Secretary-General of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Haitham al-Ghais, has said that the OPEC+ alliance has made extraordinary efforts to achieve stability in the global oil market.

During a workshop in Vienna organized by OPEC, the International Energy Agency and the International Energy Forum, Ghais stressed that the efforts of OPEC and its partners, collectively known as OPEC+, came in unusual circumstances for the benefit of producers, consumers, oil industry and the world as a whole.

"On the financial side, we have been observing an accelerated trend in speculative trading, with investors and other players trading futures and options at



faster rates, sometimes severely impacting market liquidity and hindering price discovery mechanisms," the OPEC Secretary General said in the opening remarks of the workshop on 'the Interactions Between Physical and Financial Energy Markets'.

He said, "The past year demonstrated the need for continuous monitoring of the factors driving volatility in energy markets and how they may affect the market in short, medium and

long term." For his part, Secretary General of the International Energy Forum, Joseph Moynihan, warned in his hometown of the emergence of 'new vulnerabilities' due to the high level of inflation and the lack of investment in supplies. He called on producers and consumers to take this into account "when taking risks in investing or to understand the evolution of energy costs for consumers."

The expert, Toriel Busoni of the International Energy Agency, also warned of the danger of volatility in the energy markets, pointing out that the past three years confirmed the impact of supply and demand shocks on financial markets and energy prices.

Agencies

US Fed likely to hike rates again despite signs of slowing economy

Washington, US - The US Federal Reserve is widely expected to raise its benchmark lending rate for a tenth - and possibly final - time on Wednesday, as it continues its fight against high inflation.

The US central bank is likely to take this decision despite growing signs that the American economy is slowing down, with many economists predicting the US will enter a mild recession later this year.

Analysts and traders expect the Fed to hike interest rates by 25 basis points and then hold them high in a bid to bring inflation back towards its long-term target of two percent without spurring a deeper, more painful recession.

"We expect the Fed to hike by 25 basis points and signal a pause in June, with a weak upward bias for rates going forward," Bank of America economists wrote in a note to clients.

A further rate hike Wednesday would mark the Fed's tenth rate hike in a row, bringing the benchmark to between 5 and 5.25 per cent - its highest level since 2007.

More than 80 per cent of futures traders also expect the Fed to raise interest rates by another 25 basis points, according to data from CME Group.

Banking turbulence

The meeting of the rate-setting Federal Open Markets Committee (FOMC) on May 2 and 3 will be held under very different circumstances than its previous one in March, which took place amid a short, sharp, banking crisis unleashed by the rapid collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) a few days earlier.

SVB's swift demise after it took on excessive interest-rate risk raised concerns of banking



Fed Chair Jerome Powell suggested after the March interest-rate decision that the Fed could raise rates just once more (AFP)

contagion, which were amplified by the collapse of New York-based Signature Bank a few days later. Against the backdrop of ongoing turbulence in the banking sector, the Fed held off a larger rate hike on March 22, instead opting for a quarter-point rise.

Concerted efforts by US and European regulators in the aftermath of SVB's collapse helped calm financial markets and appear to have prevented further high-profile casualties in the banking sector.

"With stress in credit markets easing, Fed officials look set to push ahead with a 25bp rate hike at the early-May meeting," Oxford Economics' lead US economist Michael Pearce wrote in a recent note to clients.

But despite calmer financial markets, SVB's collapse has nevertheless had a lasting impact on the banking sector, with banks tightening lending conditions in the weeks since.

Fed officials have noted that the tighter lending conditions could act like an additional rate hike, possibly reducing the number of hikes necessary to bring inflation back down to two percent.

One and done?

Recent US economic data point to a slowing economy, with growing predictions that the US will enter a recession later this year. Data released in late April showed that economic output slowed to an annual rate of 1.1 per cent in the first quarter of this year, while the Fed's favored measure of inflation fell to an annual rate of 4.2 per cent in March, down from 5.1 per cent a month earlier.

The growing impact of the Fed's campaign of rate hikes on the economy has led analysts and traders to predict the Fed will likely stop raising rates after the decision on Wednesday.

With the quarter-point rise widely expected, the focus next week will instead "be on any changes to the guidance language in the statement," from the Fed, Deutsche Bank economists wrote in a recent note to clients.

"While our base case remains that the May hike will be the last of this cycle as the economy responds to the tightening to date, we see risks tilted toward another increase in June," they said in the note.

AFP

شركة صناعة مواد البناء (ش.م.ع.)

Construction Materials Industries (S.A.O.G)

P.O. Box: 1791, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman, Tel: 26752247/26752287, Fax: 26750867

MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Management of Construction Materials Industries SAOG has the honour of submitting the report on the performance of the Company for the three months ended on 31st March 2023.

Key Performance Indicators

Particulars	2023 31 - Mar RO	2022 31 - Mar RO	Increase / (Decrease)	% of Increase / (Decrease)
Sales	577,703	865,131	(287,428)	(33.22) %
Gross Profit	96,365	215,914	(119,549)	(55.37) %
Profit/(Loss) before Tax	(46,066)	121,489	(167,555)	(137.92) %
Net Profit / (Net Loss) after Tax	(46,066)	121,489	(167,555)	(137.92) %
Earnings Per Share	(0.0007)	0.0014	(0.0021)	(150.00) %

Particulars	2023 31-Mar RO	2022 31-Dec RO	Increase / (Decrease)	% of Increase / (Decrease)
Total Assets	9,257,189	8,058,992	1,198,197	14.87 %
Total Liabilities	2,525,226	1,280,963	1,244,263	97.13 %
Net Assets	6,731,963	6,778,029	(46,066)	(0.68) %
Total Number of Shares	62,500,000	62,500,000	---	---
Net Assets Per Share	0.1077	0.1084	(0.0007)	(0.65) %

Operating Performance

Production:

Production of Quick Lime from our Plant has been Decreased by 26.58 % (5,127 MT.) during the first quarter 2023 compared to the same period last year. (2023 - 14,164MT, 2022 - 19,291MT).

Sales:

Sales has been decreased by 33.22% (RO:287,428/-) during the first quarter this year, compared to the same period in the previous year, due to several reasons. The most important of which is the decrease in demand in the iron industry sector, the main user of quicklime and dolomite products.

As a result of the decision the Ministry of Transport, by preventing the entry of (empty) land transport vehicles into the Sultanate, had a significant impact on the company's inability to abide by its commitments to export Hydrated Lime to desalination plants in the neighboring country as was decided, which had a significant impact on the company's inability to achieve the sales agreed upon with customers, as well as the production breakdown of the Lime Kiln with 200MT per day capacity due to fire resulting from electrical contact for 15 days, which had a significant impact on the company's ability to achieve the goals planned during the period.

Comparative sales statement until the end of the first quarter of the current year (2023: RO.577,703/-, 2022: RO.865,131/-)

Net Profit/Loss:

The Company had incurred a net loss of OMR. 46,066/- during the First Quarter 2023 compared to a net profit of OMR.121,488/- for the same period 2022.

One of the main reasons that led to this loss is the low demand for the dolomite product within the Sultanate and also the stoppage of major consumers of the company's main products (dolomite and quicklime) for the reasons mentioned above, as well as the decision of the Ministry of Transport to prevent the entry of transport tankers (empty) from neighboring countries that were transporting the company's products to desalination plants in the United Arab Emirates, which had a significant impact on the decrease in the company's sales of our product (quick lime).

In addition to the increase in the cost of transportation and the rise in direct production costs (lime stone, factory land rent, etc...) interest cost on lease liability as per IFRS16 has been increased due to the revised lease rent rates from Madayan. Customs duties has also been increased in addition to an increase in tariffs of water and electricity. However, the administration strives to find possible solutions to minimize the impact of these increase in the operational expenses and achieve the best possible results under these difficult circumstances.

In contrast the company still faces some obstacles of which the most important are mentioned below:

1.The recent decisions of Ministry of Transport to prevent the entry of (empty) land transportation tankers to the Sultanate of Oman to transport hydrate lime, had a negative impact on the company and led to a decline in its sales.

2.The high cost of direct and indirect production, and as a result of intense competition in neighboring countries, the company is unable to charge this increased cost to selling prices, including the increase in tariffs for electricity, water, natural gas and other components used in operating the lime kilns, which negatively affected the company's ability to compete in the markets, domestic and foreign.

3.Increase in customs duties imposed by neighboring countries on importing raw materials and exporting our products, the most important of which is the increase and introduction of road tolls, which negatively affected significantly in the cost of the product.

4.The fierce competition that we face in the local market from competitors from neighboring countries is very difficult, as we are unable to pass those additional expenses to our customers.

5.Follow-up with the concerned government agencies to obtain the necessary licenses to operate the company's quarries (Wadi Al-Jizzi and Dhank) to provide the raw materials needed in the production process in order to reduce the cost of production, as the company is now procuring the necessary raw materials from other suppliers inside and outside the Sultanate, which led to a high production cost compared with when it was provided through the company's quarries.

Prospects:

The company's management and all the company's employees are actively and continuously seeking to find new markets and new customers for the company's products quick lime, dolo lime and hydrated lime to compensate for the negative effects that affected the company's sales as a result of the reasons mentioned above, and as a result of the continuous effort and endeavor is underway with some customers in foreign markets to find New markets for the company's products such as quick lime, dolo lime and hydrated lime, which promise promising results, God willing.

The company's management also strives to solve the important problems facing the company by developing new production methods, reducing expenses and costs, and maintaining the level of product quality through maintenance and continuous improvement of the performance of production machines and the development of the technical staff in factory.

To improve the company's performance level, work is underway to obtain the completion of the necessary licenses to operate the company's suspended quarries through continuous follow-up with the concerned government agencies. A mining license has been obtained for the company's quarry located in the state of Sohar - Wadi Al-Jazi and is following up to obtain the environmental permit to operate the mine for production of Raw materials for our factory at a lower cost than it is now.

"Un Audited" Statement Of
Financial Position As At March 31, 2023

ASSETS	2023 March RO	2022 December RO
Current Assets:		
Cash and bank balances	391,213	564,008
Term deposit	507,562	500,000
Trade and other receivables	907,934	866,492
Inventories	1,648,203	1,505,353
Total Current Assets	3,454,912	3,435,853
Non-current Assets:		
Property, plant and equipment	4,022,826	4,088,896
Right of use of Assets	1,779,451	534,243
Total Non-current Assets	5,802,277	4,623,139
TOTAL ASSETS	9,257,189	8,058,992
LIABILITIES AND SHAREHOLDERS' EQUITY		
Current Liabilities:		
Trade and other payables	367,009	390,451
Tax provision	1,320	2,363
Current Portion of Lease Liability	96,000	72,000
Deferred Tax Liability	464,329	464,814
Non-current Liabilities:		
Employees service benefits	142,679	136,808
Non-Current portion of Lease Liability	1,751,123	512,246
Provision for decommissioning	16,112	16,112
Deferred Tax Liability	150,983	150,983
Total Non-current Liabilities	2,060,897	816,149
Total Liabilities	2,525,226	1,280,963
Shareholders' Equity:		
Share capital	6,250,000	6,250,000
Legal reserve	370,078	370,078
Accumulated profit/(loss)	111,885	157,951
Total Shareholders' Equity	6,731,963	6,778,029
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND SHAREHOLDERS' EQUITY	9,257,189	8,058,992
Net Assets Per Share [face value RO.0.100 each]	0.108	0.108

"Un Audited" Statement Of
Comprehensive IncomeFor The First
Quarter Ended On March 31, 2023

	March 2023 RO.	March 2022 RO.
Sales	577,703	865,131
Cost of sales	(481,338)	(649,217)
Gross Profit	96,365	215,914
Other income	2,467	27,292
General and administrative expenses	(97,406)	(96,488)
Selling and distribution expenses	(25,501)	(20,562)
Interest - bank facilities (net)	3,645	2,056
Interest - on lease liability (IFRS16)	(25,636)	(6,723)
Profit/(Loss) for the period before taxation	(46,066)	121,489
Taxation provision	(---)	(---)
Profit/(Loss) for the Period	(46,066)	121,489
Earnings/(Loss) per share [basic and diluted]	(0.0007)	0.0014

Note: The complete accounts either in English or Arabic will be sent to any shareholder by mail within 7 days of receipt of request

Huawei posts slight increase in Q1 revenue

Beijing, China - Huawei announced a 0.8 per cent increase in revenue from the same period last year as the sanctions-battered firm reorients its business layout.

The Shenzhen-based telecoms giant posted total revenue of 132.1bn yuan (US\$19.1bn) for the January-March period.

Huawei also announced that its net profit margin in the first quarter was 2.3 per cent, down from 4.3 per cent in the same period last year.

The firm said in the brief report that "overall operating re-



sults are in line with expectations".

The company, a leading supplier of telecom gear, smartphones and other advanced equipment, has been hit with tight trade restrictions by the

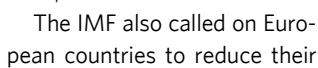
United States as relations between Washington and Beijing sour.

Huawei was once the world's top smartphone maker but saw its sales slump after sanctions cut off access to key parts and barred it from using Google's Android operating system.

It has since moved into the cloud computing sector - with an aim to invest in data centres around the world - and also focused on offering consumer tech such as smartwatches in addition to phones.

AFP

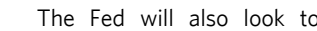
The IMF believes that central banks should still raise interest rates as it fears that increases in energy prices are feeding through to price increases throughout the economy.



"So there's a bit of room for wages to increase," said Kammer.

AFP

Barr's report found that the Fed "did not appreciate the seriousness of critical deficiencies in the firm's governance, liquidity, and

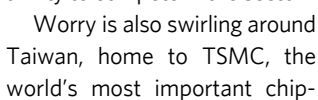


"While there are areas identified by Vice Chair Barr on which we agree -- including enhancing attention to liquidity issues, especially when a firm is rapidly growing -- the bulk of the report

As a result, "certain targeted reviews were not completed timely or at all," the report found.

AFP

In South Korea, Samsung Electronics' chip division re-



"It's a very intense, competitive ecosystem out there and it'll just get more complicated as more of these chips come to marketplace," said Gold.

AFP



مستثمرات الخليج
United GCC Fund

UNITED GCC FUND



المستثمرات للأوراق المالية
UNITED SECURITIES

Chairman's Report

Dear Investors,

It is with great pleasure that I announce the United GCC Fund's performance for the first quarter of 2023. Our fund delivered a remarkable 4.69% return in Q1 2023, surpassing the S&P GCC Index benchmark by over 700 basis points. It's also my pleasure to note that we have distributed dividends to our valued clients for the twelfth consecutive time.

The global stock market began the year on a high note, fueled by speculation that the Federal Reserve would pause its actions. However, the rapid rate increases by the central bank revealed vulnerabilities in the banking system, resulting in the collapse of SVB bank and sparking fears of contagion. Despite these challenges, central banks responded swiftly, joining forces to bolster dollar liquidity, stabilize the financial system, and restore market confidence. The Swiss government and regulators also facilitated the acquisition of Credit Suisse by UBS, reassuring investors and demonstrating the central banks' dedication to managing the crisis. Consequently, the MSCI World Index experienced gains during Q1 and rose by 6.84%, and the MSCI Emerging Index climbed by 3.54%.

In terms of oil, Brent closed by -7.15% lower at \$79.77/barrel. Recession fears, US reluctance to replenish the SPR, and strikes in France, which could affect demand, contributed to the decline in oil prices during the quarter. However, as we draft this report, OPEC+ has announced an unexpected cut in oil production by over 1 million barrels, signalling OPEC+ is targeting a USD 80/bbl price floor, which is favorable for the region. Furthermore, expected Chinese demand may tighten the market in the second half of the year, potentially supporting further upward risk to oil prices.

As of Q1 2023, regional markets displayed mixed performance, with Dubai's leading the pack with a gain of 2.68%, followed by Saudi Arabia and Oman with gains of 1.07% and 0.2% respectively. While Abu Dhabi saw the largest decline (-7.17%), followed by Qatar (-4.39%), Kuwait (-3.13%) and Bahrain (-4.0%).

The regional IPO boom remains robust, with sustained interest in recently listed IPOs and a projected increase in offerings this year. Moreover, political risks have receded, as Saudi Arabia has commenced talks with Iran and Syria, potentially leading to the reopening of embassies and consulates between the countries. We believe these recent initiatives will significantly reduce geopolitical risk while attracting tourists and foreign investors to the region.

Saudi Arabia has announced the first batch of Shareek program projects, totaling \$51 billion out of the intended \$1.3 trillion, in line with Vision 2030. This move illustrates the nation's commitment to diversifying away from a hydrocarbon-centric economy and promoting private sector investments by providing incentives like government off-take agreements and access to government loans or financial support. The government projects that the Shareek program's initial phase will generate over SAR 466.83 billion in GDP growth by 2040 while creating 64,451 jobs during the same period.

Looking ahead, the recent market correction has made valuations in the GCC area reasonable. Nonetheless, Q1 earnings will play a critical role in guiding us for the upcoming period. Our mix of equity holdings is well-positioned to capitalize on the current macro themes and from a bottom-up perspective as well. We have confidence in our disciplined investment approach and in-depth understanding of the GCC region, which will enable us to successfully navigate the prevailing market conditions.

Once more, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all our clients, investors, and stakeholders for placing their trust in us. Your faith inspires us to excel in our performance.

Yours sincerely,

Yours sincerely,

Mustafa Ahmed Salman

Chairman - Management Body, UGCC Fund



مستثمرات الخليج
United GCC Fund

Unaudited condensed interim statement of Comprehensive Income for the three-month period ended 31st March 2023

	Three months ended 31st Mar 2023	Three months ended 31st Mar 2022
	RO Unaudited	RO Unaudited
Income		
Interest income	599	258
Dividend income	206,964	181,203
Fair value change on financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	584,406	2,182,077
Realised gain/(loss) on sale of financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	44,065	363,891
Foreign exchange (loss)/gain	2,868	1,773
Other Income	-	-
Net investment income/(loss)	838,902	2,729,203
Expenses		
Management fees	(38,035)	(42,525)
Custody and administration fees	(6,656)	(7,442)
General and administrative expenses	(67,677)	(72,059)
	(112,368)	(122,025)
Profit and total comprehensive income/(loss) for the period and increase/(decrease) in net assets attributable to the unit holders	726,534	2,607,177
Profit/(loss) per unit	0.062	0.227

Unaudited condensed interim statement of Financial Position at 31st March 2023

	As at 31st March 2023	As at 31st December 2022
	RO Unaudited	RO Unaudited
ASSETS		
Cash and cash equivalents	1,333,701	714,966
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	14,716,944	17,327,082
Other receivables	136,653	80,902
Total assets	16,187,298	18,122,950
LIABILITIES		
Payables and accruals	346,475	73,056
Net assets attributable to unitholders	15,840,823	18,049,894
Total liabilities and assets attributable to unitholders	16,187,298	18,122,950
Net assets attributable to the unitholders per unit	1.342	1.524

To get the complete financials kindly contact us on : 24763300
Or email us on : info@usoman.com

For subscription details please contact UGCC Fund@ 24763362 or
email ugccfund@usoman.com

Oman Sail's SailFree shortlisted for CSR award

Oman Sail's SailFree programme has been nominated as a finalist in the Best Sports Event CSR Initiative category at the prestigious Middle East Sports Industry Awards 2023 (SPIA).

Delivered in partnership with bp Oman and the Oman Paralympic Association, SailFree was launched in 2019 as the first sailing programme for persons with disabilities in the region and has made incredible progress in its mission to introduce Omanis with disabilities to the sport.

In 2022, the squad celebrated its first ever medal after winning gold at the RS Venture Connect World Championships hosted at the Barceló Mussanah Resort - the largest event of its kind in the entire year and the first exclusively Para Sailing event to be held in Oman.

SailFree has provided the framework for those with zero sailing experience to compete internationally, with members of the programme competing at regattas in Belgium, France and the United Kingdom during the last year, and equipped coaches with the skills to train people with disabilities using the highly-adaptable RS Venture Connect dinghy to ensure sailing is a sport for all.

The programme has also shown the potential for sailing to change lives, foster a newfound sense of freedom and unlock valuable life skills through learning, teamwork and participation. Ten para sailors from SailFree also volunteered at the World Athletics Race Walking Team Championships, held in Muscat.

Khamis al Anbouri, SailFree programme manager, said, "Being shortlisted for this award is an incredible achievement for SailFree and acknowledgement of the wide-reaching impact the programme has had."

The progress the team has made since the initiative launched, Anbouri said, "is remarkable and has been the spark to develop Oman as a hub for Para Sailing within the region and further afield, as shown by the international representation at the RS Venture Connect World



Championship. We are proud to pioneer sailing as an inclusive sport in the region and provide a positive example for others to

follow as we move towards an inclusive society where opportunities are available for all."

The driving factors behind

SailFree are linked to 10 of the 12 National Priorities outlined in Oman Vision 2040. SailFree's activities promote education,

learning and research, as well as developing national capabilities, improving health and wellbeing, and national identity within par-

ticipants.

SailFree has a strong environmental message and members of the programme take an active role in Oman Sail's overarching mission to preserve the country's beaches and oceans, while also encouraging leadership, cooperation and sustainable development for the long-term prosperity of the nation.

These goals run parallel to the UN Sustainable Development Goals where SailFree provides meaningful contributions to 10 of the 17 areas, building on Vision 2040 by reducing inequality, stimulating economic growth, and providing a platform to raise awareness of the impact of climate change and responsible consumption.

SailFree's success will be felt across the international sailing community in the coming months as four therapists from the Al Amal Occupational Therapy & Rehab Centre at the Armed Forces Hospital passed the national classifier final as-

essment in November 2022 and are now one step away from becoming International Classifiers.

There are currently just 11 international classifiers worldwide, meaning Oman's contribution will be significant for para sailing globally.

Oman Sail won both 'Best Sports Event Organiser of the Year' and 'Best Sports Event of the Year' at the SPIA Awards following an exceptional year in 2021. In recognition of a landmark year for the company, Oman Sail harnessed over a decade of international event management experience to deliver nine major sailing events and set a new Guinness World Records™ in the process.

Organised by Sport 360X, the SPIA Awards recognise the achievements of the sporting industry across the Middle East in 18 categories. The winners will be announced at a gala awards ceremony on Wednesday at the Atlantis, The Palm, in Dubai.

Omantel awards contracts to Omani freelance entrepreneurs

Oman Telecommunications Company 'Omantel' signed agreements with a group of young Omani male and female freelancers to award contracts for document archiving services.

The initiative aims to support the efforts made by the Sultanate of Oman to keep pace with the rapid developments in the business environment in Oman.

The business development efforts, led by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is intended to enhance the role of individual institutions and companies to contribute to the promotion of the national economy.

The agreements were signed by Ghassan bin Khamis al Hashar, the Acting Chief Financial Officer of Omantel.

Speaking about the agreement, Ghassan stressed that Omantel is, as usual, at the forefront of companies seeking to promote initiatives that support the national economy and utilize the capabilities of Omani graduates to empower entrepreneurs, in addition to contributing to the development of the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Omantel's Acting Chief Financial Officer further said, "These agreements represent an important milestone for Omantel's Strategic Sourcing & Procure-



ment Division, as this initiative is being launched with the aim to support freelance local business owners by assigning direct contracts for document archiving services."

On his part, Ghalib bin Ali bin Hamoud al Mamari, Acting General Manager of Strategic Sourcing & Procurement at Omantel, said "By awarding direct contracts to this group of freelancers, we will make use of their skills to provide documents and archives management services. After fulfilling the legislative and regulatory requirements, the se-

lected freelancers can offer their services in accordance with the legal framework that was recently announced by the National Employment Program."

It is worth mentioning that the introduction of this framework has enabled the Strategic Sourcing and Procurement Division of Omantel Finance Unit to launch such an unprecedented initiative to support medium and small enterprises, business owners, and entrepreneurs.

"This initiative is a continuation of support provided during the past period and a prelude to

several upcoming initiatives that can be used to explore the skills of young people who possess commercial licenses to practice self-employment from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion.

"According to the regulations in force to register freelancers in this field and with the commitment of the entrepreneurs for self-employment, we will be able to make a solid impact by spreading the culture of self-employment and raising productivity and competitiveness in the labor market," he concluded.

Khedmah launches new digital service for payment of traffic fines

As part of the ongoing efforts to promote collaboration and partnership between public and private sector institutions and to facilitate services for citizens and residents, Oman Investment and Finance Company 'Khedmah' has launched a new service to inquire about and pay traffic violation fines through its service application and website.

This service builds on the existing cooperation between the company and the Royal Oman Police, which aims to provide a range of traffic services through the company's various channels.

This step is a qualitative addition to the services provided by 'Khedmah', wherein the company previously introduced services for printing ownerships and paying fines for traffic violations through self-service devices at its branches in various governorates of the Sultanate.

This step has contributed over the past period to facilitating and saving effort, costs, and time for beneficiaries of these services.

On this occasion, Saeed bin Ahmed Safar, the CEO of Oman Investment and Finance Company 'Khedmah', expressed his happiness with the launch of the traffic violation payment service on the 'Khedmah' application.

"This step reflects the confidence that we have in Khedmah to accomplish a diverse set of quality services, and falls within



the framework of the company's efforts to accommodate the largest possible number of services for its customers in one platform."

He expressed his thanks and appreciation to those involved in the Royal Oman Police for their trust and efforts in launching this service, and their cooperation in everything that would enhance integration between the public and private sectors in facilitating services for citizens and residents.

It is worth mentioning that the number of users of the 'Khedmah' app recently

reached 800,000, which serves as a single station to carry out many services, most notably paying bills for public services, recharging phones and electricity, car insurance, subscription to entertainment channels, donating to charitable institutions, paying social insurance subscriptions, and other services.

'Khedmah' seeks to employ innovation in its operations and to find new and advanced digital solutions for financial transactions, which aligns with national efforts aimed at achieving digital transformation.

Philippine leader in US to bolster ties

Manila and Washington recently agreed to expand their cooperation in strategic areas

Manila, Philippines - President Ferdinand Marcos left Manila for a visit to the United States on Sunday, after the allies bolstered military cooperation in the South China Sea with their largest-ever drills and inked an agreement expanding US troops' access to bases in the Philippines.

Manila and Washington recently agreed to expand their cooperation in 'strategic areas' of the Philippines as they seek to counter Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region and its sweeping claims over disputed waters, small islands and shoals.

Marcos's visit comes after the United States called on China to stop 'provocative and unsafe conduct' in the contested South China Sea after a recent near-collision with a Philippine coast guard vessel.

Marcos begins his four-day trip with a meeting with US President Joe Biden on Monday at the White House, which the Philippine leader described as 'essential to advancing our national interest and strengthening that very important alliance'.

"We will reaffirm our commitment to fostering our long-standing alliance as an instrument of peace and as a catalyst of development in the Asia Pacific region," Marcos said in a pre-departure statement.

Ahead of the visit, US State Department spokesman



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. welcomes Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang during a courtesy call at Malacanang Palace in Manila on April 22 (AFP)

Matthew Miller slammed China over the near-collision of one of its ships with a Philippine patrol boat a week ago, saying it was a reminder of Beijing's 'harassment and intimidation' in the disputed waterway.

"We call upon Beijing to desist from its provocative and unsafe conduct," he said in a statement, adding that any attack on Philippine armed forces would trigger a US response.

Biden has been working to bolster relations with Asian allies as the US-Chinese relationship remains in a historically deep

chill. The Philippines' proximity to key sea lanes and Taiwan gives it strategic importance.

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, ignoring an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

A near-miss

On April 23, as a Philippine Coast Guard boat carrying journalists neared the Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands, a Chinese vessel more than twice its size sailed into its path.

AFP journalists witnessed the

incident from another Philippine boat less than a kilometre (0.6 miles) away.

The first vessel's commanding officer said the Chinese ship came within 45 metres (50 yards) of his boat, and only quick actions avoided a collision.

The Chinese foreign ministry said on Friday that the Philippine boats had 'intruded' without China's permission and called it a 'premeditated and provocative action'.

Manila responded that 'routine patrols in our own waters can be neither premeditated or

provocative' and insisted the patrols would continue.

Marcos has said he will not let China trample on the Philippines'

We will reaffirm our commitment to fostering our long-standing alliance as an instrument of peace and as a catalyst of development in the Asia Pacific region

FERDINAND MARCOS JR

rights in the sea, and has gravitated towards the United States as he seeks to strengthen defence ties.

This month, the Philippines identified four military bases - in addition to five existing sites - to which US forces will have access, including one near the Spratly Islands.

The allies also carried out their largest-ever military manoeuvres in recent weeks.

This shift has alarmed China, which has accused Washington of trying to drive a wedge between Beijing and Manila.

'Ironclad commitment'

US-Philippine ties were badly frayed under Marcos's predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.

Marcos has sought to allay public fears that the alliance with the United States could bring the Philippines into a conflict if China were to invade Taiwan, which Beijing sees as its own territory to be reclaimed one day.

Marcos has said he will speak with Biden about the 'need to tone down the rhetoric' over the South China Sea, Taiwan and North Korea.

White House Spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said this month that Biden intended, in the meeting with Marcos, to 'reaffirm the United States' ironclad commitment to the defence of the Philippines'.

Before departing on Sunday, Marcos said he would convey to Biden that Manila wished to forge stronger ties in areas ranging from food and energy security, to 'ensuring our resilience from threats to our economy, including global supply chain disruptions and economic coercion'.

Marcos added that he would push for 'greater economic engagement' between the two countries and expected to meet US business leaders to promote trade and investment.

AFP

Philippines: 4 missing after dive boat sinks

Manila, Philippines - Rescuers were searching for four people on Sunday after a boat carrying more than a dozen scuba divers sank at a World Heritage-listed marine sanctuary in the Philippines, authorities said.

The Philippine Coast Guard said 28 people were rescued after 'Dream Keeper' went down on Sunday morning in the pristine waters at Tubbataha Reef off the western province of Palawan.

Four Chinese nationals were among those on board the dive boat.

The owner of the vessel, a dive master and two guests were still missing, coast guard spokesman Rear Admiral Armando Balilo said.

A coast guard vessel and about 10 dive boats were searching the waters.

"It's full of diving enthusiasts now and it's on their bucket list. It's a dream dive," said Balilo, referring to Tubbataha.

The 97,000-hectare Tubbataha Reef is one of the country's largest marine protected areas.

AFP

'I call it being seasoned': Biden laughs off jokes about his age

Washington, US - US President Joe Biden took it on the chin on Saturday at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner as he laughed gamely through sharp jokes about his age, and hit back with a few of his own.

Washington's political and media elites gathered for their annual big-night-out in the US capital for an event that ranged from the traditional comedy gags to somber calls to free reporters imprisoned abroad.

Headlining the after-dinner entertainment was *Daily Show* correspondent Roy Wood Jr., who gleefully mocked Biden, 80, for running for a second term in the White House that could mean he is still president at age 86. Wood noted recent angry protests in France against raising the retirement age.

"They rioted because they didn't want to work until 64. Meanwhile, in America, we have an 80-year-old man begging us for four more years of work," he dead-panned, drawing a broad smile from Biden, sitting only yards away.

"Let me finish the job' - That's not a campaign slogan, that's a plea," Wood added. "Say what you want about our president, but when he wakes up from that nap, work gets done."

Biden aimed one of his barbs at media mogul Rupert Murdoch, the 92-year-old owner of conservative TV network Fox News.

"You might think I don't like Rupert Murdoch, that's simply not true. How can I dislike a guy who makes me look like (29-year-old pop star) Harry Styles?" Biden joked. He also targeted CNN presenter Don Lemon who was sacked allegedly after sexist and ageist on-air remarks.

"Call me old - I call it being seasoned. You say I am ancient - I say I'm wise. You say I'm over



Call me old - I call it being seasoned. You say I am ancient - I say I'm wise. You say I'm over the hill - Don Lemon would say that's a man in his prime

JOE BIDEN

the hill - Don Lemon would say that's a man in his prime."

The dinner institution had started to wither - first boycotted by Donald Trump, then shut down altogether to fend off COVID-19.

Even last year, strict COVID testing, frequent use of masks and diminished attendance resulted in a low-key affair.

But this year's event for 2,600 guests was sold out, and attended by both Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

Having the president and vice president in attendance restored a tradition last observed in 2016, the final dinner before Trump entered the White House.

"Folks, it is wonderful to be back here again, proving I haven't learned a damn thing," said Biden. The occasion is meant to celebrate the constitution's First Amendment guarantees of free speech and to advocate for a free press worldwide.

AFP

France: Thousands protest against immigration plans

Paris, France - Thousands of people, including many undocumented migrants, marched in Paris and other French cities on Saturday, protesting planned changes to immigration laws and evictions from the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte.

In the French capital, demonstrators marched behind a banner proclaiming 'No to the Darmanin law. Against repression, imprisonment and deportations, for a welcoming migration policy', a reference to Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin. Organisers said that 2,300 people turned out for the protest in Paris.

The immigration bill, which the government has just postponed until the autumn, 'is a racist law, which aims to criminalise foreigners' and lead to 'more deportations', said Aboubacar, 31, an undocumented Malian.

"The problem is not immigra-



Demonstrators marching behind a banner against the legislative proposal on asylum and immigration, in Paris, on Saturday (AFP)

tion, it's exploitation and rogue bosses," said the post office subcontractor who, with colleagues, has been fighting for 17 months to obtain his official documents to live and work in France.

The protesters also took aim at Operation Wuambushi (Take

Back) being carried out by the authorities on the French Indian Ocean Island of Mayotte to send back illegal immigrants, most from neighbouring Comoros, currently housed in unsanitary shanty towns.

"The way undocumented Co-

morans are treated is unworthy of a country like France," said Marie-Christine Vergiat, vice-president of the French Human Rights League and a former member of the European parliament.

The Darmanin bill and the operation in Mayotte are linked, Said Mhamadi, a Comoran civil leader, said in the southern port city of Marseille, where up to 300 people demonstrated.

'Controlling immigration'

The controversial bill, entitled 'Controlling immigration while improving integration', is aimed, among other things, at providing greater scope for deportation, especially for foreigners who commit crimes.

It would require a minimum level of French before a multi-year residence permit could be granted, would introduce manda-

tory fingerprinting, and tighten requirements for the renewal of long-term permits.

On Wednesday, the French government once again failed to reach consensus on the immigration bill, which is considered too divisive in an already abrasive social climate.

The government is promising a balance between the expulsion of foreigners who threaten public order and better integration of undocumented migrants, in particular by regularising workers in sectors where manpower is needed.

But while its critics believe the reforms are too authoritarian, Eric Ciotti, the head of the right-wing Republicans, believes they don't go far enough. 'No more rights for illegal immigrants, no more social benefits from the first day' for regular immigrants, he said.

AFP

German climate activists find sanctuary in churches

Berlin, Germany - Copies of a climate change petition along with photos of the signatories lay at the foot of the altar. Metres away, a dozen activists were undergoing street protest training.

Other members of the Letzte Generation (Last Generation) group were having a vegan brunch buffet in the pews, minutes before they were to march out through the imposing doors of Berlin's St. Thomas Church for their latest demonstration to press the government to do more for the climate.

The Protestant church has become the unlikely staging point for the climate activists in their latest two-week campaign to bring Berlin's traffic to a standstill by glueing themselves onto the asphalt.

In northeastern Berlin, Gethsemane Church - a key site in the peaceful revolution that brought down the Berlin Wall - is hosting an open discussion on climate change every evening this week, before handing the baton to another church next week.



Activists of the environmental group 'Last Generation' (Letzte Generation) hold a march outside the Saint Thomas church in Berlin's Kreuzberg district on Wednesday (AFP)

Although politicians including leading members of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government have blasted Letzte Generation's road blockade protests, the churches have thrown open their doors to the activists.

"We want to contribute to al-

lowing the participants to remain in peace," said the St. Thomas Church's council in a statement.

"The radicalisation of the climate movement is the expression of the despair that too little is being done for the protection of the climate and thereby for the

preservation of Creation. We're taking this despair seriously and confronting it," they added.

The churches' action is not without controversy, as surveys suggest a majority of the public frown on Letzte Generation's protests.

In a recent poll by national broadcaster ZDF, 82 per cent of respondents felt the street blockades went too far.

Scholz's government, including the Greens, have also spoken out against the protests. Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck of the Greens has said the street blockades were 'not a helpful contribution to climate protection' because they don't win consensus, rather they 'irritate people'.

"The supposed saviours of the world in a church - what hypocrisy," charged *Focus* magazine in a column.

Amid the accusations flying at the protesters, pastor Aljona Hofmann at Gethsemane Church said it was all the more important for both sides to have a platform to communicate directly and peacefully.

"The strength of the church is to bring together people with different opinions, in order to sound out what we have in common and where do we diverge," said the pastor.

AFP

Heavy fighting rocks Sudan despite truce

Army forces clashed with paramilitaries as deadly hostilities have entered a third week

Khartoum, Sudan - Heavy fighting again rocked Sudan's capital on Sunday as tens of thousands have fled the bloody turmoil and a former prime minister warned of the 'nightmare' risk of a descent into full-scale civil war.

Army forces clashed with paramilitaries in Khartoum as deadly hostilities have entered a third week despite the latest ceasefire, which was formally set to expire at the end of the day.

"There has been very heavy fighting and loud gunfire ... since the early morning on my street," a southern Khartoum resident told AFP.

Clashes were reported around the army headquarters in central Khartoum, and the army also carried out airstrikes in the capital's twin city of Omdurman across the Nile River.

Foreign nations have scrambled to evacuate thousands of their citizens by air, road and sea



Sudanese army soldiers rest near a tank at a checkpoint in Khartoum on Sunday, as clashes continue in war-torn country (AFP)

since the fighting plunged the poverty-stricken country into deadly turmoil on April 15.

A first Red Cross plane brought eight tonnes of humanitarian aid to Port Sudan, from Jordan, on Sunday. It carried surgical material and medical kits to stabilise 1,500 patients, the International Committee of the Red Cross said.

Millions of Sudanese have endured crippling shortages of water, food, medicines and other basic supplies, while tens of thousands have fled to neighbouring countries, with more on their way.

Satellite images showed long bus convoys at the Egyptian border, while the UN said tens of thousands had escaped to Chad,

South Sudan, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic.

The turmoil could deepen further in the power struggle between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Sudan's former premier Abdalla Hamdok warned on Saturday that the conflict could

If Sudan is to reach a point of civil war... Syria, Yemen, Libya will be a small play...a nightmare for the world

ABDALLA HAMDOK

deteriorate into one of the world's worst civil wars.

"God forbid if Sudan is to reach a point of civil war proper... Syria, Yemen, Libya will be a small play," Hamdok told an event in Nairobi. "I think it would be a nightmare for the world."

Risk of famine

The violence has killed at least 528 people and wounded about 4,600, the health ministry said, although the real casualty toll may be higher from fighting in 12 out of Sudan's 18 states including the Darfur region.

The UN World Food Programme has warned the unrest could plunge millions more into hunger in a country where 15mn people already need aid to stave off famine.

Some of those killed still lie on the roads of Khartoum, and the ICRC's Africa regional director Patrick Youssef told journalists the Sudanese Red Crescent was 'trying to get to the bodies in the streets'.

Only 16 per cent of hospitals are functioning in Khartoum, according to the World Health Organization, with many facilities shelled in the fighting.

The warring sides have agreed to multiple truces but none has taken hold, as chaos and lawlessness have gripped the capital city of five million and other regions.

The latest three-day ceasefire - due to expire at midnight (2200 GMT) on Sunday - was agreed on Thursday after mediation led by the United States, Saudi Arabia, the African Union and the United Nations.

As the battles have raged regardless, the rival generals have taken aim at each other in the media. Burhan again branded the RSF a militia that aims 'to destroy Sudan' while Daglo called the army chief 'a traitor'.

Local authorities in Khartoum on Sunday put civil servants on open-ended leave 'due to the security situation', though the majority of residents have already been hiding at home since the fighting broke out.

Sudan was ruled for decades by Islamist-backed strongman Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted by the military in 2019 after mass pro-democracy protests.

The coup brought Burhan and Daglo to power, and they seized full control in another military takeover, in 2021, before turning on each other.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged negotiations to end the bloodshed.

"There is no right to go on fighting for power when the country is falling apart," he told Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television on Saturday.

AFP

Israelis protest ahead of new parliament session

Tel Aviv, Israel - The latest protest against the Israeli government's controversial judicial reform plans packed central Tel Aviv on Saturday, as divisions persist before lawmakers return to parliament.

Opponents of the legislation have kept up demonstrations in the commercial hub and across the country since January, despite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu putting the controversial reform programme on ice a month ago. 'History has its eyes on you', read a placard held aloft at the rally in Tel Aviv, where demonstrators lit flares and waved national flags in the latest show of political discontent.

Israeli society has been deeply split over the ambitious legislation, which seeks to weaken the Supreme Court and hand politicians greater influence over the selection of judges. Netanyahu's right-wing administration argues the proposals are necessary to rebalance power between the judi-



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends a weekly cabinet meeting in the prime minister's office in Jerusalem on Sunday (AFP)

ciary and elected officials, while opponents say they represent a threat to democracy.

The weekly rallies have repeatedly drawn tens of thousands onto the streets of Tel Aviv. Israel's Channel 12 estimated around 150,000 attended on Saturday, while Channel 13 put the figure at around 200,000.

Holding an Israeli flag, protester Iris Oren said the rally was a 'fight for democracy'.

"This struggle gives us strength and it is clear to me that it also reaches the Knesset (parliament), and it is clear to them that they will not be able to pass unilateral decisions," she told AFP. Israelis gathered against the backdrop of cross-party talks hosted by President Isaac Herzog this month, which have sought to reach a compromise on the reform package.

AFP

Uzbekistan votes to 'strengthen president'

Tashkent, Uzbekistan - Voters across Central Asian Uzbekistan went to the polls on Sunday in a constitutional referendum that could allow President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to remain in power until 2040.

Mirziyoyev, 65, became president in 2016 after the death of dictator Islam Karimov.

He insists the overhaul of the constitution will improve governance and quality of life in the landlocked country of 35mn people, whose rights have long been heavily restricted.

But it is Mirziyoyev who is expected to benefit most in the majority-Muslim country, observers say.

The constitutional changes would extend presidential terms from five to seven years, allowing him to serve two more terms and extend his time in power until 2040. The authoritarian reformer voted in the capital Tashkent with his family.

Polling stations opened at 8am (0300 GMT), according to the Uzbek Election Commission.



A woman casts her ballot at a polling station in Tashkent on Sunday (AFP)

They will close at 8pm.

There is little doubt the amendments will be adopted, in a country where the media is heavily controlled.

The government has gone to some lengths to give the vote a veneer of legitimacy, enrolling local celebrities at large rallies and concerts to praise the proposals and the president.

Billboards around Tashkent, the biggest city in Central Asia, encourage people to vote.

The campaign appears to be working.

"The new constitution will change my life," Shamsiddin Zhurayev, a 40-year-old businessman, told AFP outside a Tashkent polling station.

"But I don't really know in what way."

Yet the prospect of Mirziyoyev clinging on to power unnerved some.

"Everything is done so that the president remains in power for

life," said 70-year-old pensioner Nurkhamil, who refused to give his last name.

He conceded that Mirziyoyev had 'made some reforms and tries to change things' but worried the Uzbek leader is following the footsteps of longtime Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Our authorities are copying Putin's system," he said.

"They (leaders) are not eternal, you have to respect your people."

Following Karimov's death, Mirziyoyev spearheaded a series of reforms in Uzbekistan, including a clampdown on forced labour in the cotton fields.

But activists say rights abuses persist, and authorities have shown no sign of allowing a political opposition to emerge. In 2022, at least 21 people died during demonstrations in the autonomous region Karakalpakstan. Rights activists accused the authorities of having used lethal force against the protesters.

AFP

'Anyone is better': Turkey's young voters turn away from Erdogan

Istanbul, Turkey - Student Emre Ali Ferli has known no leader other than Recep Tayyip Erdogan. That's enough to make the 18-year-old back the Turkish president's main rival when he votes for the first time on May 14.

"I am tired of getting up every day and thinking about politics," said Ferli, referring to the tumult of Erdogan's 20-year rule.

"When President Erdogan is gone, young people will be able to focus on their exams and to speak freely."

Like Ferli, around 5.2mn Turks who reached voting age since Erdogan came to power in 2003 - eight per cent of the electorate - will have their first say on election day.

The 69-year-old president's chief opponent, 74-year-old former civil servant Kemal Kilicdaroglu, is banking on students such as Ferli. "It is through you that spring will come," the grandfatherly leader of Turkey's main secular party told a youth

rally in Ankara.

Opinion polls suggest that Kilicdaroglu has reason to be optimistic.

One survey showed only 20 per cent of Turks in the 18-25 age bracket ready to vote for Erdogan and his Islamic-rooted party in the presidential and parliamentary polls. Both past Turkey's retirement age, Erdogan and Kilicdaroglu have been trying to seduce Gen Z voters with pledges to abolish a tax on mobile phone purchases and free internet packages.

Adding to Erdogan's problems, a third candidate, 58-year-old secular nationalist Muharrem Ince, is posing as a more fresh-faced alternative.

"The Erdogan vote is lower among young people," said Erman Bakirci, a researcher at the Konda polling institute.

"First-time voters are more modern and less religious than the average voter, and more than half are dissatisfied with the



A Supporter holds up a sign reading 'Democrat vs Dictator' during a rally in support of Republican People's Party (CHP) Chairman and Presidential candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu in Kocaeli, on Friday (AFP)

life they lead."

'Anyone is better'

In Kasimpasa, a working-class Istanbul district where Erdogan

played street football growing up, some have no fear of speaking out against their native son.

"Erdogan must go! All my neighbours will vote for him, but

not me," Gokhan Celik, a 19-year-old in a green tracksuit, declared under two flags emblazoned with the president's face.

Firat Yurdayigit, 21, a textile worker, criticised Erdogan for building a third airport for Istanbul 'instead of taking care of people'.

"I will vote for Muharrem Ince," Yurdayigit said. "But no matter who is elected, anyone is better than Erdogan."

His friend Bilal Buyukler, 24, tried to defend the Turkish leader.

But even he conceded that Erdogan was 'partly responsible' for years of economic turmoil, including historically high inflation and a currency collapse.

"I can't find work because of the Syrian refugees," said Buyukler, blaming his unemployment on the 3.7mn people who fled war on Turkey's southern border to big cities such as Istanbul. "I can't get married - it's too expensive," he said. "But I don't see any alternative."

"I can't vote for Kilicdaroglu because of religion. He walked on a prayer rug with his shoes!"

he exclaimed, pointing to a campaign faux pas by the opposition leader highlighted by pro-government media and Erdogan.

Kilicdaroglu has taken pains to dispel the staunchly secular image of his CHP party, a constant worry for socially conservative voters who found a home in Erdogan's AK Party.

Last year, Kilicdaroglu proposed a law guaranteeing women's right to wear headscarves, trying to peel away voters won over by Erdogan's unshackling of religious restrictions. "Mr Kemal will never let you lose your gains," Kilicdaroglu said in a video message aimed at conservative women.

His six-party alliance also includes three conservative Islamic groups, which Seda Demiralp, an associate professor at Istanbul's Isik University, called 'a message of reconciliation intended for the religious electorate'.

AFP

Fuel depot in Crimea on fire, Russian-held towns shelled

Kyiv, Ukraine - A huge fire erupted in Moscow-annexed Crimea after a suspected drone attack hit an oil depot, as fighting intensified on the southern Ukrainian front and shelling deprived Russian border villages of power.

The attacks on Saturday came one day after Kyiv said preparations for a long-awaited counteroffensive were nearly complete, having vowed to expel Russian forces from territory they seized in the east and south following their 2022 invasion.

On Friday, a Russian strike on a block of flats in the central Ukrainian city of Uman killed 23 people, including a baby boy.

On Saturday, officials in Moscow-controlled Crimea, towns under Russian occupation in southern Ukraine reported attacks. The governor of the region near the border with Ukraine also said two people were killed when a Ukrainian missile hit a village.

"As a result of the strike inflicted by Ukrainian nationalists, unfortunately, two civilians were killed," Alexander Bogomaz, governor of Bryansk oblast, said in a message posted on Telegram, reporting an attack on Suzemka.

Fears of Ukrainian reprisals more than a year into Moscow's offensive have grown in Russia, where a range of cities have cancelled traditional May 9 celebrations to mark the Soviet victory over the Nazis at the end of World War II in 1945.

In Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, clouds of smoke rose high into the sky as fuel reserves burned.

The Crimean port city has



This video grab taken from a footage released on Saturday on the Telegram channel of Mikhail Razvozhayev, the Moscow-installed governor of Sevastopol, shows a huge fire at a fuel depot in Sevastopol (AFP)

We will do everything possible to ensure that the terrorist state is held accountable for its actions as soon as possible

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

been hit by a series of drone attacks since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine began more than a year ago.

'God's punishment'

Russian-installed authorities said the fire was caused by a sus-

pected drone but sought to play down the incident, amid rising security fears on the peninsula.

The Kremlin said nothing about the attack.

It came less than 24 hours after Russia struck a typical Soviet-era housing block in the historic city of Uman, killing more than two dozen residents.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, in his evening address on Saturday, said six children had been killed in the attack - the previous figure given by the authorities had been five. "We will do everything possible to ensure that the terrorist state is held accountable for its actions as soon as possible," he added.

"Anyone who prepares such

rocket attacks cannot but know that they will become an accomplice to murder."

The Ukraine leader said that next week would be important in terms of 'our struggle for justice'.

He stressed that Kyiv was preparing 'several important, powerful steps to consolidate our partners and give more energy to the creation of a tribunal for the crime of Russian aggression. And to accelerate the defeat of the terrorist state'.

Earlier Kyiv had identified an 18-month-old baby boy as among the victims.

"One woman is considered missing. The search continues," Ukrainian Interior Minister Igor Klymenko said. Ukraine did not claim the Crimea attack, but mil-

itary intelligence implied it was revenge for Uman.

Andriy Yusov, from the defence ministry's intelligence unit, said it was 'God's punishment, in particular for the civilians killed in Uman'. He warned people in Crimea to 'avoid being near military facilities and facilities providing the aggressor's army in the near future'.

On the Russian-annexed peninsula, the governor of Sevastopol, Mikhail Razvozhayev, urged Crimeans to 'remain calm' and said 'nobody was hurt'.

Razvozhayev insisted that the peninsula's reserves had not been impacted and that authorities had enough fuel for all civilian needs.

AFP



National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) personnel arrive to inspect the gas leak accident at a factory in Ludhiana on Sunday (AFP)

Gas leak kills 11 people in India

Amritsar, India - A gas leak killed 11 people in India on Sunday, an official said, in the latest deadly industrial accident in the vast developing economy of 1.4bn people.

The gas leak happened in Gaspura, an industrial area of Ludhiana in the northern state of Punjab. "Eleven deaths are confirmed," Mandeep Singh Sidhu, police commissioner of Ludhiana, told reporters, adding that four people were hospitalised.

The cause of the leak was yet to be ascertained, Sidhu added.

"When the blood sample is matched with the sample that the NDRF (National Disaster Response Force) team takes, only then will we be able to tell you the exact cause, which kind of gas," the police commissioner said.

Five women were among those who died, broadcaster NDTV reported. The six other victims included two boys aged 10 and 13, the report added.

Industrial gas leaks blamed on poor safety standards and insufficient checks are common in India.

Last August, at least 112 women were hospitalised after a gas leak at an apparel manufac-

turing plant in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. That followed a similar accident in June when around 200 women fell unconscious after a gas leak in the same area, NDTV reported.

In 2020, at least 15 people were killed and hundreds hospitalised after a gas leak at a chemical plant in Visakhapatnam, an industrial port city in the same state.

Nearly 1,000 people were exposed to the gas and over 500 were hospitalised with symptoms of severe respiratory distress and skin and eye irritation.

Residents were found slumped in the streets after being exposed to the gas, forcing a large-scale evacuation around the plant.

A government report accused the plant's owner LG Polymers, a subsidiary of South Korea's LG Chem, of negligence and said the disaster was due to a lack of safety protocols and poor emergency response.

Two senior South Korean executives and 10 other local employees were arrested and charged with offences, including the Indian legal equivalent of manslaughter.

AFP

Gunman on the run after 5 shot dead in Texas

Houston, US - Police in Texas said they were searching on Saturday for a man believed to have shot dead five neighbours after they asked him to stop firing his rifle in his yard late at night.

The victims, who were all from Honduras, included an eight-year-old child, the local sheriff said.

The drunken gunman apparently stormed into the crowded house and opened fire, reportedly infuriated by the request to stop shooting his semi-automatic weapon in his yard because the noise was keeping a baby awake.

Sheriff Greg Capers of San Jacinto County, which is north of Houston, described a horrifying scene when authorities arrived at the residence after receiving a call about 'harassment' around 11:30pm on Friday.

The victims, aged from eight to 40 years old, were strewn from the front door through the house to an inside bedroom, where two women were found lying on top of two traumatised children who survived the massacre.

"In my opinion, they were actually trying to take care of the babies and keep them babies alive," Capers told ABC's Houston station KTRK.

AFP

UN chief, envoys in key talks on Afghanistan crisis

Doha, Qatar - UN chief Antonio Guterres will gather international envoys at a secret location in Doha on Monday in an increasingly desperate bid to find ways to influence Afghanistan's Taliban rulers.

Considered the world's biggest humanitarian crisis by the United Nations, Guterres's quandary has been deepened by the Taliban administration's move to stop girls going to school and most women from working, even for UN agencies.

The Taliban government, which took back power in August 2021, will be absent from the talks with representatives from about 25 countries and international organisations, according to diplomats.

Ahead of the talks, a small group of women staged a protest in Kabul on Saturday to

oppose any international recognition of the Taliban government. But the UN and Western powers are adamant this will not be discussed.

"Any kind of recognition of the Taliban is completely off the table," said US State Department spokesman Vedant Patel.

Apart from confirming that the Taliban leadership is not on the list of participants, the UN has refused to provide any specifics including the location in Qatar's capital or who will join Guterres.

The Taliban's deputy minister for refugees Mohammad Arsala Kharoti said on Sunday that 'such meetings will not have any results'. "As long as they don't establish proper relations with the Emirate (Taliban-ruled Afghanistan) and no representation of the Emirate is present,



This file photo shows members of a Taliban delegation arriving for a meeting with foreign diplomats in Qatar's capital Doha on October 12, 2021 (AFP)

these meetings won't be successful to a great extent," he told AFP at Kabul airport.

In Doha, the UN secretary-general is also to give an update

on a review of the world body's critical relief operation in Afghanistan, ordered in April after authorities had stopped Afghan women from working

with UN agencies, diplomats said.

The UN has said it faces an 'appalling choice' over whether to maintain its huge operation in

the country of 38mn.

Torn apart over the Ukraine war and other global tensions, the UN Security Council powers united on Thursday to condemn the curbs on Afghan women and girls and urge all countries to seek 'an urgent reversal' of the policies.

The Afghan foreign ministry rejected the call and said the ban 'is an internal social matter of Afghanistan'.

Richard Gowan, UN expert for the International Crisis Group, an independent NGO, said the UN is 'in a trap over Afghanistan'.

"Guterres has to untangle a very complicated knot. He needs to find a way to keep aid flowing into Afghanistan, but the Taliban ban on women is a huge blow to the UN's ability to operate in the country."

AFP

Pope Francis appeals to Hungarians to be 'open' to migrants

Budapest, Hungary - Pope Francis on Sunday called on Hungarians to be 'open' toward migrants, as he wrapped up a three-day visit to the central European country whose nationalist premier has taken a staunch anti-immigration stance.

Tens of thousands thronged a central Budapest square to hear the pope lead an open-air mass during which he urged all, including 'those with political and social responsibilities', to be more open.

"Let us encourage one another to be increasingly open doors," the 86-year-old Argentine pontiff said, adding it was 'sad and painful... to see closed doors'.



Pope Francis waves as he celebrates a holy mass at Kossuth Lajos Square during his visit in Budapest on Sunday (AFP)

"The closed doors of our selfishness with regard to others... the doors we close towards those who are foreign or unlike us, towards migrants or the

poor," he said.

Throughout his visit to Budapest - his second since a brief 2021 stopover - Francis has emphasised a welcoming stance to-

wards those fleeing poverty or conflict zones.

The comments have stood in stark contrast to those of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban who has regularly espoused anti-migration rhetoric to defend a 'Christian Europe' since coming to power in 2010.

On Sunday, some 50,000 people thronged to hear the pope say mass under tight security at Kossuth Lajos Square, behind the parliament on the banks of the Danube, according to local authorities. "I feel emotional. He is very important in my life," onlooker Ferenc Toth, 43, told AFP after the pope passed by in his popemobile.

'Christian mission'

University student Levente Kiss said it was 'unique' to see the pope up close.

"It was good to see that the pope has taken a stance that really calls us to our Christian mission to support the people in migration crises, especially the war in Ukraine," the 21-year-old added.

On Saturday, Francis gave a speech to refugees - mostly from neighbouring Ukraine - and poor people at a Budapest church.

Orban's government has welcomed those fleeing the war in Ukraine, which borders Hungary.

But activists say there is barely a support system in place

and Orban's insistence on maintaining ties with Moscow has also alienated Ukrainians.

Francis' 41st international trip since becoming pope in 2013 is taking place entirely in Budapest, the capital of the EU member where 39 per cent of the 9.7mn population are Catholic.

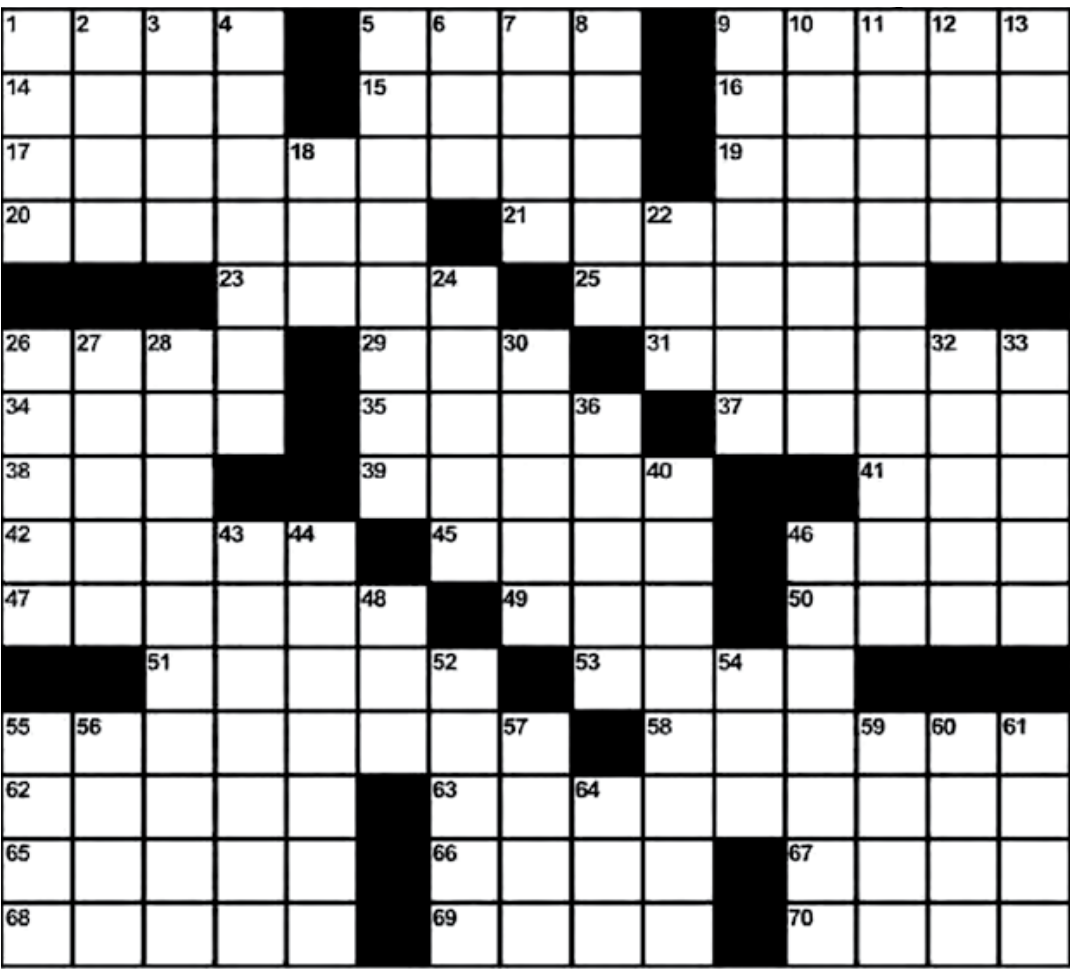
It comes a month after he was hospitalised for three months for bronchitis, so all eyes have been on the pontiff's health.

But despite persistent knee pain forcing him to move around in a wheelchair, the pope has appeared to be in good shape.

On Saturday, Francis met Budapest mayor Gergely Karacsony, a staunch Orban opponent.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Eyelid projection
- 5) Not docked
- 9) Salon specialties
- 14) Cantina cooker
- 15) Noontime service
- 16) No-brainer?
- 17) Rip-off for readers?
- 19) Given to back talk
- 20) Band of seven
- 21) Happy-go-lucky
- 23) Scandinavian male name
- 25) Firefighter's need
- 26) Meet squarely
- 29) "Bingo!"
- 31) Gold coins of yore
- 34) Like a burned-out briquette
- 35) Place to play
- 37) Danger
- 38) Greek "P"
- 39) Bit
- 41) Altar avowal
- 42) Scottish clans
- 45) Not quite all
- 46) Become unhinged

- 47) Provocation for a duel
- 49) Mental ability
- 51) Look like a creep
- 51) Unable to escape
- 53) By way of, briefly
- 55) Small floral cluster
- 58) Repair the surface of
- 62) Wedge-shaped diacritical mark
- 63) Shortstop, often
- 65) Certain free radical
- 66) Soon, to a bard
- 67) "... of the Flies"
- 68) Certainly not tidy
- 69) Destiny
- 70) Exists on a small pit-tance (with "by")

DOWN

- 1) Gobs
- 2) On the safe side, at sea
- 3) High-five, e.g.
- 4) Act made with Taft
- 5) Camels' destinations?
- 6) Get the picture
- 7) Part of CEO
- 8) Rose petal extract

- 9) In a heap
- 10) Imposing structure
- 11) Boisterous
- 12) Engage in self-pity
- 13) Eyelid affliction
- 18) Saltwater body
- 22) "Awesome!" of the '80s
- 24) Bygone Iranian leaders
- 26) Tehran tongue
- 27) Wan-looking
- 28) Piano tune played with two fingers
- 30) Cupid's projectile
- 32) Kind of wave
- 33) Inclination
- 36) Call it quits
- 40) Remove, as a monarch
- 43) They're often stuffed
- 44) In a smooth manner
- 46) Cheesy entree
- 48) Aviv
- 52) Coffee order
- 54) Call, as a game
- 55) Bogus
- 56) Blanched
- 57) Fish in a casserole
- 59) Crazy

- 60) Give a darn
- 61) Pass catchers
- 64) "Sesame Street" watcher

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Your values are precious to you, and that's good. But you also have to remind yourself that what is right for you isn't necessarily right for everyone else. Don't try to force others to believe in what you believe or act in the way that you think is right. If they're going to be in your life, you need to respect them for who they are. You can't consider people to be special projects or works in progress. Take them for who they are or not at all.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
There is a strong current of compassion running through your life right now, and it will reawaken your more nurturing instincts. You're much more apt to give other people the benefit of the doubt right now, so it's a perfect day to start forgiving grudges and welcoming people back into your life. Issues that you used to see in strictly black-and-white terms are suddenly much more complicated than you realized. There are many shades of gray, and you're finally ready to see them all.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
You have the potential to be a very positive force in someone's life today, and you know you want to be. So in order to tap into this potential, you should get involved with helping others as much as possible. From surrendering a good parking spot to lending someone some money, what you give to people will mean much more to them than you could ever imagine. Being of service to other people is a great way to make a connection with them.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Enthusiasm alone isn't going to help you get everything done that you need to get done, but it certainly makes the experience more pleasant! So choose to be happier today and happier you will be. Put a smile on your face even if you feel angry or upset. Think the best of other people, not the worst, and don't take things too personally. If someone is late to meet you, they aren't trying to blow you off. You can cause yourself to start feeling good as soon as you start thinking positively.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
An interesting travel opportunity could come your way, although at first it might not seem like a trip you want to take. But you should. Let go of your expectations and preconceived notions about a fun place to go to. If you have the time and the money, you should give this new adventure a try. Exploring a new place and having a new experience is never anything but a growing experience. You'll have more fun than you could ever imagine.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
You might think that just one more push will make things happen for you, but this isn't the case. Now is not the time to keep going. Now is the time to stay put and let things move on without you for a while. There is momentum that could carry you where you need to go. If you add to that energy, you'll miss the mark by a mile. Slow down, step out of the action, and wait for what you want to come your way. It won't be too long.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
The hours today will trickle by at the pace of molasses in winter, but that isn't a bad thing. A slow day is a great way to learn how to have more patience. There won't be much change or movement in any direction, but that doesn't mean you can't have a perfectly fine time anyway. Accept the day for what it is (not very exciting) and you'll be surprised by how calm you feel. It's only when you struggle against something you can't change that you feel stress.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
You'll have to be honest about what you think when you're asked to give your opinion, whether it might hurt someone's feelings or not. There's no point in sharing your thoughts unless you share all of them, completely unedited. Tell them the good and the bad and don't sugarcoat anything. It's only going to waste their time. Being critical is sometimes a challenge for you, but it's one you can handle today. You can clearly see what's wrong and what's right.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
When you encounter a coworker or friend who's doing things with style, watch them very closely. There are tips and tricks you could learn that can help you get one step closer to your ideal public image. If you can, align yourself with the people who can make positive changes in your life. Stick to them like glue and suggest some extracurricular activities for the two of you. It's time to start conversations you may have been avoiding.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
It would do your attitude good if you were to start socializing a little bit more. Downtime is good, and it's necessary to stay centered and in touch with yourself. But friends are starting to wonder if it's even necessary to invite you along on things since you've turned them down so often. Even if you don't feel like being social, you should give it a try. Chances are once you get started on the action, you'll get into it much faster than you thought. Sometimes having fun takes work.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Despite what you might think, being aggressive isn't the same thing as being abrasive. You can push harder to get what you want without turning anyone off. Being a little more forceful might not win you any new friends, but it's certainly not going to scare away any of the people who know and love you best. If you aren't a little bolder, you run the risk of being looked on as an easy mark and a pushover. And that's just not who you are, is it?



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Ultimatums aren't usually the right approach for you. You like to have people want to do things with you, not be forced to give in. But today, time is of the essence and you might have to push a little bit harder than you usually do in order to get the answers you need. Planning a dinner or other type of group social event? The final attendance can't be left up in the air any longer. Plans must move forward. So make those phone calls and get those commitments you need!



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The 1963 American comedy film "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World", centring on pursuit of stolen cash, starred which actor well-known for drama but not necessarily for comedy?
A. Richard Burton
B. Humphrey Bogart
C. Cary Grant
D. Spencer Tracy

2. What are alternative names for "typhus"?
A. Foot and mouth disease
B. Mad cow disease
C. Prison fever
D. Dutch elm disease

3. Which western country was the first to extend the right to vote in national elections to women?
A. Switzerland
B. Australia
C. USA
D. New Zealand
Correct Answer: New Zealand

Answers: 1. A 2. C 3. D

KIDS COLOURING

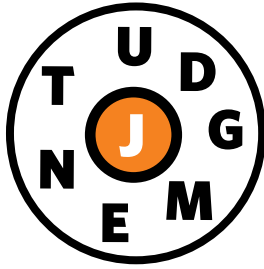


BOGGLER

A	U	K	T
A	C	C	M
O	R	B	A
E	M	A	R

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

ORDER RESTORED

Manchester City go top as Haaland equals Premier League goal record

London, United Kingdom - Manchester City moved to the top of the Premier League as Erling Haaland equalled the competition's single-season goal record and Julian Alvarez scored a stunner to clinch Sunday's 2-1 win at Fulham.

Haaland converted a third-minute penalty at Craven Cottage to move level with Alan Shearer and Andy Cole's single-season Premier League record total.

Shearer scored 34 for Blackburn in 1995 and Cole hit the same tally for Newcastle in 1994.

Haaland has reached 34 Premier League goals in just 30 appearances in the competition, scoring more than 21 top-flight teams have managed in total in their first 30 games this season.

It was also the Norway striker's 50th City goal in all competitions since he signed from Borussia Dortmund last year.

Carlos Vinicius equalised for Fulham but Julian Alvarez's first goal in six games, a brilliant long-range effort, lifted City one point clear of second-placed Arsenal.

Treble-chasing City, on top for the first time in 10 weeks, have won their last eight league games and are unbeaten in their last 18 matches in all competitions.

Pep Guardiola's red-hot team, who have a game in hand on Arsenal, need to win five of their last six games to be certain of a fifth title in six seasons.

With Haaland's goal spree showing no signs of slowing, few would bet against them taking advantage of Arsenal's collapse.

Arsenal, winless in their last



Manchester City's Erling Haaland scores from the penalty spot during their English Premier League match against Fulham in London on Sunday (AFP)

Man City won their last eight league games and are unbeaten in their last 18 matches

four games, host Chelsea on Tuesday, with City back in action at home to West Ham on Wednesday.

In the immediate aftermath of Wednesday's crucial 4-1 demoli-

tion of Arsenal, Guardiola had dismissed suggestions the title race was over.

History-making Haaland

Guardiola reminded his players they were held to a surprise draw at Nottingham Forest in their next match after beating Arsenal in February. It was a warning that had the desired affect, even without Kevin De Bruyne, who was missing due to an injury.

City took just three minutes to move ahead in west London as

Riyad Mahrez found Alvarez in the Fulham area and the Argentine forward was flattened by Tim Ream's clumsy challenge.

History in his sights, Haaland took the ball with a determined look and confidently drove his penalty low past Bernd Leno.

Fulham broke out to snatch an equaliser against the run of play in the 15th minute.

Harry Wilson's pass found Vinicius and the Brazilian took advantage of City's sloppy marking to drill a powerful finish past Ederson from 10 yards.

Guardiola was on the touchline urging City to play with more focus and Jack Grealish nearly delivered when his curler from the edge of the area was brilliantly pushed onto the woodwork by Leno.

Alvarez has found consistent game-time hard to come by in his first season at City due to Haaland's excellence.

But Guardiola is a big fan of the diminutive World Cup winner and he showed exactly why he has the Spaniard's faith in the 36th minute.



Napoli's Victor Osimhen wears a disappointed look at the end of their Serie A match against Salernitana in Naples on Sunday (AFP)

Napoli miss chance to win Serie A with Salernitana draw

Naples, Italy - Napoli missed the chance to win Serie A for the first time in 33 years on Sunday after being held to a 1-1 draw by Salernitana.

Runaway league leaders Napoli needed to win to secure their third league crown with six games remaining in the season after Inter Milan beat closest challengers Lazio 3-1 earlier in the day.

But the long-awaited Scudetto party will have to be put on hold for at least a few more days after Boulaye Dia's stunning strike six minutes from time ensured Salernitana escaped with a point after Mathias Olivera had headed the hosts ahead just after the hour mark.

However the coming mid-week round of matches could finally end Napoli's long wait for glory.

Luciano Spalletti's team are 18 points ahead of Lazio but Juve can close that gap to 17 by winning at Bologna in Sunday's late match and moving into second place.

Depending how that match and Juve and Lazio's games on Wednesday go Napoli could be crowned champions before they take the field at Udinese on Thursday night.

A win in Udine will ensure Napoli's current stars emulate Diego Maradona, who led southern Italy's biggest club to their only previous league titles in 1987 and 1990.

Barca thrash Betis to stay ahead of rampant Madrid

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona thrashed 10-man Real Betis 4-0 on Saturday to move a step closer to winning La Liga for the first time since 2019.

Real Madrid beat Almeria 4-2 to cut the gap to eight points earlier on but Barcelona triumphed to restore their 11 point advantage.

Andreas Christensen, Robert Lewandowski and Raphinha struck for Barca at Camp Nou with Guido Rodriguez netting a late own goal to round off the rout.

Edgar Gonzalez's early dismissal made it an easy night for Xavi Hernandez's side to protect their lead with six games remaining.

With his side comfortably

winning, Xavi brought on 15-year-old forward Lamine Yamal to become the club's youngest ever player to debut in La Liga.

Betis also brought on veteran

We generated a reaction. We improved a lot, it was a very good reaction from the whole team. We went 1-0 up and after the red card, it was in our favour

XAVI HERNANDEZ

Joaquin Sanchez, 41, for his final appearance at Camp Nou before he retires at the end of the season, and he was afforded a standing ovation by Barcelona supporters.

The Catalans bounced back

from a 2-1 defeat by Rayo Vallecano in midweek.

"We generated a reaction," said Xavi. "We improved a lot, it was a very good reaction from

the whole team.

"We went 1-0 up and after the red card, it was in our favour."

Xavi brought Christensen into the starting line-up after injury and he made a quick impact on his return.



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates after scoring against Real Betis on Saturday (AFP)

Stylish Madrid

Benzema climbed to 17 goals in La Liga this season with his treble, now two behind Lewandowski. Benzema netted his treble in the first half and Rodrygo added the fourth early in the second for Madrid, while Lazaro and Lucas Robertone struck for the visitors, 15th.

Almeria coach Rubi made several changes to his regular side, clearly unconvinced his team could take points from the Santiago Bernabeu - the visit of Elche on Tuesday should be more profitable in their survival bid.

Madrid played with freedom in attack during an entertaining game, albeit one low on tension with their hopes of retaining the title minimal.

Al Dawsari scores, sees red in AFC Champions League final stalemate

Dubai, United Arab Emirates - Salem Al Dawsari went from hero to villain as he scored an opener for Al Hilal but then saw red in the final minutes for kicking Ken Iwao, as the reigning champions drew 1-1 with Urawa Red Diamonds in the AFC Champions League final first leg in Riyadh on Saturday.

Al Dawsari's opening-half strike was cancelled by a 53rd-minute equaliser from Shinzo Koroki in what was an eventful affair at King Fahd International stadium.

No stranger to delivering on big occasions, Al Dawsari had scored for Al Hilal in the semi-finals and final of the AFC Champions League last season, netted the winner for Saudi Arabia against Argentina at the 2022 World Cup last winter, and con-



Al Hilal's Salem al-Dawsari celebrates after scoring against Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds in Riyadh on Saturday (AFP)

verted two penalties in the FIFA Club World Cup semi-finals against Flamengo in February to send his side into the final for the very first time.

His mixed night on Saturday, however, will leave a bitter taste as he looks set to miss the second leg of the final for being sent off.

Meanwhile, 36-year-old Koroki was a key factor in Urawa's 2017 AFC Champions League title-winning run, as well as the Reds' march to the final in 2019, scoring 12 goals across both editions.

After a loan spell at Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo, the veteran forward returned to Urawa at the start of 2023 and is once again proving to be a crucial leader for the Saitama outfit.

Locking horns for the third time in the final stage of the competition, Al Hilal and Urawa - who split their previous two championship deciders - have formed the most exciting rivalry in Asian club football.

Urawa came out on top in the 2017 final but Al Hilal got their revenge two years later.

AFP

Crowd trouble in Tunisia as Esperance reach CAF Champions League semis

Johannesburg, South Africa - Clashes between police and spectators in Tunisia delayed a CAF Champions League quarter-final by 45 minutes on Saturday before local club Esperance survived a tense finish to march on.

Esperance drew 1-1 with Algerian visitors JS Kabylie to advance 2-1 on aggregate to a semi-final showdown with Al Ahly of Egypt.

Mohamed Ali Ben Romdhane gave Esperance a 49th-minute lead and Adem Redjem levelled with five minutes of regular time remaining.

Including added time, Kabylie had 12 minutes to score again and win overall on away goals, but failed to do so.

After a goalless first half, video footage showed police

firing tear gas into a section of the crowd occupied by supporters wearing the colours of Esperance.

Pleas from several Esperance players to the crowd to

Esperance drew 1-1 with Algerian visitors JS Kabylie to advance 2-1 on aggregate

stop throwing objects on the pitch were initially ignored at the national stadium in Rades on the outskirts of Tunis.

According to eye witnesses, Esperance supporters tried to enter the pitch after the first

half, but the police intervened and clashes broke out.

An AFP photographer saw looting in the stands and tear gas covered the stadium in thick smoke. Several police officers were injured by projectiles.

Order was eventually restored and the second half of the second leg kicked off 45 minutes behind schedule.

Ahly, who have featured in five of the last six Champions League finals but won only two, drew 0-0 with Raja Casablanca in Morocco to qualify 2-0 on aggregate. Raja squandered a great chance to halve the overall deficit in first half added time when Yousri Bouzouk slammed a debatable penalty against the crossbar.

AFP

HISTORIC VICTORY

Oman Racing’s Ahmad Al Harthy wins first world endurance podium in 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps

Muscat - History-making FIA World Endurance Championship racer Ahmad al Harthy secured his and Oman Racing’s first podium finish in the globe’s biggest endurance racing category on Saturday in an action-packed TotalEnergies 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps.

Already making headlines the day before with an absolutely scintillating maiden GTE Am pole position in qualifying, Al Harthy proudly flew the Omani flag on the FIA WEC podium 24 hours later after a fantastic performance with team-mates Michael Dinan and Charlie Eastwood.

“Amazing, amazing – finally! We’ve done it, making history again, I’m so happy to have taken the podium we’ve wanted for so long. After qualifying on pole position, the start to the race was challenging as Michael went with slicks on the damp track, so it was very difficult, but he drove amazingly well and did an incredible job,” said Al Harthy.

“All the drivers and the team did an amazing job, the positions were changing and moving around with lots going on with Safety Cars. It went for us, and went against us at times, but in the end we got the podium and were less than half a second from second place. Charlie kept fighting right to the finish, he raced so well.

Saturday’s race in Belgium began on a damp track and the No.25 Aston Martin Vantage was fitted with slick Michelin tyres for the start. Dinan began



Ahmad Al Harthy of Oman Racing (left) celebrates on the podium after finishing third in the 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps



Amazing, amazing – finally! We’ve done it, making history again, I’m so happy to have taken the podium we’ve wanted for so long. All the drivers and the team did an amazing job

AHMAD AL HARTHY

the race and while the early running was difficult with grip at a premium, slipping down to eighth place, the American did an outstanding job on the slick rubber to stay in contention and he battled back brilliantly as the track dried

more and more.

Into the top five before the end of the first half hour, he returned to the podium placings ahead of the first round of pit stops. Moving as high as second before Oman Racing’s initial pit visit,

Dinan rejoined in fourth and stayed in the podium fight before handing over the car to Al Harthy.

Determined to keep the podium challenge on course, the Omani raced superbly and held third spot with two and a half

hours elapsed – delivering fantastic pace and racecraft. Positions changed fairly regularly with Safety Car interventions and different strategies in play, Oman Racing leading at points, and there was very little to choose between the front-running contenders.

The Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS supported driver didn’t put a wheel wrong and after serving the team’s fourth stop, Al Harthy continued in fourth and then made his way

back into the top three before Eastwood took over for the final couple of hours.

With 90 minutes to run the Irishman was fourth, but he moved inside the top three again. Gaining more and more ground, as the race entered its closing stages Eastwood was right on the tail of the No.33 Chevrolet Corvette. Trying everything to find a way past, at the end of six intense hours the Oman Racing Aston Martin finished third and just 0.2 seconds shy of the runner-up spot.

Marking a true breakthrough weekend for Al Harthy and Oman Racing in FIA World Endurance, the Spa performance has been the perfect preparation for the crown jewel event of the season which comes next – the one and only Le Mans 24 Hours.

“I was very pleased with my drive in the battle with everybody all the time, although we were synched slightly differently with pit-stops. Sometimes we were fifth, sometimes leading, and then in the final hour we could see the podium was possible.”

Al Zubair and Schiller claim stunning win in International GT Open series in Portugal

Portimao, Portugal - Oman’s Al Faisal al Zubair and German team-mate Fabian Schiller made a fabulous start to their short 2023 International GT Open campaign by winning the opening round of the series at the Autodromo Internacional Algarve, in Portimao, Portugal, on Saturday.

The Al Manar Racing by Get-speed Mercedes AMG GT3 crew had qualified fourth for the race and second in the Pro category and delivered a stunning performance in favourable racing conditions to win the first 40-lap race of the campaign by



Al Faisal al Zubair with team-mate Fabian Schiller

15.611 seconds.

Pro category cars dominated the upper echelons of the leader board and filled the first seven places in the classification after the first of two races over the weekend.

The Optimum Motorsport duo of Samuel de Haan and Charlie Fagg were their closest challengers in second place in a McLaren 720S GT3. Team Motopark’s Diego Menchaca and Marcos Siebert rounded off the podium places in their Mercedes AMG GT3.

Al Zubair said: “It was an excellent race. We started from

P4, 0.3 seconds behind the pole-sitter and we took the lead in the first stint. The team and I did a great job. Fabi took the lead in the second stint and he was fast, so we won. This is a great start to the 2023 season and we are looking forward to another win in the second race.”

After taking advantage of the private test sessions on Friday, Al Zubair and Schiller were third quickest in the free practice stint behind Liqui Moli Team Engstler’s Luca Engstler and Dylan Yip (Audi) and Kessel Racing’s Frédéric Jousset and David Fumanelli (Ferrari).



Red Bull Racing’s Sergio Perez celebrates with the trophy after winning the Formula One Azerbaijan Grand Prix in Baku on Sunday (AFP)

‘King of the streets’ Perez leads Red Bull 1-2 in Baku

Baku, Azerbaijan - Sergio Perez won Sunday’s Azerbaijan Grand Prix with teammate Max Verstappen in second to ram home Red Bull’s supremacy over the rest of the Formula One grid.

Ferrari’s pole-sitter Charles Leclerc completed the podium, a respectable third.

“Vamos!” exclaimed the Mexican on the team radio after making it a hugely profitable weekend in Baku where he also claimed Saturday’s sprint race.

Red Bull boss Christian Horner acknowledged Perez’s “sensational weekend”.

He added: “He’s always been outstanding on this track, I don’t know what it is about Azerbaijan, but he absolutely excels here.”

Red Bull’s roll through 2023 after four races now reads four wins plus Saturday’s sprint, three poles, and three 1-2s.

Verstappen leads the drivers’ championship by just six points ahead of the fifth round of the record 23-race season in Miami.

Perez’ engineer told him on the team radio he was the “king of the streets” and with justification as five of his six F1 wins - not counting Saturday’s sprint - have come on street circuits, twice in

Baku alongside victories in Saudi Arabia, Monaco and Singapore.

The popular Perez, who believes he can really challenge Verstappen for the title, said: “It really worked out today for us (me), we managed to keep the pressure on Max. I think it was very close between us, we pushed to the maximum, we

I don’t know what it is about Azerbaijan, but he absolutely excels here

CHRISTIAN HORNER

both hit the wall a few times but we (I) managed to keep him under control.”

Bagnaia wins Spanish MotoGP

Reigning world champion Francesco Bagnaia held off a frantic late counter-attack by Brad Binder in Jerez on Sunday to win the Spanish Grand Prix and take the lead in the MotoGP standings.

Oman qualify for ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup after finishing third in Premier Cup

Muscat - Oman’s off-spinner Jay Odedra’s five-wicket haul ended in vain as the third-place playoff match of the ACC Men’s Premier Cup against Kuwait was abandoned due to persistent rains at the TU Cricket Ground in Kathmandu, Nepal, on Sunday.

The right-arm bowler ran through the Kuwait middle order to restrict them to a paltry 130 in 31.3 overs. Chasing a modest target, Oman looked good in their chase as openers – Kashyap Prajapati and Jatinder Singh raced to 41 in just six overs before rains forced the players to go indoors.

With rains continuing, the match was finally called off but despite the no result, Oman secured a place in the 2023 ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup in July.

Duleep Mendis’ men made it to the Emerging Teams Asia Cup on the basis of finishing third in the Men’s Premier Cup as they



Jay Odedra

had a superior net run-rate (NRR) than Kuwait after both teams had ended with six points in their respective group stage. Oman finished with an NRR of +0.377 as compared to Kuwait’s +0.223.

Earlier, a day after the disappointment of losing to the UAE in the semi-final narrowly, Oman bowlers proved their dominance as Kuwait batters floundered against the sharp attack.

Kuwait opener Adnan Idrees top-scored with 34 and a late cameo from Sayed Monib, who hit 28 off 10 balls including five fours and a six helped the team cross 100-run mark.

Odedra returned with sensational figures of 5.3-1-14-5 and was on a hat-trick after dismissing Clinto Anto and Shiraz Khan off successive deliveries in the 26th over of the match. He then went on to pick three more as Kuwait crumbled to 130. Bilal Khan picked up two early wickets while skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, Ayaan Khan and Jatinder Singh also took a wicket apiece.

Prajapati was unbeaten on 13 while Jatinder was at the crease on 19-ball 26 when the match was called off.

The 2023 ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup will be the fifth edition of the event and is scheduled to be held in July 2023.

Pakistan beat New Zealand

Rawalpindi, Pakistan - Fakhar Zaman smashed a third consecutive century to guide Pakistan to a seven-wicket victory over New Zealand in the second one-day international on Saturday.

The 33-year-old left-handed opener hit an undefeated 180 off 144 balls for his tenth ODI hundred. It followed his 117 in the first match and 101 against the same opponents in January as Pakistan chased a stiff 337-run target in 48.2 overs. The win gives Pakistan a 2-0 lead in the five-match series with the last three matches in Karachi on May 3, 5 and 7.

Along with Zaman, skipper Babar Azam hit a brisk 66-ball 65 and Mohammad Rizwan a 41-ball 54 not out as Pakistan achieved their second highest successful ODI chase behind 349 against Australia in Lahore last year.



JAISWAL CENTURY IN VAIN AS MUMBAI BEAT RAJASTHAN

MATCH 42

Rajasthan Royals' Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates after scoring a century in their match against Mumbai Indians at the Wankhede Stadium on Sunday. Jaiswal scored 124 runs off 62 balls, but Mumbai replied in fine fashion through Cameron Green (44 off 26) and Suryakumar Yadav who made a blazing 55 off 29 balls, before Tim David finished off the match with three consecutive sixes for a six-wicket victory

Marsh rues Hyderabad's 'disappointing loss'

New Delhi, India - Sunrisers Hyderabad overcame a sparkling all-round performance by Mitchell Marsh to down Delhi Capitals by nine runs in the Indian Premier League on Saturday.

South Africa's Heinrich Klaasen hit an unbeaten 53 to steer Hyderabad to 197-6, a total their bowlers defended by restricting Delhi to 188-6 at the Feroz Shah Kotla ground.

Marsh returned bowling figures of 4-27 including a maiden over and then hit a 39-ball 63 but the effort was not enough for bottom-placed Delhi, who fell to their sixth loss in eight matches.

"Took me a few games to get going, but a disappointing loss," said Marsh, who became the third

player to be named man of the match from the losing side this season. "We've been on the wrong end of a few (close matches) but we feel there is a long way to go in the tournament."

Former champions Hyderabad, who won their only title in

2016 under current Delhi skipper David Warner, bounced back from their three losses to move up one spot to eighth.

Warner fell for a duck but Delhi's chase looked good during a 112-run partnership between Phil Salt and Marsh.

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Punjab win battle of Kings

Raza trumps Pathirana as Punjab edge Chennai

Chennai, India - A last-ball thriller that ended with Sikandar Raza pulling Matheesha Pathirana for three quick runs stunned a Chepauk crowd that may have expected their team to return home with a win and get closer to the top of the table. Chennai Super Kings had almost everything going for them; Devon Conway walloped an unbeaten 92, MS Dhoni stretched their total to 200 with two sixes to end the innings, and they strangled Kings' chase through the middle overs, but lost despite largely being ahead through the final over thanks to Pathirana's accuracy.

With nine to win off the last over, Raza and Shahruxh Khan couldn't hit a single boundary

against Pathirana's dipping deliveries. After a single, a leg bye, a dot ball and two twos off Pathirana's yorkers and slower balls, Kings needed three off the last ball. Raza shuffled across and pulled a short-of-length slower ball over square leg, landing it right in between deep fine leg and deep midwicket to secure three and seal victory with his arms aloft.

The two points took Kings to 10 points alongside three other teams, and to fifth place on the table, just behind Super Kings on net run rate.

Super Kings were favourites when Liam Livingstone and Sam Curran struggled to score freely off Pathirana and Maheesh Theekshana. With 72 to win off 30, Livingstone got to face Tushar Deshpande and belted three sixes in four balls with four leg byes in between. Even though he fell off the fifth ball of the over, Kings still had Jitesh Sharma and Shahruxh to come, and the 24-run over brought their equation down to 48 off

24.

Curran and Jitesh slammed straight sixes off Ravindra Jadeja in the 17th, but Pathirana was going to bowl two of the last three overs. He removed Curran's off stump with a stunning, full delivery that swerved past his outside edge, and with 22 needed off 12, Kings went after Deshpande in the 19th to try and ensure they didn't leave too much for the last over. Jitesh lofted the first ball over cover for four and got out to a contentious decision two balls later when substitute fielder Shaik Rasheed caught him at the wide long-on boundary while almost touching the boundary cushions with his foot. With 15 required off eight, Raza edged his first ball for four to make it a 13-run over.

Even though Pathirana sent down an excellent last over, Raza manipulated the field perfectly to pick ones and twos and sealed the match with a hard-run three.

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SNAKE PRINCESS

With pythons in her lap

At four in the morning outside a Yangon monastery, Shwe Lei and her team were wrestling 30 writhing pythons into old rice sacks and loading them into a van.

It was just another day in the life of Myanmar's premier snake removal squad, prising pythons and cajoling cobras from dangerous entanglements with the human world before returning them to their natural habitat.

Stuffed into the sacks were three months' worth of work, rescued from homes and apartments around Yangon and cared for at the monastery until they are fit for release to the wild.

"I love snakes because they are not deceitful," Shwe Lei told AFP at the snake shelter run by the group, a python entwined around her body.

"If you acknowledge their nature, they are lovely."

Her mentor Ko Toe Aung, a burly 40-year-old who said he has been hospitalised seven times since he started catching snakes in 2016, was more prosaic.

Anyone in the snake-catching game has to be 'fast and agile', he said.

"Wherever we catch a venomous snake, it is 90/10... It's a 90 per cent chance the snake will bite me."

Their team - called Shwe Metta, or 'Golden Love' in Burmese - has around a dozen members and rescued around 200 snakes last year from around Yangon.

Social media videos of the pair pulling snakes out of sink plugholes and extricating them from roof eaves have earned them the moniker 'prince and princess of snakes' from local media.

On the scent

The team all have day-jobs and rely on donations for everything from their protective gear to petrol to run their purple-coloured snake 'ambulance'.

They mostly catch Burmese pythons - non-venomous snakes that typically grow to around five metres long and squeeze their prey of rats and other small mammals to death.

Cobras and banded krait also make homes in Yangon's apartments and are a trickier prospect - their venom can be fatal.

More than 15,000 people were bitten by snakes in Myanmar in 2014, according to the



Shwe Lei with a snake at the Buddhist monastery in Mingalardon Township in Yangon (AFP)

In the past people... used to kill snakes whenever they found them. But they have more knowledge and they know we can release snakes back into the wild. So they call us to capture and remove them

SHWE LEI

latest available figures from the World Health Organization.

Of those, 1,250 died, a fatality rate higher than many other countries, largely due to Myanmar's creaking healthcare system and patchy access to antivenoms.

It is a danger never far from the team's work.

In March, they spent two days trying to remove several cobras nesting underneath a Yangon house.

Tunnelling into the foundations as neighbours watched, their digging was frequently interrupted by the snakes inside spitting venom towards them.

"It stinks," said Ko Ye Min (31), a tattooed

member of the team, as he took a break from trying to reach the nest.

Recognising exactly which kind of stink is another skill a snake-catcher must hone, according to Ko Toe Aung.

"We have to be familiar with their smells... to identify the species of snakes before removing them," he said.

Cobras smell 'rotten', he said.

"But the smell of a python is much stronger. Sometimes

we even vomit when we bring it into the ambulance."

'Compassion'

Through their online videos and growing fame, the Shwe Metta team hope to encourage people to be more compassionate towards the slithering reptiles - especially if one turns up in their house.

"In the past people... used to kill snakes whenever they found them," said Shwe Lei.

"But they have more knowledge and they know we can release snakes back into the wild. So they call us to capture and remove them."

The rescued snakes are kept under observation in a nearby monastery until there are enough of them to justify a journey into the bush to release them.

In late March, the team walked into the sweltering backwoods of the Bago Yoma hills, 150km north of Yangon, on such a journey.

Each member carried a python in a bag slung over their shoulder until they reached a suitable spot to release it.

A few of the dazed reptiles needed gentle prods to get going, but after weeks in a cage and a five-hour car journey, Shwe Lei sympathised.

"Nobody likes the feeling of being locked up," she said after the last one had slithered off - hopefully not to return to the human world for a long time. "I feel happy releasing the snakes... from the point of view of compassion for each other, it is satisfying."

AFP



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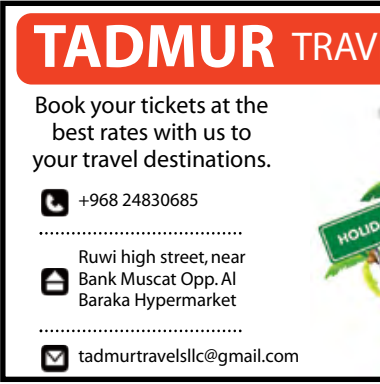




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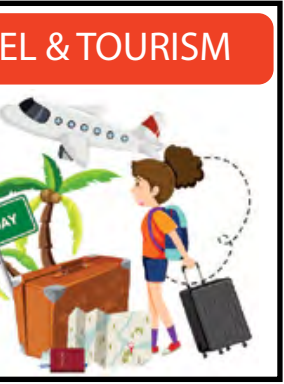
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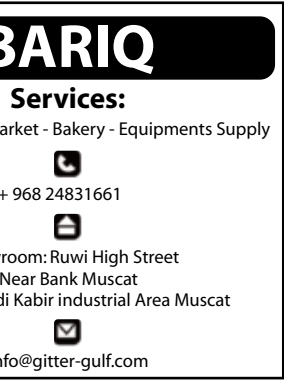


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THATCHER SCIENTIST ON MISSION TO REVIVE CRAFT

Once upon a time many homes in the picturesque Burgenland wine-growing region of eastern Austria were thatched. But now Jacobus van Hoorne's house is the only one in the entire neighbourhood with a reed roof.

And to get it approved he had to battle for two years with the local authorities, culminating in

having to set fire to a model thatched house to prove that his home wouldn't be a fire hazard. "You are practically not allowed to have reed roofs in Austria," said Van Hoorne. "You have to find a way around it, which took a long time." Buoyed up by his legal victory, the CERN particle physicist turned thatcher hopes to revive the ancient art as a part of more sustainable house building - particularly as his reeds come from the region's Unesco-listed salt-water lake. "It's not just a natural raw material, but it also has great insulating properties," he told AFP. "A roof like that... is only made of reed and (steel) wire. It's completely untreated. You can just compost it and recycle the wire. "The nature, the material, the craft. It's just beautiful," he added. A reed roof lasts about 40 years, said the Dutch-born scientist, and unlike conventional materials whose manufacture requires lots of carbon to be burned, reeds actually help store it.

Carbon captors Like straw and earth they have an almost negligible carbon footprint, said Azra Korjenic, head of the Department of Ecological Building Technologies at the Vienna University of Technology. In fact, marshlands and moors where reeds grow are some of the planet's main carbon sinks, surpassing even forests and grasslands, according to the 2015 Soil Atlas. Yet one of the biggest stumbling blocks to sustainability is the construction industry, which favours prefab building modules over ecological materials, Korjenic added. Current regulations and norms are also hampering the inclusion of natural building materials. As Austria's only master thatchers, Van Hoorne and his father are in high demand, and they also farm their own reeds locally. But even that is not easy because of low prices



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and droughts which stunt the reeds' growth as the climate warms, he said. He and four other remaining reed farmers in Austria also face crushing competition from China, which has an 80 per cent share of the European market. With his customers for now mostly in England and the Netherlands, 'shipping a container from Shanghai to Rotterdam costs around US\$2,000 - just as much as a truck from Austria,' he said. AFP





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