

Royal Decree ratifies air services pact with Belarus

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No 67/2023 on Sunday ratifying an air services agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Republic of Belarus signed in Muscat on July 25, 2023.

Article 1 ratifies the aforementioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article 2 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Sept 28 holiday for Prophet's birthday

Muscat - On the occasion of the birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), Rabee al Awwal 12, 1445 AH corresponding to Thursday, September 28, 2023 will be an official holiday for employees of units of the state's administrative apparatus, other legal entities and establishments of the private sector.

The Ministry of Labour stated that private sector employers may agree on terms to engage employees on the said holiday, if deemed necessary due to the nature of their work, provided they are compensated for the holiday.

Geologic hydrogen next big opportunity for Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MEM) has signed memoranda of understanding with two companies - one from the US and the other from Oman - to assess the potential of geologic hydrogen exploration in the sultanate.

Under the agreements, the US company Eden Geopower and the Omani Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre will facilitate scientific exchange in order to conduct extensive preliminary studies for assessing the potential and opportunities in geologic hydrogen exploration. They will identify suitable locations for conducting experimental research in collaboration with MEM.

The MoUs were signed on the sidelines of a workshop on the untapped potential of geologic hydrogen - a promising, eco-friendly primary energy source - held in Muscat on Sunday.

Attended by H E Mohsen bin Hamad al Hadrami, Undersecretary of MEM, and Dan Milstein, Senior Advisor to the US Department of Energy, the workshop was the first government-level event focused on geologic hydrogen for exchange of vital information and to foster both commercial and academic partnerships in innovative energy research.

(Supplied photo)



Our goal is to firmly establish Oman as a leading and trustworthy player on the global stage in this sector

H E MOHSEN ALHADRAMI

nerships in innovative energy research.

Discussions revolved around exploration and extraction of hydrogen formed deep within the Earth, notably in Oman's Hajar Mountains by a natural process

involving groundwater interacting with iron-rich minerals like the distinctive olivine rocks found in Oman.

The workshop underlined the essential nature of comprehensive research needed to comprehend fully the technical and commercial possibilities in geologic hydrogen exploration.

MEM has stated its openness to research and experimental proposals, emphasising Oman's commitment to environmental sustainability and advancements in renewable energy and clean hydrogen initiatives.

H E Hadrami said, "These agreements will pave the way for

in-depth preliminary studies and collaborative experimental research, reinforcing Oman's position as a key global player in this sector. Our goal is to firmly establish Oman as a leading and trustworthy player on the global stage in this sector."

He underlined the strategic importance of expanding the hydrogen sector for global energy security, and economic and environmental benefits.

Following the workshop, specialists, researchers and company representatives will visit sites in Oman known for gas emissions, potentially including hydrogen.

'Russia-Ukraine crisis poses significant threat to global peace'

New York, US - The Russia-Ukraine crisis poses a significant threat to global peace, the flow of energy and food supplies, and represents a serious challenge to international cooperation, H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, said in his speech at the 78th UN General Assembly in New York on Saturday.

He described dialogue as a firm principle in Oman's foreign policy, given its effective impact in achieving reconciliation, harmony and peace between conflicting parties.

The ramifications surrounding the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the security and military escalation, and its painful humanitarian effects represent a serious challenge to international cooperation and the global system based on respect for the law and the United Nations Charter.

"Therefore, my country calls for dialogue and peaceful negotiations on the basis of the principle of 'no harm and no harm inflicted', respecting the sovereignty of nations, good neighbourly relations and addressing the root causes of this crisis," H E Sayyid Badr said.

The sultanate asserted its firm commitment to join hands with the international community in its quest to achieve a peaceful world order, based on justice, fairness, respect for the Charter of the



H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi

United Nations, international law, the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs, the foreign minister added.

"In line with this commitment, my country urges the international community to adhere to the United Nations system in addressing conflicts, seeking peaceful resolutions through dialogue, and negotiating to build a world characterised by dignified living, prosperity, stability, security and peace."

On the regional front, the foreign minister said that the Palestinian cause is at the forefront of continuing conflicts and suffering injustice for over seven decades. The Palestinian people stand resilient against the oppressive Israeli occupation, siege and oppression, as well as violations of international law and United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Continued on Page 03

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Streamline or penalise?

Several locations in Muscat witness the illegal sale of fish, fruits and other food items. Such open markets not only raise concerns about hygiene and food safety but also pose a challenge to maintaining price. Unregulated sale of these food items jeopardises public health and also undermines efforts to ensure fair pricing for consumers. There is an urgent need to safeguard both the well-being of the population and integrity of the local food industry. What measures should be taken to curb such illegal sale of fish and other food items in the streets? Here's what readers of *Muscat Daily* said -

Khalid al Abri
Salesman

I do not approve of this practice at all. The authorities must streamline the licensing process for legitimate street vendors to encourage compliance. There must also be designated food zones with proper infrastructure to attract vendors away from illegal areas like the Kebab Street near Al Mouj. And there must be frequent raids and inspections to ensure hygiene standards are met.

Mustafa Salim
Private sector employee

This is a very unhygienic practice. I have been to these places in Gala Industrial Area where I have seen how they sell fish. Though the vendors claim the fish is fresh, from the strong odour I do think otherwise. To curb the illegal sale of food items on Oman's streets, firstly, law enforcement must be made stronger by increasing patrols and penalties for offenders, and secondly, public awareness must be raised

through campaigns about the dangers of unregulated street food.

Khalil S Faraji
Businessman

Selling fish, fruits and vegetables under the blazing sun in 40C by the roadside is neither safe nor hygienic. Municipalities, in collaboration with related ministries, should consider investing in and constructing small, affordable air-conditioned units in suitable locations that are not too far from main roads.

Nasser Mohammed al Adawi
Brand manager

The ideal solution is to focus on finding correct and sustainable solutions, implementing a new economic development strategy that prioritises the advancement of these economically disadvantaged social groups and the improvement of their living conditions. Additionally, efforts should be directed towards achieving a fair distribution of wealth.

Why don't these same authorities consider enacting laws to regulate the work of these vendors, designating specific locations for them and establishing municipal offices to determine the style and nature of sales spaces? For instance, weekly markets could be organised in various locations, bringing together all street vendors on specific days, as is the practice in many countries. If the relevant authorities embrace this concept, it could help alleviate the clustering of vendors in the city centre, public squares, residential areas, commercial streets and in front of places of worship and government offices, where the presence of street vendors has become a permanent fixture.

Shareen Firdosia Mohd
Private sector employee

Why not make it legal? Why not provide them the means to sell their goods under a roof? How about building something dedicated to these street vendors where they can sell their produce without fear?

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YOUR SAY

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Event to focus on nurturing gifted children

Our Correspondent
Muscat



Children First Association is set to host the first Oman Children's Conference and Exhibition at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre from Monday to Wednesday.

The event will focus on the latest strategies for nurturing gifted children. A diverse group of local, regional and international specialists and academics will share their insights and expertise.

Sharing her thoughts on the event, H H Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation at Sultan Qaboos University and Chairperson of Children First Association, said, "The conference is an invaluable platform to enhance national and international awareness on caring for the gifted. It's an opportunity to share experiences, explore possibilities for investing in their abilities and discuss the crucial roles of families, educational institutions and society in supporting these children."

The event is in line with Oman Vision 2040 and aims to develop national competencies and support talented individuals. It is a significant step towards realising the objectives of the association's first five-year plan.

Participants of the conference can look forward to a range of of-

The conference is an invaluable platform to enhance national and international awareness on caring for the gifted

H H DR MONA AL SAID

ferings, including training seminars and entertainment activities.

Various entities, including Children First Association and the Ministry of Information, will conduct awareness programmes and offer consultation on childcare, besides performances presented by schools and educational institutions.

The event's comprehensive approach ensures a thorough exploration of the many facets involved in nurturing gifted children, contributing substantially to their development and future contributions to society.

MHUP offers 279,455sqm of land for agricultural projects in Dhakhliyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat



The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) is offering 279,455sqm of agricultural land in Dhakhliyah governorate through public auction in an initiative allowing private sector involvement in economic growth.

An official at MHUP said that the investment opportunities include several projects in the agricultural sector, including raising poultry and livestock and cultivating aromatic plants.

Highlighting the ministry's vision, the official stated, "MHUP offers prime land for ag-

ricultural investment. We urge private entities to launch projects that not only enhance food production but also provide profitable returns. These initiatives will serve local and regional markets while generating employment for our citizens."

Municipality issues stern warning against littering

Muscat - Muscat Municipality has alerted citizens and residents to the severe consequences of littering in the city's public spaces. Recent incidents of barbecue waste littering at two city sites prompted the warning.

The municipality issued a statement highlighting the broader implications beyond

mere littering. 'Such behaviour adversely affects public health, pollutes the environment and ruins the outdoor experience for others. The law strictly forbids littering, imposing a fine of up to RO100 for violations.'

To avoid legal repercussions, the municipality urged all citizens and residents to use designated sites for waste disposal.

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Oman, India discuss cooperation in defence production, procurement

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The first ever India-Oman Defence Industrial Seminar was held in Muscat on Sunday.

The seminar provided an opportunity for government-owned and private defence companies from India to come together with officials from the ministries of defence, agriculture and fisheries, and transport, communications and IT in Oman to hold discussions on cooperation in defence production and procurement, a press release stated.

The Indian delegation was headed by Sanjay Mehrishi, Deputy Director General of Exports, Department of Defence Production in the Ministry of Defence, who provided an overview of the advances made by India in the field of defence production.

Addressing the seminar, H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, highlighted the traditionally close relations between the two countries and encouraged participants to engage in constructive collaborations to



achieve tangible results beneficial for both the nations.

"With India's defence exports rising 23-fold in the past ten years, the country has emerged as a leading supplier of high quality low-cost equipment and is willing to share its expertise with Oman for mutually beneficial defence partnerships," he said.

This was the first such physical seminar on 'Defence Industrial Collaboration' between India and Oman.

According to the Indian Embassy, the seminar received unprecedented response with 23 Indian public and private companies participating, reflecting the enthusiasm amongst them to partner and collaborate with Oman and to support the Sultan's Armed Forces and civil defence agencies in addressing

their requirements.

A wide range of topics related to defence hardware, security systems, cyber security, communications and niche technologies were covered during the seminar, which saw the Indian companies presenting their products to Omani officials.

As part of the seminar, several B2G and B2B meetings will be held on Monday.

MHT calls bids for management, operations of 2 forts in Buraimi

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) is inviting bids for the management and operations of Al Hilla Fort and Al Khandaq Fort in Buraimi.

Companies interested in promoting these historical sites for cultural and heritage tourism are invited to submit their detailed proposals by November 16.

In a statement, MHT outlined specific requirements for the bids. Interested parties should present a clear action plan outlining their approach to managing

and operating the two sites.

The submission should include detailed information on organisational structure, shareholders, partners and previously completed projects.

MHT emphasises the promotion of the forts, while thoroughly documenting and presenting the historical significance of the sites and devising robust marketing strategies. Proposals must underscore the architectural uniqueness of the forts and actively involve the local community in cultural and social events.

Historically rich Buraimi is a hub of heritage attractions and is

home to multiple castles and forts. The Al Hilla Fort, located in a souq neighbourhood, dates back to the 16th century and covers an area of about 4,200sqm. Nearby, the traditional open souq still buzzes with local vendors selling speciality items.

Al Khandaq Fort in the Hammasa area is surrounded by a 7.5m trench, lending it its name.

MHT restored 310 historical monuments across Oman in 2022 in efforts to enhance the appeal of the sultanate's rich heritage and provide diverse and enriching experiences to tourists and the local community alike.

INVITATION TO TENDER

Sohar Aluminium LLC (SA), PO Box 80, PC- 327, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman hereby invites qualified Suppliers/Contractors for the following tender:

Tender No. : RFP 23/005

Tender Title : Provision of Catering Services

Scope : Provide a complete catering services (Canteen) for our employees including contractors working in all 3 areas of Sohar Aluminium i.e., Main Smelter, Port and Powerplant area. (A detailed scope of work will be shared to the interested and qualified bidders who's profile matches to the Industrial catering services)

Last Date for Applying Tender Documents
25 September 2023

Start Date for Issuing Tender Documents
2 October 2023

Last Date for Tender Submission
24 October 2023

Kindly send your email and company profile to: tender@sohar-aluminium.com
For list of active tenders visit: <https://www.sohar-aluminium.com/en/content/tender-listing>

Diverse migratory bird species monitored in North Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) has documented diverse species of migratory birds in North Batinah from December 2022 to September 2023.

Amani Abdullah al Shibli, an environmental inspector at the Environmental Conservation Department in North Batinah, collated data after extensive periodic monitoring and environmental analysis.

Amani detailed the diverse bird species monitored, which include 16 winter-visiting species, nine year-round residents, two migration season visitors and one summer visitor.

Emphasising the vital role of environmental diversity in pre-



serving the habitats of these birds, she said, "The availability of lakes, creeks, sandy beaches, agricultural land and tidal mudflats in the governorate offers optimal environments for various bird species."

Among the year-round residents in North Batinah are notable species like the gray egret, rock heron, red-cheeked plover, sooty gull, swift tern and common mynah.

The winter visitors include the little egret, great egret, little sand plover, little crested tern, red leg sandpiper and water curlew.

The summer and migration seasons also attract species like the pink tern, common tern and white-cheeked tern.

This diverse influx of bird species highlights the importance of North Batinah as a critical location for bird migration, preservation and observation.

Oman plans listing in World Competitiveness Yearbook

Muscat - Oman is working on inclusion in the World Competitiveness Yearbook (WCY) issued by the International Institute for Management Development.

The yearbook is a comprehensive annual report and worldwide reference point on the competitiveness of countries. It provides benchmarking and trends, as well as statistics and survey data on extensive research, based on four factors: economic performance, government efficiency, business efficiency and infrastructure.

The National Competitiveness Committee proposed the feasibility of including Oman in WCY in its meeting on Sunday.

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'Russia-Ukraine crisis threat to global peace'

Continued from Page 01

"Therefore, my country, like all peace-seeking nations and communities, sees no alternative to the resolution of this crisis other than the two-state solution outlined in international legal references and resolutions, including the Arab Peace Initiative."

The UN bears moral and legal responsibility, he added, to find a just and equitable solution to this issue, ensuring an end to the dire suffering endured by the Palestinian people.

"We are facing complex global challenges, most notably the escalating effects of the climate crisis, the spread of pandemics, drug trade and human trafficking, in addition to political and sectarian conflicts, which call for the international community to firmly adhere to the principles of right and justice and apply the rules of international law without double standards, so that security and reassurance prevail among people, trust spreads among countries and partnerships among peoples grow and flourish," H E Sayyid Badr concluded.

SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH
Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Grade In Tender Board Registration	Last day to purchase tender documents	Last date of tender submission
17/2023	Services	Cleaning Services To Entire Campus And Facilities To Ministry's Various Buildings At Muscat Governorate For The Period Of 1st January 2023 To 31st December 2023	Excellent Grade	05/10/2023	30/10/2023
18/2023	Services	Maintenance Of Landscaping Works To Ministry's Campuses In Muscat Governorate For The Period Of 1st January 2023 To 31st December 2023	First Grade	05/10/2023	30/10/2023
19/2023	Electromechanical and Telecommunications Contracting and Maintenance	Maintenance & Operation Of Electro-Mechanical And Air-Conditioning Units To Ministry's Various Buildings In Muscat Governorate For The Period St January 2023 To 31st December 2023	First Grade	05/10/2023	30/10/2023
20/2023	Services	Construction Of Grassed Football Pitch With Automatic Irrigation System, Supply And Insulation Of Flood Light At Alsalam Sport Club (Shinas Branch)	Excellent & First Grade	05/10/2023	30/10/2023
21/2023	Supply	Support Libraries With The Basic Equipment Of The Operating System Rfid Technology	Third Grade	05/10/2023	30/10/2023

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

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Omani, Saudi companies invited to bid for EZAD facility projects

Muscat - The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) through the electronic tender system (ESNAD) invited Omani and Saudi companies to bid for the development of the Integrated Economic Zone at Al Dhahirah Governorate (EZAD).

Tenders have been called for providing advisory services for designing and supervising the implementation of infrastructure facilities for the EZAD.

'OPAZ invited local specialised companies to get the terms and conditions of the tender from the website of the General Secretariat of the Tender Board,' the company stated.

The deadline for participating and purchasing the tender documents has been set for October 2. OPAZ set the date for interested companies in bidding for the project to visit the Zone on October 3, and October 26 has been set as the deadline for receiving bids.

Yahya bin Khamis al Zadjali,



planning advisor to OPAZ Chairman, pointed out that the tender was announced after OPAZ had finished its thorough analysis and plans for establish-

ing the Integrated Economic Zone at Al Dhahirah Governorate.

"The scope of this tender includes the design and supervi-

sion of the first phase's infrastructure facilities, including roads, electrical installations, water and sewage networks, telecommunications networks,



The scope of this tender includes the design and supervision of the first phase's infrastructure facilities at the Integrated Economic Zone at Al Dhahirah

YAHYA AL ZADJALI

gas networks, industrial waste treatment and necessary area facilities like administrative and commercial buildings and some ancillary facilities," he elaborated, adding that the initial phase of the comprehensive plan for the construction of the Integrated Economic Zone at Al Dhahirah "is currently being finalised by OPAZ".

This Zone (EZAD) plays a strategic role in enhancing bilateral trade between Oman and

Saudi Arabia by attracting companies from the two countries to establish their projects within the Zone and find economic partnerships to reduce the production and export costs, make it easier to supply goods and products and provide high quality industries. "Additionally, the Zone provides job opportunities for Omanis in various sectors and industries, streamlined with Oman's Vision 2040 goals," Zadjali asserted.

Muscat Stock Exchange gains 2 points



Muscat - Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) general index - 30 on Sunday gained 2.2 points, comprising a rise by 0.05% to close at 4679.02 points, compared to the last session, which stood at 4676.84 points.

The trading value on Sunday stood at RO3,626,269, comprising a drop by 38.9%, compared to the last session, which stood at RO5,931,275.

The report released by MSX pointed out that the market value went down by 0.073% to reach about RO23.49bn.

The report added that the value of shares bought by non-Omani investors reached RO220,000, comprising 6.06%.

The value of shares sold by non-Omani investors reached RO483,000, comprising 13.31%. The net non-Omani investment decreased by 7.25% to RO263,000.

OQGN set to be the largest firm on MSX Shariah Index

Muscat - Given OQGN's expected market capitalisation of up to RO606mn at the top of the price range, the company is expected to become the largest entity on the MSX Shariah Index, when it lists in late October 2023, a release stated.

The addition to the MSX Shariah Index will of course be contingent on the completion of the relevant assessment by MSX post IPO, it added.

The Prospectus for the forthcoming OQGN IPO, published on September 18, confirms that the OQGN share offer is sharia'a-compliant.

In its Prospectus, OQGN details the pronouncement by the Shariyah Review Bureau, a sharia's advisory firm licensed by the Central Bank of Bahrain, which confirms that, in its view, based on the circumstances as at the date of the pronouncement, the offer is sharia'a com-



Khalid al Qassabi - VP Finance

pliant in accordance with pertinent sharia'a principles of the AAOIFI Sharia standards as of the date of the Prospectus.

'A copy of the aforementioned report by the Shariyah Review Bureau is available on the OQGN IPO portal for interested parties', OQGN informed.

Notably, a relative outperformance of the S&P GCC Shariah

Index in comparison to the S&P GCC Composite Index has consistently been seen in the GCC market over the last five years. This outperformance by the S&P GCC Shariah Index has mainly been attributed to (i) the presence of companies from resilient and defensive sectors; and (ii) relatively low leverage of underlying companies in the S&P GCC Shariah Index.

OQGN vice president - Finance - Khalid Nasser al Qassabi said, "Being sharia'a compliant has been a fundamental part of our planning for this IPO."

OQGN's IPO follows the new financing agreements signed by OQGN in June this year with a consortium comprising of 16 local and regional banks in June this year, which was considered one of the largest syndicates of sharia'a-compliant financing in Oman.

MEM supports studies of proposed Shell-led hydrogen, ammonia project

Muscat - The Ministry of Energy Minerals (MEM) provided its support to Oman Shell's continuing studies of the technical and commercial viability of its proposed blue hydrogen and ammonia project.

H E Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Minister of Energy and Minerals led a government team - which met with Oman Shell's senior vice president and country chair, Walid Hadi - earlier on September 21 to discuss the latest developments on the project.

Shell is the developer of the proposed project which aims to supply blue (low carbon) hydrogen and ammonia to local and international markets enabled by capturing and storing the carbon dioxide (CO₂) associated with the production process.

A suitable CO₂ store for the proposed project has been identified in collaboration with PDO. Shell has selected Duqm as the location of its blue hydrogen and ammonia manufacturing facili-



ties where there are opportunities to supply local industries with low carbon hydrogen.

Commenting on the role that the plan could play in the creation of a hydrogen economy in Oman, H E Afi said, "The sultanate is committed to its declared target of Net Zero Emissions by 2050. This blue hydrogen and ammonia project has the potential to accel-

erate the transition of customers to low carbon fuels, even as large-scale Green Hydrogen becomes available. The ministry therefore supports Shell's efforts to prove the commercial and technical viability of the project over the next phase."

Commenting on the ongoing study, Walid Hadi said, "As the developer of this aspired blue hy-

drogen and ammonia project, Shell continues to support Oman's Vision 2040 and its ambition to reach Net Zero Carbon Emissions by 2050 by supplying low carbon fuels domestically and abroad. Through pre-feasibility stage, we aim to mature the technical design, commercial arrangements with the government."

Sharakah paves way for innovation, jobs, economic resilience

Muscat - Oman is on the brink of becoming the region's fastest-growing economy, with an anticipated growth of 4.3%.

This surge is attributed to both a strategic increase in hydrocarbon production and the development of new natural gas fields. Remarkably, after surpassing its 10-year GDP growth average in 2022, the nation's economic momentum carried forward into 2023. This growth is not merely anchored in hydrocarbons; diversification spanning the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors have further propelled Oman's economy.

Reflecting Oman's financial resilience and attractiveness to investors, the government posted a commendable RO656mn budget surplus in the first half of the year. Such a surplus has boosted the nation's credit rating while bolstering investor confidence.

Oman's economic evolution is anchored in its Vision 2040, a comprehensive plan aiming at private sector-led growth, job



creation in non-hydrocarbon sectors, fiscal responsibility, and external sustainability.

Oman Vision 2040 priorities areas like labour market flexibility, improved tax efficiency, transparency in state-owned enterprises, a conducive investment atmosphere, digitalisation, and a shift towards green energy.

Sharakah, a major entity in sultanate's entrepreneurial arena,

aligns seamlessly with Oman's Vision 2040 and the Economic Stimulus Plan (ESP). By doing so, it reinforces its dedication to Oman's national objectives.

Sharakah's current strategy serves as a dynamic guide, allowing flexibility amidst changing startup trends. The organisation champions various sectors, emphasising In Country Value (ICV), Information and Commu-

nications Technology (ICT), and the knowledge-based economy.

A salient outcome of Sharakah's efforts is the heightened recognition and improved perception of startups and SMEs in Oman. Through campaigns, educational programmes, and partnerships, Sharakah has highlighted the potential of these enterprises. Such endeavours have not only elevated the startup status but also inspired many to embark on entrepreneurial paths.

Sharakah's emphasis on emerging industries like technology and renewable energy establishes it as a keystone in Oman's economic diversification and future prosperity. Its support for SMEs resonates with Oman's broader goals of economic growth, talent retention, and sustainable development.

Sharakah has ushered in significant transformations within Oman's SME ecosystem through its innovative approach, strategic collaborations, awareness-raising initiatives, focus on emerging

industries, and unwavering alignment with national goals.

These transformations have culminated in an improved and dynamic ecosystem that empowers startups and SMEs to thrive, ultimately driving economic growth and ensuring a prosperous future for Oman.

Ali bin Ahmed Muqail, CEO of Sharakah aptly states, "SMEs are recognised globally as the backbone of economies. Their agility allows them to stand out. With limited capital needs for setup, technology procurement, and talent acquisition, SMEs remain a crucial element of Oman's economy. We take pride in fostering their growth."

Emphasising that the role of partnerships, cannot be overstated, especially for SMEs, the CEO says, "Collaborations enable knowledge exchange, leveling the playing field for SMEs against larger corporations. SMEs, with their adaptability and resourcefulness, can quickly capitalise on emerging trends."



Al Maha signs deal with Al Qalaf Marine Services

Muscat - Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG, recently announced the signing of a distributorship agreement with Al Qalaf Marine Services for the exclusive distribution of AMPRO AQUA 4S, a cutting-edge 4-stroke marine engine oil.

With this agreement, Al Qalaf Marine will serve as the exclusive distributor of AMPRO AQUA 4S four stroke marine engine oil across the Sultanate of Oman.

In addition to traditional distribution channels, Al Qalaf Marine will make this high-performance marine engine oil accessible

through their online portal, ensuring convenience and efficiency for marine enthusiasts across the country.

Hafidh Bait Hadeed - the division head of Sales - said, "Al Qalaf's expertise in the marine industry and extensive reach align seamlessly with our commitment to delivering quality products to our customers. Together, we aim to elevate the maritime experience in Oman."

Aqil al Bharani, the CEO of Al Qalaf Marine Services, expressed excitement about this partnership.

Sohar International to expand portfolio with diverse services

Staying committed to its vision to be a world-leading Omani service company that helps customers, communities, and people to prosper and grow, Sohar International has furthered its transformational journey to go beyond banking.

The bank has proudly launched a first-of-its-kind in Oman, an innovative ecosystem of financial and non-financial services through its mobile banking apps that perfectly complement customers' lifestyles enabling them to live a better life.

With the integration of these services within the Sohar International Mobile Banking app, the initial phase of the app's launch has categorised the services into distinct sections, namely 'My Life' and 'My Goals'.

Leveraging these new integrations to convert its current apps into a one-stop platform, Sohar International Mobile Banking app offers convenient options enabling customers to book air travel tickets, make hotel reservation, purchase gifts vouchers and much more.

Commenting on the development, Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer at Sohar International said, "At Sohar International, we thrive on digitalisation,



the key to triumph in today's world. It fuels boundless efficiency, agility, and innovation, empowering us to exceed customer expectations. Our commitment to innovation drives growth, aligning with Oman's digitalisation goals and uplifting communities. Together, we're

'My Bills'. For entertainment seekers, 'My Entertainment' allows users to purchase gift cards from anywhere and send them to anyone, including dining, shopping, and much more from more than 500 brands worldwide.

Additionally, mobile users can book from over 300 leisure activities, including amusement parks, cruises, and much more, available in 80 cities. These initial offerings cater to the diverse interests and preferences of customers, enhancing their overall experience with the Sohar International app.

"The launch of our new platform is occurring at a crucial time as we expand our boundaries, extend our reach, and adapt to the dynamic market needs. This reaffirms our commitment to being a world-class Omani services company," Musalmi asserted.

By incorporating a fresh approach into their corporate strategy, the CEO that reflects innovation, inclusivity, and growth, Sohar International will continue to prioritise building meaningful relationships with clients and contributing to Omani society. "To ensure a thriving ecosystem, it is necessary to keep up with change," stated Musalmi.



Bank Muscat kids account can be opened at select Lulu stores

In emphasis of its customer-centric vision and commitment to enhancing financial inclusion through the delivery of various banking services that cater the needs of all segments of the society, Bank Muscat is offering children saving accounts targeting different age groups constitute an excellent opportunity for customers to enhance their financial awareness and be encouraged to embark on a regular saving practices at an early stage of life for a financially secure future.

As part of its endeavour to make the services of opening children saving accounts accessible to customers, Bank Muscat has partnered with Lulu Hypermarket Oman, one of the biggest retail chains, by allocating specific Kiosks in various Lulu Hypermarket locations across the sultanate.

This partnership came with the aim to serve the community and allow them to enjoy the various facilities offered across the Lulu Hypermarket locations all over the sultanate on all days of the week, from 5pm to 9pm, until September 30.

Therefore, customers are able to benefit from account opening services in the Lulu Hypermarket at Mabela North, Mall of Muscat, Oman Avenues Mall, Amerat, Khaboura, Barka, Suwaiq, Rustaq, Ibri, Buraimi, Nizwa, Salalah, Salalah Grand Mall, Sohar, Sur and Ibri. Bank Muscat customers may also opt to request for opening children accounts online through the Internet Banking services and mBanking App.

In line with Bank Muscat's commitment to its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and to enhancing convenience and easy access for customers, the Bank has recently announced extra working hours at a number of 42 select branches across the sultanate until September 30, from 3pm to 6pm, from Sunday to Thursday, to allow customers to open children account seamlessly.

The working hours are extended at the branches in Al Mahaj Al Amerat, Madinat Al Nahda, Al Khoudh, Muscat City Centre, Qurm, Mabela, Mabela Industrial area, Oman Avenues Mall, Jibroo, Seeb, Azaiba Round About, Wadi Kabir, Al Hail, Markaz al Bahja, Bausher, Quriyat, Al Kamil, Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, Sur al Afiah, Sinaw, Bidiya, Ibri, Musannah, Al Washil - Rustaq, Barka Souq, Bidaya, Bat'ha Hilal - Suwaiq, Tharmad, Saham Corniche, Shinas, Falaj al Qabail, Sohar, Al Khaboura, Dereez, Izki, Firq, Samail, Bahla Souq, Ibri Jubail, Salalah 23rd July Street, Taqa, and Buraimi - Main Road.

'Parents may take advantage of this opportunity by visiting the nearest branch or sending an email to the email address (MinorAO@bankmuscat.com) attaching the required documents for opening children accounts. Further to that, customers may follow the steps illustrated on the website <https://bm.click/AACA> for opening the saving account specified,' the bank informed.

Bank Muscat's children accounts of different age groups feature multiple advantages.

OPAZ Board approves framework of annual plan

The Board of Directors of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) held its third meeting for the year 2023, chaired by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Board, at OPAZ headquarters in Muscat.

During the meeting, the Board of Directors approved the general framework of OPAZ' annual plan for 2024 and its affiliated zones, which will be submitted to the Council of Ministers.

The meeting touched on a number of subjects, including the regulation of electricity sector in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) between the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Zones and the Public Services Regulatory Au-



thority. The Board also approved unifying usufruct fees for lands allocated to companies providing services in SEZAD and directed OPAZ Management to study the possibility of applying the same in all affiliated zones, in coordination with the zones' management.

The Board of Directors, further, discussed the requests submitted to extend the exemption period from paying usufruct fees for some local companies in the zones supervised by OPAZ and actions were taken accordingly.

It is noteworthy that the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) was established as per the provision of the Royal Decree No.105/2020, issued on August 18, 2020.

OPAZ oversees the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, free zones in Sohar, Salalah and Al Mazunah and any other special economic zone or free zone. It also oversees the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) and Khazaen Economic City.

Muscat International Unity Youth Cup from October 12

It will be a stage where the young talent will perform and try to outshine each other. Nearly 50 football teams with players as young as nine year olds and up to 17 years of age will feature at the inaugural Muscat International Unity Youth Cup, which will be held in Muscat from October 12-14.

The tournament, organised by Muscat Football Academy (MFA) in cooperation with Oman Football Association (OFA), is expected to attract all the leading private football academies from the region with confirmation already received from academies based in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar.

At a press conference held at Grand Hornumz on Wednesday, Chuck Martini, MFA owner, said, "This would be a platform for youngsters to showcase their talent and we are delighted to get the backing of the Oman Football Association for the first time. The three-day event will be held at two venues with the first two days teams vying against each other at Cheltenham Muscat and the grand finale concluding with



a full-day affair at the majestic Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

"It will be a dream come true for a lot of the youngsters to play and display their skills at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. It is the venue where our national team heroes and many top international teams have played. To play at the same venue on the final day will be something special."

The Unity Youth Cup will bring together young players from neighbouring countries including teams from Manchester City, PSG, Barcelona, Evolution and Juventus academies. The tournament will feature five categories - under-9, under-11, under-13, under-15 and under-17.

Except for the under-17 and under-15 competitions, which will be played in 11-a-side and nine-a-side formats respectively, the other categories will be eight-a-side format.

This Unity Youth Cup is part of the grassroots development programme under the world football governing body, FIFA, and will bring out the best of talent in Oman, who will get an opportunity to compete against leading academies from the region.

Martini said, "The tournament will bring in hundreds of players and their parents from the neighbouring countries and we are committed to make it a top-class event."

Mall of Muscat vibrates in 'Panchavadyam'

Mall of Muscat, Oman's premier shopping destination, recently delighted its visitors with a captivating performance of Panchavadyam, the popular rhythmic orchestra from the Indian state of Kerala.

This ensemble showcased the remarkable talents of approximately 20 artists proficient in an array of instruments, including five distinctive percussion instruments: Timila, Maddalam, Ilathalam, and Idakka, alongside the symphonic tones of the wind instrument known as Kombu.

Commencing with a gentle tempo, the Panchavadyam performance gradually built-up momentum, eventually reaching a breathtaking crescendo that had the audience fully immersed and enraptured by the music.

A spokesperson for Mall of Muscat said, "Panchavadyam's performance brought forth a musical delight that resonated deeply, and the crowd's palpable enthusiasm was a testament to its captivating allure. This is our special way of welcoming and pampering our valued visitors."

"Mall of Muscat took great pleasure in hosting this immersive music session, introducing



the enchanting melodies of this orchestra to the people of Oman," the spokesperson added.

"Traditional Omani music boasts a rich heritage, featuring a wide array of percussion instruments that have played a significant role in shaping the country's musical traditions for centuries. This performance served as a beautiful fusion of cultural appreciation and entertainment, celebrating both the artistry of Panchavadyam and the diverse musical heritage of Oman."

Incorporating an expanse of approximately 200,000sqm and providing more than 3000 parking spaces, the Mall boasts a substantial area. Beyond its shopping allure, Mall of Muscat presents a host of family-centric attractions, including a cinema, an entertainment zone, and other engaging features.

Remarkably, it also hosts the Oman Aquarium, the largest and only public aquarium within the Sultanate. With an impressive array of 240+ brands spanning across fashion, lifestyle, sports, and electronics, Mall of Muscat offers an unparalleled luxurious experience.

Located in Mabela, in close proximity to the Muscat International Airport, Mall of Muscat beckons with its charm. Boasting an expansive collection of 240+ brands that span fashion, lifestyle, sports, and electronics, this retail haven occupies an impressive 200,000-square-meter expanse, generously adorned with over 3000 parking spaces.

Within its precincts lies a treasure trove of family-friendly attractions, designed to delight all members of the household.

Specifically catering to the young audience, the Mall also features specialised kids' outlets all dedicated to ensuring children's boundless entertainment.

Changan UNI-V promises exhilarating drive

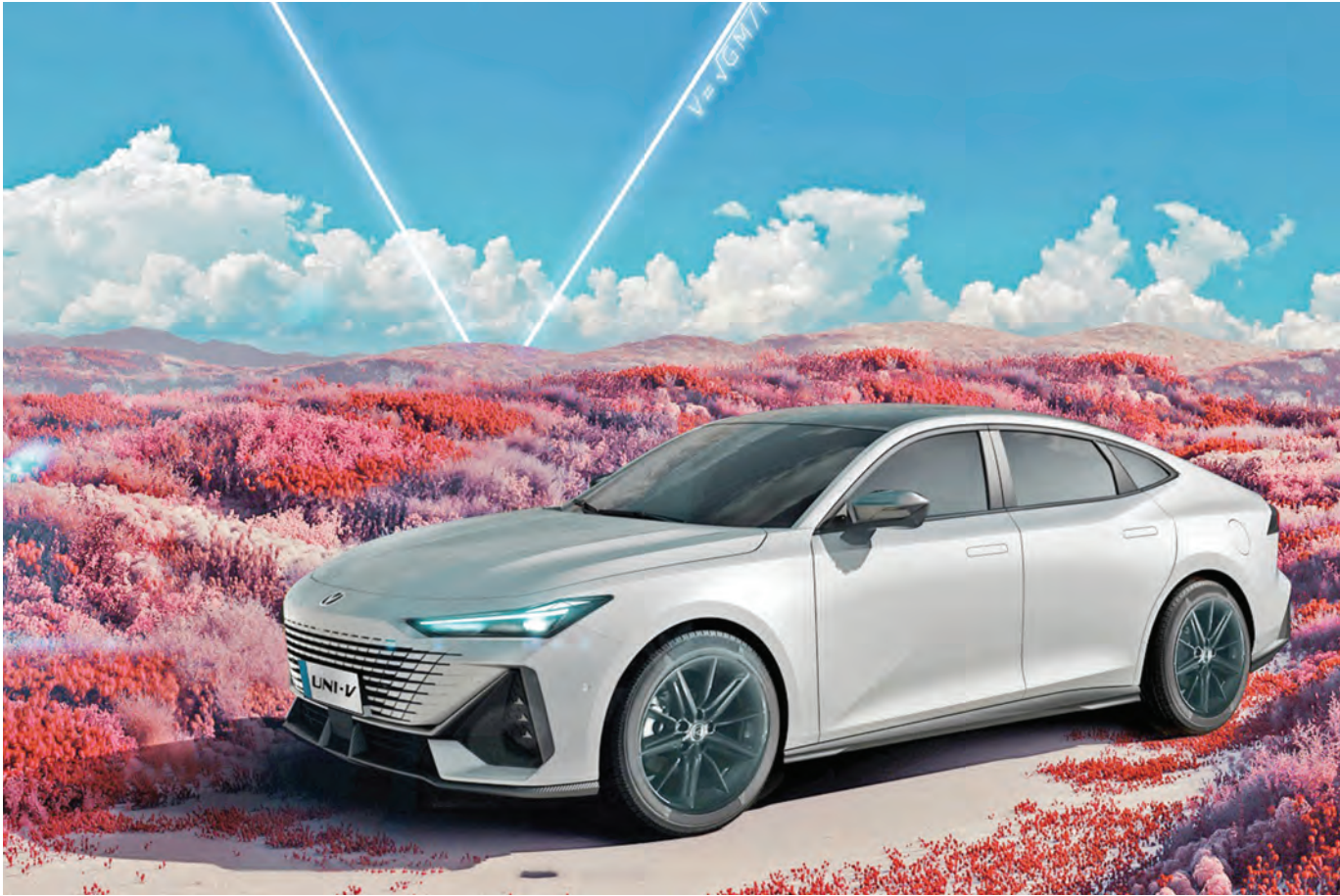
Luxury sedan Changan UNI-V promises an exhilarating driving experience while embodying a perfect blend of sportiness, sophistication, and security.

This exceptional model is loaded with state-of-the-art and opulent features, including a retractable rear spoiler, seamlessly integrated concealed door handles, and sumptuous leather seats, all contributing to its unparalleled allure.

Moreover, the Changan UNI-V impresses with its cutting-edge technology, boasting a striking 10" instrument cluster, a 10.25" infotainment screen, and convenient wireless chargers, ensuring you stay connected and charged throughout your journeys.

Safety takes the centre stage in the Changan UNI-V, as it comes equipped with a comprehensive suite of protective features, such as a 360° HD Camera, automatic emergency braking, forward collision warning, and intelligent adaptive cruise control.

With these advanced safety measures, you can enjoy every ride with peace of mind, knowing you are well-protected on the road. In essence, the



Changan UNI-V is a masterpiece that elevates your driving experience to new heights, offering both luxury and performance in perfect harmony.

Spokesperson for Arabian Gulf

Automobiles and Equipment (AGAE) says, "The premium UNI-V is a visually stunning masterpiece that leaves a lasting impression with its opulent interior, remarkable performance, and an

extensive array of cutting-edge safety, security, and driving assistance technologies."

Under the hood, the Changan UNI-V harnesses the mighty Blue Core 1.5 L turbocharged en-

gine, a true powerhouse that unleashes a remarkable 188 horsepower and an astonishing 300Nm of torque. Its prowess is seamlessly paired with a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission,

ensuring a smooth and efficient distribution of power to the front-wheel drive system.

As a current mainstream standard A-class sedan, the Changan UNI-V boasts ideal dimensions, measuring 4680x1838x1430mm in length, width, and height, while its generous wheelbase spans 2750mm. These well-balanced proportions contribute to the UNI-V's overall stability and agile handling on the road.

The UNI-V continues its family tradition of a borderless grille and adapts a more agile and accurate design to help the model feel much sportier. It has exterior features that make it unique including 18" Alloy Wheels, Panoramic Sunroof, Split and Auto LED Headlamps, LED DRLs, ORVM - electrically folding, hidden door handles and rear spoiler.

Changan UNI-V's extraordinary interior looks formidable with its black interior, leather seats and contrast coloured seat belts which gives the Changan a luxury yet sporty feel. It boasts of ventilated six-way electric adjustable driver seat and four-way electric adjustable passenger seat.

The Changan UNI-V boasts a

wide range of safety features, ensuring comprehensive protection for passengers. These include front airbags, side airbags, curtain airbags, BS + EBD + ESP + TSC + HHC + HDC + TPMS auto hold function, front and rear parking sensors, 360° HD Camera, 360° dashcam, adaptive cruise control, forward collision warning, automatic emergency brake, and lane departure warning.

Infotainment attributes include 10 instrument cluster, 10.25" infotainment screen, Navigation, Voice Control Function, mirror link with Apple CarPlay, wireless chargers, radio, Bluetooth, USB (front and rear) and eight speakers. It has comfort features such as electronic parking brake, keyless entry with push start button, remote engine start/stop, rear air outlet, paddle shifter, electric tailgate and rear seat centre headrest.

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment has set up a spacious and state-of-the-art Showroom in Qurum, Mawaleh and Sohar and service centre in Azabiba, Muscat. AGAE has already tied up for Periodic Maintenance Services in many cities including Salalah, Sohar, Sur, Nizwa, Ibra, Ibri and Barka etc.

National Finance 'Best Performing Company' in Mid-Cap Category

Recognising its outstanding achievements over the past year, National Finance was recently honoured with the esteemed 'Best Performing Company' Award in the Mid-Cap category at the prestigious Alam Al-Iktisaad Awards 2023.

The accolade - another feather in the company's hat - underscores National Finance's unparalleled pursuit of excellence, innovation and scaling new heights in Oman's finance sector. The honour was presented by H H Sayyid Melek bin Shihab al Said and was received by Ahmed al Maawali, deputy head of Retail at National Finance, on behalf of the company.

The awards, organised by the country's leading business magazine Alam Al-Iktisaad, was graced by the presence of Chief Guest H H Sayyid Melek bin Shihab al Said and hosted by Shaikh Salim bin Mustahail al Mashani. The event also saw in attendance distinguished senior government



dignitaries, top business leaders, financial consultants, decision makers and esteemed members of the business fraternity.

In the midst of illustrious play-

Growth, Net Profit Growth and Net Profit Margin, among others.

Tariq al Farsi, Chief Executive Officer, National Finance, said, "This award serves as a testament to National Finance's dedication and constant commitment to providing the fastest and most flexible solutions to serve our customers in the best possible way. Our extensive experience, strong collaborations, strategic business practices, and hard-working and dedicated employees are the reasons behind our great achievements. This recognition reinforces our continuous commitment to delivering unparalleled financial services, staying abreast of market developments, and improving people's lives by adapting our products to meet customer needs."

National Finance caters to the evolving needs of individuals, business owners, SMEs and corporates, sets it apart as the most sought after finance company in the country.

Khazna Team of MoE's Financial Literacy Project holds 1st meeting

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Khazna Team of Instilling Financial Literacy Project, held the first meeting for members of the central team and representatives of the educational governorates, at the Novotel Muscat Airport Hotel on Wednesday.

During the meeting, the vision of the 'Khazna' project was reviewed which is raising the level of awareness of financial culture among school students to create an economically and financially aware generation.

The executive plan for the project in the next phase was also discussed during the meeting, with clarification of the implementation mechanisms, along with a discussion of the challenges that may face implementation in the educational field, and the proposed initiatives.

This approach comes about spreading the principles of financial culture because of its importance as one of the requirements of modern times and keeping



pace with economic development in the world.

Dr Haifa al Maamari, Director of the Khazna Project (Instilling the Principles of Financial Literacy among School Students), said: "This project comes out of interest in spreading awareness of financial culture among school students and preparing a generation capable of keeping pace with current economic developments as one of the requirements for sustainable human development and future skills, and to adapt to it in the future according to Oman Vision 2040.

"The Ministry of Education formed a main committee for the

Khazna Project (instilling the principles of financial culture among school students) based on Ministerial Resolution."

Dr Haifa al Maamaria also explained that the 'Khazna' project means developing a procedural plan to spread financial awareness among school students in Oman through implementing a group of various educational activities, programs, and events.

It aims at spreading awareness among school students in everything related to financial transactions in various aspects of life, raising a financially aware generation, preparing them for positive interaction with society.

OAB announces winners of summer credit card campaign

Five lucky winners will be jetting off on premium holidays after winning the final draw of the Oman Arab Bank (OAB) summer 2023 credit campaign.

The prize winners, who each secured unforgettable vacations worth RO1,200 each, comprised four customers and one OAB employee.

Sulaiman al Harthi, CEO of Oman Arab Bank, said, "I have been extremely pleased with the success of this campaign, which is part of our ongoing commitment to providing added value and opportunities for our customers. Congratulations to all our winners, and my heartfelt thanks to all our loyal customers who took part."

The campaign saw participating customers earning draw entries for every ROS spent, including online and POS transactions. Promoting in-bound tourism, those customers travelling to Salalah for the season



were able to double their entries per transaction for bigger chances to win.

OAB credit card holders can unlock a plethora of perks and benefits through the innovative mobile app. Travel benefits that come with being an OAB credit card holder include travel insurance for peace of mind, exclusive airport lounge access for added comfort, unbeatable discounts and special offers on airfares and hotel stays, as well as exquisite dining experiences at over 300 airport outlets worldwide.

ROHM holds Lunch Music for The Barber of Seville opera

The excited anticipation of the new season at ROHM has been elevated by the outstanding Lunch Music concert which took place on Saturday at 12.30pm.

ROHM is delighted to announce that the season officially began with a packed event at the Opera Galleria. The first 'Lunch Music' of the year was held with performers from the Omani Opera Choir and solo artists from the upcoming opera.

The programme for the event was built around the idea of a lunch menu, with starters, soups, main courses, and side dishes, followed by dessert. The 'food' was of course all music! Arias and duets were selected from the opera to create a stunning concert for a hugely appreciative audience.

Lunch Music has always been a very popular part of the season and this edition proved to be no exception. With standing room only, the atmosphere was one of excitement and delight, tinged with the electric anticipation of the main event which will launch ROHM's season on Friday (Sep-



tember 29) and run for a further performance the next day: *The Barber of Seville*, the full opera.

This grand, red-carpet occasion opens the season entitled 'Stars, Legends, Dreams'. There are three further 'Lunch Music' dates this season to put in your calendars. Each are connected to

operas of the season: *La Bohème* on November 18, *Don Pasquale* on December 9, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on February 3.

Lunch Music is always held in the Opera Galleria and is a free un-ticketed event. There is seating but this is allocated on a first come first served basis and fills

up quickly. The concerts are of one hour duration and audiences are welcome to come and go as they please.

'On Monday 7pm, you are invited to attend 'Opera Talks' at the Music Library (ROHMA), where musicologist Gaston Fournier will present themes

from *The Barber of Seville* opera, with singers demonstrating excerpts in an exclusive and intimate setting. Opera Talks will create a special feeling of connection with the opera, adding a dimension to the experience which is both rewarding and enriching,' the ROHM informed.

2 Palestinians killed in West Bank raid

Violence has surged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since early last year, particularly in the West Bank

Tulkarem, Palestinian Territories - Israeli forces shot dead two Palestinians in a pre-dawn raid on Sunday in the West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said, as the army confirmed it dismantled an 'operational command centre' in the occupied territory.

Violence has surged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since early last year, particularly in the West Bank where eight Palestinians have now been killed in Israeli incursions since Tuesday.

'Two Palestinians were killed by live Israeli bullets to the head' in the town of Tulkarem, the ministry said. The army said one of its soldiers was 'moderately injured by gunshot fragments' during clashes in Nur Shams refugee camp near the town.

The Palestinian health ministry identified the two killed as Osaïd Abu Ali, 21, and Abd al-Rahman Abu Daghash, 32.

Palestinian fighter group Hamas said in a statement that 'martyr Osaïd Abu Ali' was one of its fighters.

Ibrahim al-Nimer, a representative of the Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group in the camp, told AFP that 'the army entered the camp after 2am... and demolished streets and



Residents inspect the damage at the Nur Shams refugee camp in the northern city of Tulkarem in the occupied West Bank on Sunday (AFP)

The Palestinian health ministry identified the two killed as Osaïd Abu Ali, 21, and Abd al-Rahman Abu Daghash, 32

and identified by the Islamic Jihad fighter group as a member of its armed wing.

Recent months have seen a surge in such military raids and a rise in Palestinian attacks on Israelis, as well as an increase in West Bank settler attacks against Palestinians. In early July, the Israeli army carried out its biggest raid in years on the Jenin refugee camp in which at least 13 Palestinians were killed, including fighters and children.

One Israeli soldier was also

1967. Excluding annexed east Jerusalem, the territory is now home to around 490,000 Israelis who live in settlements that are considered illegal under international law.

The Palestinians, who seek their own independent state, want Israel to withdraw from all land it occupied in the Six-Day War and to dismantle all Jewish settlements.

However, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-right government has pushed forward settlement expansion. The coalition includes settlers such as the extreme-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Unrest has also surged in recent days in the Israeli-blockaded Gaza Strip, where Palestinians have been holding daily protests along the border with Israel. On Saturday, the Israeli army carried out a drone strike after violent protests in which three Palestinians were wounded by Israeli fire.

The strike was one of a series that have come amid the border protests after Israel closed the Erez crossing, the only one for pedestrians into Israel from Gaza. AFP

killed in that raid, but by Israeli fire 'following an incident of mistaken identification', the army said days later.

The Jenin raid also targeted several explosives-manufacturing facilities, the army said of the operation that left much of the camp charred and in rubble.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day War of



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi addresses the 78th United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York City on September 19 (AFP)

Iran asks Sweden to act against Quran burnings

Tehran, Iran - Iran has demanded Sweden take action over Quran burnings before the two countries can exchange ambassadors again, and urged it to release a jailed Iranian citizen, the foreign ministry said on Sunday.

Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian discussed the Quran issue with his Swedish counterpart Tobias Billstrom on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, the foreign ministry said.

"Regarding the exchange of ambassadors, we are waiting for good action on the issue of the Holy Quran in Sweden," Iran's top envoy told Billstrom in New York, the Iranian ministry said in a statement.

Sweden has seen a series of public burnings of the Islamic holy book. Stockholm has voiced condemnation but said it cannot stop acts protected under laws on free expression.

Iran said in July it would not allow a new Swedish ambassador into the country after the mission of the last envoy ended.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi days ago held up a Quran at the UN rostrum and declared that 'the fires of disrespect will not overcome the divine truth', also condemning 'Islamophobia and cultural apartheid' in the West.

Amir-Abdollahian told his Swedish counterpart that 'defending the values of Sweden at the cost of ignoring the values of

Regarding the exchange of ambassadors, we are waiting for good action on the issue of the Holy Quran in Sweden

HOSSEIN AMIR-ABDOLLAHIAN

two billion Muslims in the world is unacceptable'.

Prisoners

He also urged Stockholm to release Hamid Noury, an Iranian arrested in November 2019 and sentenced to life in prison after being convicted over the mass executions of prisoners ordered by Tehran in 1988.

"We expect that the Swedish government will make a wise and courageous decision in the appeal stage and release Mr Noury," the minister said, adding that 'we are ready for positive and constructive cooperation in various fields'.

The statement did not address Swedish nationals incarcerated in Iran, including the EU diplomat Johan Floderus, 33, who has been detained for more than 500 days.

In July last year, Iran announced it had arrested a Swede on suspicion of espionage, and earlier this month Iran's judiciary stated that the Swedish citizen had committed crimes in Iran. AFP

logical devices'.

Troops also uncovered a large number of explosive devices during the raid, it said. "During the activity, suspects opened fire and hurled explosive devices at the

forces, who responded with live fire," the army said.

Surge in army raids

An AFP journalist who toured the Nur Shams camp hours after the

raid saw that a roof of a building and its walls had fully caved in, as residents inspected the damage.

Israeli forces had raided the same camp on September 5. One Palestinian was shot dead,

Cop killed, fighting ongoing in north Kosovo

Banjaska, Kosovo - Skirmishes between gunmen and authorities in northern Kosovo were ongoing, according to Prime Minister Albin Kurti, hours after a police officer had been killed when a patrol was hit by an ambush involving firearms and explosives.

Kurti said at least 30 heavily armed gunmen were now surrounded by authorities near Banjaska in north Kosovo and called for their surrender.

"There are at least 30 professional, military or police armed people who are surrounded by our police forces and whom I invite to surrender to our security agencies," said Kurti during a press conference.

Kurti added that the group was located in and around a monastery near the village of Banjaska, where the patrol had been ambushed early on Sunday.

The Serbia Orthodox Church confirmed that gunmen had stormed a monastery in Banjaska, where pilgrims from the northern Serbian city of Novi Sad were staying.

"We can see armed people in uniforms... they are firing on us



Kosovo police officers guard the entrance to the village of Banjaska in north Kosovo on Sunday (AFP)

and we are firing back," Kosovo police official Vetton Elshan told AFP by phone from Banjaska.

Kurti's comments came hours after he called the ambush an act of terrorism and pinpointed the blame on the Serbian government. "Organised crime with political, financial and logistical support from officials in Belgrade is attacking our country," Kurti

wrote on social media.

Serbian state media outlet RTS later reported that Jarinje and Brnjak border crossings between Serbia and Kosovo have been closed.

Tensions

The incident comes more than a week after talks between the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo

centred on improving ties failed to make a breakthrough during EU-mediated negotiations in Brussels.

The EU has been trying for years to resolve the long-running dispute between Balkan neighbours that has soured relations since their war more than two decades ago.

Brussels believed it had bro-

ken the logjam by hammering out a plan to normalise ties in March, but since then there has been minimal progress.

The diplomatic stalemate comes as tensions in the troubled north have been smouldering for months, following the Pristina government's decision to install ethnic Albanian mayors in four Serb-majority municipalities in May.

The move has triggered one of the worst bouts of unrest in the north in years. Demonstrations followed, as well as the arrest of three Kosovar police officers by Serbia and a violent riot by Serb protesters saw more than 30 NATO peacekeepers injured.

Kosovo remains overwhelmingly populated by ethnic Albanians, but in the northern stretches of the territory near the border with Serbia, ethnic Serbs remain the majority in several municipalities.

The tussle in the north is just the latest in a long list of incidents to rock the area since Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008.

AFP

Armenia signals policy shift away from Russia



Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan (AFP)

Yerevan, Armenia - Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on Sunday signalled a major foreign policy shift away from Russia following Moscow's refusal to enter the latest conflict over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh.

Pashinyan told the nation in a major television address that his former Soviet republic's current foreign security alliances were 'ineffective' and 'insufficient'.

He added that Armenia should join the International Criminal Court (ICC) - a tribunal which has issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin over his actions in Ukraine.

"The systems of external security in which Armenia is involved are ineffective when it comes to the protection of our security and Armenia's national interests," Pashinyan said.

His address aired just days after Azerbaijan claimed full control over Nagorno-Karabakh in a

six post-Soviet states. The group pledges to protect other members that come under attack.

But Russia is bogged down in a war in Ukraine and has grown more isolated on the international stage.

It argued that Yerevan itself recognised the disputed region as part of Azerbaijan and refused to come to Armenia's aid.

"It has become evident to all of us that the CSTO instruments and the instruments of the Armenian-Russian military-political cooperation are insufficient for protecting external security of Armenia," he said.

"We must transform and supplement the instruments of Armenia's external and domestic security, in cooperation with all the partners who are ready for mutually beneficial steps," Pashinyan said.

Pashinyan's address came after days of increasingly strong criticism in Moscow of what has

been Russia's main ally in the volatile Caucasus.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday accused Armenia of 'adding fuel to the fire' with its public rhetoric.

Moscow had earlier this month summoned Armenia's ambassador following its decision to decision to host US forces for small peacekeeping drills.

Russian state television commentators have been attacking Pashinyan and other Armenian leaders for their criticism of Moscow.

Pashinyan's comments about the ICC threaten to generate particular anger in the Kremlin.

ICC judge Tomoko Akane issued an arrest warrant for Putin in March for the war crime of allegedly unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

Putin has avoided visiting other ICC member nations to avoid the possibility of arrest. AFP

Bombing toll climbs in Somalia

Mogadishu, Somalia - Emergency workers in central Somalia dug through rubble to recover more bodies on Sunday after a truck bombing killed over a dozen people and brought buildings crashing down.

A suicide bomber drove the vehicle which was loaded with explosives towards a security checkpoint in the town of Beledweyne on Saturday, triggering an explosion that left scores trapped under bricks and concrete.

Police told AFP on Sunday that the toll had climbed past the 13 deaths reported earlier.

"The search and clearing operation is going on at the site of the explosion and dead bodies were recovered this morning under the debris," said Sayid Ali, deputy commander of the Beledweyne police station.

AFP

Biden aims to wrest influence from China in Pacific islands

Washington, US - President Joe Biden is set to host leaders of Pacific island nations with an aim of countering China's ever-growing influence, proffering goodies ranging from an American football experience to shiny new embassies.

The summit of leaders from the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum will take place on Monday and Tuesday, one year after the first meeting, which was also in Washington. According to senior administration officials, Biden will announce a more assertive US stance in the region, funding for infrastructure projects and strengthened maritime cooperation, in particular to fight against illegal fishing.

The forum brings together states and territories scattered across the Pacific Ocean, from Australia to sparsely populated micro-states and archipelagos.

There is 'no question that there is some role that the PRC has played in all this.... its assertiveness and influence, including in this region, has been a factor that requires us to sustain our strategic focus,' a senior White House official said on condition of anonymity, referring to China by the abbreviation of its formal name.

Absence noted
China's influence will be felt



US President Joe Biden leaves the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Georgetown, on Saturday (AFP)

through the absence of the prime minister of the Solomon Islands, now closely aligned with Beijing. Manasseh Sogavare, who was in New York last week to attend the UN General Assembly, did not extend his stay in the United States.

"We're disappointed that he's chosen not to come to this very

special summit," another White House official said.

Another goal of the meeting is to renegotiate 'Compacts of Free Association' with the Marshall Islands before current terms expire on Saturday.

The agreement, which Washington also has with Micronesia and the Palau archipelago - other

territories formerly under American administration - allows the United States to have a military presence on the islands.

In exchange, Washington provides economic assistance and security guarantees, and inhabitants of the islands can live and work in the United States.

The Marshall Islands is de-

manding that any new agreement account for the effects of Washington's nuclear testing programme there in the 1940s and 50s.

The Biden administration hopes to announce 'very substantial progress' in the negotiations, the second White House official said.

The summit of leaders from the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum will take place on Monday and Tuesday, one year after the first meeting, which was also in Washington

For the summit itself, Biden has prepared a full programme, kicking off with an afternoon of American gridiron.

The leaders will travel by train on Sunday to Baltimore, where they will be guests of honour at a NFL game between the port city's Ravens and the Indianapolis Colts.

Monday's agenda features meetings and a lunch with Biden. On Tuesday, the leaders will meet with top officials on climate and the economy, and spend time with US lawmakers.

According to the officials, the United States will announce the establishment of diplomatic ties with the Cook Islands and Niue, a tiny territory with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants.

AFP

Blaze kills 34 at illegal Benin fuel depot

Cotonou, Benin - At least 34 people died in Benin near Nigeria's border on Saturday when a contraband fuel depot exploded into flames, sending up a black cloud of smoke into the sky and leaving dozens of charred bodies at the site, a government official and residents said.

The blaze erupted at a warehouse for smuggled fuel in the southern Benin town of Seme Podji, where cars, motorbikes and tricycle taxis came to stock up on fuel, according to local residents.

Nigeria is a major oil producer and fuel smuggling is common inside the country and along its borders, with illegal refineries, fuel dumps and pipelines sometimes causing fires. "I am still in shock. We heard people screaming for help. But the intensity of the flames was too much for people to try to approach," said Innocent Sidokpohou, a carpenter.

"I got gas for my motorbike to go do my shopping. I left and barely five metres away I heard an explosion. When I turned around it was all black smoke."

Benin's Interior Minister Alassane Seidou told reporters a serious fire had occurred in the town.

AFP

French rapper gets 12 years in prison for youth's murder

Paris, France - French rapper MHD was sentenced on Saturday to 12 years in prison for the 2018 murder of a young man in Paris who was rammed with a car before being set upon by a mob and stabbed.

Five of his fellow defendants were also jailed over the killing, receiving jail terms of between 10 and 18 years, over what prosecutors said was a fight between rival gangs. Three other men were acquitted.

The pioneer of afro-trap - a mix of hip-hop and African traditions - MHD rose to fame after becoming a viral sensation in 2015. The 29-year-old, whose real name is Mohamed Sylla, was charged with homicide in January 2019 and imprisoned. He was released after a year and a half in custody as investigations continued, and released a new album.

As Saturday's verdict was



Mohamed Sylla, aka MHD (AFP)

handed down, several women in the public gallery burst into tears. MHD hugged one of them, maintaining his composure. Those convicted - who all pleaded not guilty - have 10 days to appeal.

During his final statement to the court before it retired to render the verdict after three weeks of proceedings, he had again proclaimed his innocence.

"From the beginning, I have

maintained my innocence in this case and I will continue to maintain my innocence," he told the packed court.

The prosecutor had asked for an 18-year prison sentence for the rapper, acquittals for two of the accused, and jail sentences of 13-20 years for the others.

On the night of July 5, 2018, 23-year-old Loic K was rammed by a black Mercedes and then beaten up and stabbed by around a dozen people in a gritty part of the capital's 10th arrondissement. Although the rapper denied having been at the scene, a local resident filmed the incident from his window, and the Mercedes was quickly identified as belonging to MHD.

Other witnesses identified him by his haircut or a sweatshirt by Puma - for which he was a brand ambassador - according to investigative reports.

AFP

Italian PM admits she hoped to do 'better' on migration

Rome, Italy - Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has admitted she had hoped to do 'better' on controlling irregular migration, which has surged since her far-right party won historic elections a year ago.

"Clearly we hoped for better on immigration, where we worked so hard," she said in an interview marking the win, broadcast late on Saturday on the TG1 channel.

"The results are not what we hoped to see. It is certainly a very complex problem, but I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of it."

Meloni's post-fascist Brothers of Italy party was elected largely on a promise to reduce mass migration into Italy.

But the number of people arriving on boats from North Africa has instead surged, with more than 130,000 recorded by the interior ministry so far this year - up from 70,000 in the same pe-



Migrants arrive in the harbour of Italian island of Lampedusa, on September 18 (AFP)

riod of 2022.

After 8,500 people arrived on the tiny island of Lampedusa in just three days earlier this month, Meloni demanded the European

Union do more to help relieve the pressure.

Brussels agreed to intensify existing efforts, and this week said it would start to release

money to Tunisia - from where many of the boats leave - under a pact aimed at stemming irregular migration from the country.

AFP

Red Sea's coral reefs threatened by mysterious death of sea urchins

Eilat, Israel - The Red Sea's spectacular coral reefs face a new threat, marine biologists warn - the mass death of sea urchins that may be caused by a mystery disease.

Because the long-spined creatures feed on algae that can suffocate corals, their die-off could 'destroy our entire coral reef ecosystem', warned scientist Lisa-Maria Schmidt.

In Israel's Red Sea resort of Eilat, which borders Jordan and Egypt, Schmidt recalled the moment she and her colleagues first witnessed the population collapse. "When we jumped into the water, all of a sudden all those specimens we used to see before were gone, and what we saw was skeletons and piles of spines," she told AFP.

The team had first heard re-

ports in January that a sea urchin species off Eilat was dying rapidly, so they went to a site known for an abundance of the species *Diadema setosum*.

They first thought that local pollution could be to blame.

But, within two weeks, the spiny invertebrates also started dying down the coast, including in a seawater-fed facility of the Inter-University Institute for Marine Sciences. Scrambling to find the cause, the scientists watched with growing alarm as the mass mortality spread south through the Red Sea.

The team found that it affected two kinds of sea urchin, *Diadema setosum* and *Echinothrix calamaris*, while other species in the same environment remained unharmed.

In the marine reserve off Eilat,



Fish swim by the coral reef in the waters of the Red Sea near the southern Israeli city of Eilat on September 14 (AFP)

colourful fish and some other sea urchin species could be seen by a visiting AFP journalist - although the impact of humans was never far away.

While snorkelling, Schmidt grabbed floating plastic rubbish and pushed it up the sleeve of her wetsuit, to discard later.

Walking along the beach, she also picked up handfuls of algae, to feed to the sea urchins still alive in tanks.

'Absolutely devastating'

A similar mass mortality earlier hit sea urchins in the Caribbean, raising speculation that a disease may have arrived in the Red Sea by ships, whose ballast water can carry pathogens and exotic species.

"I think it's especially scary for

that region, especially in the Red Sea," said Mya Breitbart, a biologist from the University of South Florida in the United States.

She pointed out that, while coral reefs are dying off in many other areas, 'those corals are known to be quite resilient, and I think people have placed a lot of hope in those reefs'.

Early last year, Breitbart started hearing that the *Diadema antillarum* species - similar to those affected in the Red Sea - was rapidly changing behaviour and then dying in droves in the Caribbean.

The area has still not recovered from a similar event in the 1980s, whose cause was never discovered, and Breitbart described this second die-off there as 'absolutely devastating'.

AFP

Indian Railways begins redeveloping more than 500 major stations

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday announced that the work of re-development of more than 500 major railway stations of the country has begun and that these new stations built during the Amrit Kaal will be called 'Amrit Bharat' stations.

"We all know that there are several railway stations which have not been developed for the past several years... Work to develop these stations are underway... All the stations which will be developed in the 'Azadi Ka Amrit Kaal' will be called 'Amrit Bharat stations,'" Modi said in his virtual address as he flagged off nine Vande Bharat Express trains.

"These stations will become the identity of the new Bharat in the coming days," he added.

The prime minister emphasised that 'an India on the path of being developed will now have to modernise its railway stations as well'.

With this thinking in mind, for the first time a campaign for the development and modernisation of railway stations has begun in India, he said adding that today, a record number of foot over bridges, lifts and escalators are being constructed in the country for the convenience of railway passengers.

"Nine Vande Bharat Express trains being launched today will significantly improve connectivity as well as boost tourism across India," Modi said ahead



Passengers are seen during the flagging off of Patna-Howrah Vande Bharat Express, in Patna on Sunday (ANI)

of the flag off.

The prime minister said that the speed and scale of infrastructure development match with aspirations of 140 crore Indians. "Today people of Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar, West Bengal, Kerala, Odisha, Jharkhand and Gujarat will get the facility of Vande Bharat Express trains. These new Vande Bharat Express trains depict the new energy of the country," Modi said.

Modi said that 25 Vande Bharat Express trains are already running, and now nine more will be added to them.

Stressing the importance of railways in the lives of common citizens, the prime minister said work was going on for doubling, electrification and new routes.

He expressed happiness that the Railways has started celebrating the 'Shapna Diwas' day of establishment of railway station citing the celebrations at Coimbatore, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus and Mumbai. Coimbatore Railway station has completed 150 years.

"Now this tradition of celebrating the birthday of railway stations will be expanded further and more and more people will be involved in it," he said.

"To achieve the goal of a developed India by 2047, development of every state and the people of every state is necessary," Modi said.

ANI

Major asteroid sample lands in US

Osiris-Rex sample will provide a better understanding of the formation of solar system

Dugway, US - A seven-year space voyage came to its climactic end on Sunday when a NASA capsule landed in the desert in the US state of Utah, carrying to Earth the largest asteroid samples ever collected.

Scientists have high hopes for the sample, saying it will provide a better understanding of the formation of our solar system and how Earth became habitable.

"Touchdown of the Osiris-Rex sample return capsule!" a commentator said on NASA's live video webcast of the landing.

It completed a 3.86bn-mile (6.21bn-km) journey. It marked 'the US's first sample return mission of its kind and will open a time capsule to the beginnings of our solar system', the US space agency said in a post on X, the former Twitter.

The Osiris-Rex probe's final, fiery descent through Earth's atmosphere was perilous, but NASA managed to engineer a soft landing at 8:52am local (1452 GMT), in the military's Utah Test and Training Range.

Four years after its 2016 launch, the probe had landed on the asteroid Bennu and collected roughly nine ounces (250 grams) of dust from its rocky surface. Even that small amount, NASA says, should 'help us better understand the types of asteroids that could threaten Earth' and cast light 'on the earliest history of our solar system', NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said.

"This sample return is really historic," NASA scientist Amy



NASA safety team members approaching the Osiris-Rex asteroid sample's return craft sitting in the Utah desert at Dugway, Utah, on Sunday (AFP)

This sample return is really historic. This is going to be the biggest sample we've brought back since the Apollo moon rocks were returned to Earth

AMY SIMON

Simon told AFP. 'This is going to be the biggest sample we've brought back since the Apollo moon rocks' were returned to Earth. Osiris-Rex released the capsule early on Sunday - from an altitude of more than 67,000 miles (108,000km) - some four hours before it landed.

The fiery passage through the atmosphere came only in the last 13 minutes, as the capsule hurtled downward at a speed of more than 27,000 miles per hour, with temperatures of up to 5,000 Fahrenheit (2,760 Celsius). Its rapid descent, monitored by army sensors, was supposed to

be slowed by two successive parachutes as it made its way to the 37-mile by nine-mile landing zone.

The main chute, however, deployed 'much higher than was originally anticipated', at about 20,000 feet rather than the planned 5,000 feet, the NASA commentator said.

NASA images showed the tire-sized capsule on the ground in a desert wash, with scientists approaching the device and taking readings.

Meanwhile, the probe that made the space journey fired its engines and shifted course away

from Earth, NASA said, 'on its way' for a date with another asteroid, known as Apophis.

Scientists predict that asteroid will come within 20,000 miles of Earth in 2029.

Japanese samples

The team will carefully airlift the device by helicopter to a temporary 'clean room' nearby. NASA wants this done quickly and carefully to avoid any contamination of the sample with desert sands, skewing test results.

On Monday the sample is to be flown by plane to NASA's Johnson Space Center in Hous-

ton. There, the box will be opened in another 'clean room'.

NASA plans to announce its first results at a news conference on October 11. Most of the sample will be conserved for study by future generations. Roughly one-fourth will be immediately used in experiments, and a small amount will be sent to mission partners Japan and Canada.

Japan had earlier given NASA a few grains from asteroid Ryugu, after bringing 0.2 ounces of dust to Earth in 2020 during the Hayabusa-2 mission. Ten years before, it had brought back a microscopic quantity from another asteroid.

But the sample from Bennu is much larger, allowing for significantly more testing, Simon said.

Asteroids are composed of the original materials of the solar system, dating back some 4.5bn years, and have remained relatively intact.

They 'can give us clues about how the solar system formed and evolved', said Osiris-Rex program executive Melissa Morris.

"It's our own origin story."

By striking Earth's surface, 'we do believe asteroids and comets delivered organic material, potentially water, that helped life flourish here on Earth,' Simon said.

Scientists believe Bennu, about 500 metres (1,640 feet) in diameter, is rich in carbon - a building block of life on Earth - and contains water molecules locked in minerals.

AFP

Iran: 28 IS members held over Tehran plot

Tehran, Iran - Iranian authorities have arrested 28 people linked to the Islamic State group for plotting to target Tehran during the anniversary of last year's protests, the intelligence ministry said on Sunday.

The protests erupted after the death in custody on September 16, 2022, of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd arrested for allegedly flouting the Islamic republic's strict dress code for women.

"In recent days, during a series of simultaneous operations in Tehran, Alborz and West Azerbaijan provinces, several terrorist bases and team houses were attacked, and 28 members of the said terrorist network were arrested," the ministry said on its website.

"These elements are affiliated to the professional crime group of Daesh (Islamic State group) and some of them have a history of accompanying takfiris in Syria or being active in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Kurdistan region of Iraq," it added. In Shiite-dominated Iran, the term 'takfiri' generally refers to militants or proponents of radical Sunni Islam.

AFP

SLIMY SALE



A woman looks at snakes for sale along a street near Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on Sunday (AFP)

Flood strengthens Libya's national fabric

Tripoli, Libya - About a dozen women hunch over sewing machines in Libya's capital, urgently making clothes for the living, and shrouds for the dead, two weeks after a huge flood devastated the eastern city of Derna.

In the war-battered north African country that has long been divided between two rival governments, the tragedy that killed thousands has sparked a nationwide sense of solidarity.

"Our centre was already helping needy families, so you can imagine our mobilisation when it involves a disaster of this magnitude," said Mohamed Kamour, the director of the centre that trains women to become dress-makers. Since the flood struck on September 10, the apprentices have worked at full speed, cutting and sewing fabric for the needy in Derna, a city more than 1,300 km (800 miles) to the east.

All normal courses have been suspended for the aid effort, said Kamour, whose workshop usually helps widows and divorced



Participants work at a women's training centre in Tripoli on Saturday (AFP)

women gain financial independence. "That is the priority," he said. "We interrupted all types of training."

The workshop has already sent 1,300 school uniforms, 850 abayas and 650 shrouds to cover corpses to Derna, and a second shipment is being prepared.

Derna had a population of about 100,000 before the flash flood broke through two ageing dams after a hurricane-strength storm lashed the area.

The official death toll passed 3,800 on Saturday.

The flood, which witnesses likened to a tsunami, may have left 10,000 or more people missing, international aid groups said.

Many were swept out to sea, from where bodies are still washing ashore. Others are thought to be buried beneath the mud and debris that carpets entire neighbourhoods of Derna.

Since a 2011 NATO-backed revolt toppled longtime dictator

Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has seen more than a decade of stop-start conflict.

It is now divided between an internationally-recognised administration in Tripoli in the west and another in the east, whose forces launched a failed assault on the capital which ended in a 2020 ceasefire. Despite Libya's political split, Kamour said he received the requests of stricken residents from charities based in the east, and has stepped up production in response.

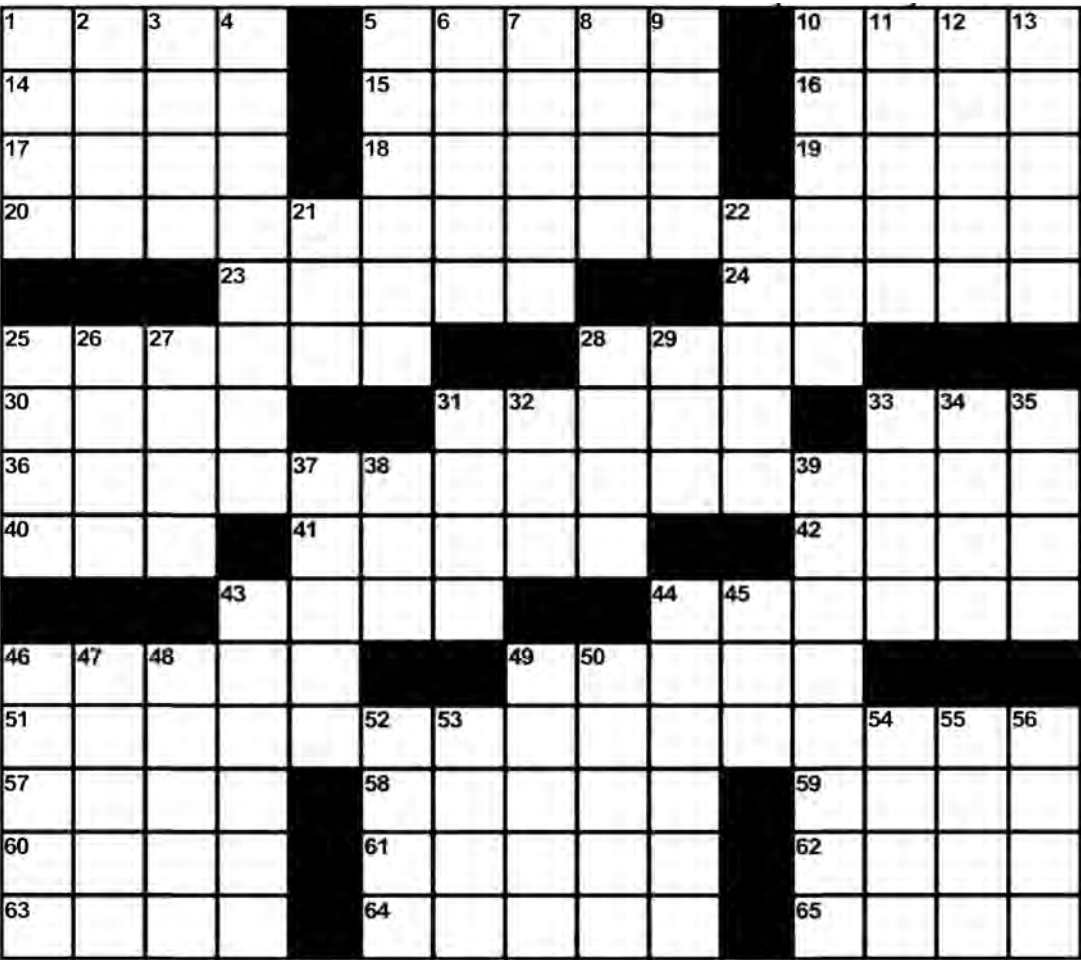
The women stand over a large table crowded with the day's output, which they sort and fold: grey and green abayas, a traditional full-length robe; white medical smocks; shrouds for the bodies.

Karima Wanis, 39, the centre's trainer, said she feels as if she lost members of her own family.

While sewing machines hummed in the background, she said that it is 'normal to come to the aid of our Derna brothers'.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) One of the common people
- 5) Horse habitat
- 10) Goalie's wear
- 14) Freight car hopper of old
- 15) "Sesame Street" resident
- 16) Cain's victim
- 17) Clickable item
- 18) Church tenet
- 19) Emulate a drunkard
- 20) Times 3?
- 23) Short choral composition
- 24) The nine of some batteries
- 25) Back out on a promise
- 28) King of the jungle
- 30) Brilliant thought
- 31) Emotionless, as a stare
- 33) Mr. Potato Head part
- 36) Times 3?
- 40) Ambulance letters
- 41) Tadpoles, in time
- 42) Lofgren who rocks with Springsteen
- 43) Friendly ground-up bait?

- 44) Shape learned in pre-school
- 46) Video game giant, once
- 49) Where babies grow
- 51) Times 3?
- 57) Remove, as a knot
- 58) Rugged box
- 59) One named in a will
- 60) Angler's equipment
- 61) Extreme hardship
- 62) Cogito-sum link
- 63) "... quam videri" (North Carolina motto)
- 64) Board for a manicurist
- 65) "General Hospital" e.g.

- 21) "Put another _ on the fire"
- 22) Conjure up, as a memory
- 25) Customary observance or practice
- 26) Dutch cheese
- 27) Beaks
- 28) Scottish miss
- 29) Pen filler
- 31) "... me up, Scotty"
- 32) "Acid" used in some trips
- 33) Film with many extras
- 34) What cheerleaders do
- 35) Emerald Isle language
- 37) Body of values
- 38) Costello of old comedy
- 39) Better or improves
- 43) Louisiana cuisine
- 44) Crunchy vegetable
- 45) Anger
- 46) Cloudless sky color
- 47) Firms up, as muscles
- 48) Chilean range
- 49) Electric bill listing
- 50) One-on-one teacher
- 52) 4,840 square yards
- 53) Straitlaced
- 54) "Bies" or "dynamics"

prefix
55) Baltic port

NOTE PAD

56) Let slip from one's hands

14	A	G	O	R	A	15	U	S	A	16	A	G	N	E	S
14	U	N	R	I	G	15	L	E	I	16	H	A	T	E	S
17	L	O	B	B	E	D	G	R	E	N	A	D	E		
17	T	R	E	E	R	A	S	T	E	R	R	H	O		
17	Y	E	T	O	E	R	Y	E	A	R	N	E	D		
17	T	O	S	S	E	D	A	N	O	H	I	T	T	E	R
17	I	D	Y	L			A	P	A	C	E				
17	D	E	M	O	T	E	S	I	V	Y	D	A	M		
17	E	S	P		H	E	L	E	N	E	S	I	N	E	
17	A	T	O	N	E		E	D	O		W	E	A	L	S
17	M	O	N	T	E		P	I	N		U	T	T	E	R
17	Y	O	Y	O	S		Y	E	S		M	Y	E	R	S

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You've been putting aside your own interests and needs for so long that you might be losing sight of what they are! Today is a good day to put yourself first again and do whatever you want when you want to do it. No one will get upset if you reschedule a meeting or postpone a date. In fact, you might be doing them a favor. You can't decide on your next move by checking in with other people anyway. Check in with your heart.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Today, some people will agree with you and some people won't. And you'll just need to accept those who don't see things the way you do. They're not trying to dismiss you. They're just being themselves. You can't waste your energy picking fights with people about things you can't change, namely, the way they think. If you butt heads with someone, just move on to other people and other things. Agree to disagree and save your strength for things you can actually change.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Today, your presence will be required by a group of important people who are looking for a solution, and they think you have it! This isn't the time to get nervous, though. This is the time to get excited. The fact that they need you shows just how valuable you are, so use that to your advantage. Make note of this episode and remind people about it when it's time to talk about advancement. People have short memories, so it's up to you to remind them.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Be careful not to overdo it today. Keeping things on an even keel will do wonders for your energy and your social life. If you're going to a party, don't overdo it. Start a conversation, and be careful not to get to your point too quickly. Just being yourself will make people feel more comfortable. At work, don't make a big show out of your latest idea. Just present it, argue for it, and then let the chips fall where they may. Being too loud will only show you in a bad light.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Be wary of people who are pushing you to make a big purchase today, especially if they occupy a partnership role in your life. Anyone who is pressuring you to make a decision might have ulterior motives, although not necessarily bad ones. But you can't afford to spend your money on something unless you know why they feel so strongly you should buy it. This isn't the time to get pressured into anything. Take things at your own pace!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You might think that the people in positions of authority over you aren't interested in what you have to say right now, but nothing could be further from the truth. They're dying to pick your brains. Ignore anyone who tries to keep you out of important discussion. They're just jealous of the fact that your profile is getting higher and you're surpassing them in the eyes of important people. You count more than just about anyone else right now.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

A small snag could trigger your temper and leave you feeling frustrated and maybe even a little embarrassed about losing your cool today. But later, the Universe will send you some high energy that will make you feel good. This attitude reset will enable you to look at this obstacle and see it in a new light. Suddenly, you'll see a way around it. Things might get off to a rocky start, but they are sure to work out by the end of the day.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The power balance in one of your more complicated relationships is starting to be an issue. You two don't have equal power, and it doesn't look like this imbalance is likely to change any time soon. So what can you do about it? Investigate another partnership. Even if you're the one who holds all the cards, it isn't healthy to have a relationship that is this off-balance. It won't last much longer unless you two come to a serious agreement.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You're so in sync with the folks you're working with that finishing other people's sentences will be easy to do. But it might be in your best interests to keep this level of connection to yourself. Knowing that you can practically read their minds won't set them at ease. Having this level of synergy with everyone will boost your confidence and enable you to move the conversation in a direction that includes more opportunities for your personal or career growth.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You need to take care of issues around your home right now, so try to put your household on the top of your priority list. Whether it's minor repairs, major renovations, or just some rearranging of furniture, putting physical energy into your intimate surroundings will energize you and fill you with a sense of pride that you haven't felt in quite a while. Get creative in your tasks too. Ask a friend to help you out if the job is too big for just one person.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You can't take popular opinion seriously right now. The mob mentality is all based on the lowest common denominator, and common you are not! Disregard things that are overly trendy and opt for quality things and thoughts that have stood the test of time. It's very easy to just go along with the crowd, but the crowd never goes anywhere interesting, does it? Swim upstream today and find your own niche in life. It's much more rewarding.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If you're dealing with a group of people today, try to push your own agenda a little bit more forcefully than you normally would. Instead of just going along with the crowd, be more firm about what you want to do. Insisting will enable you to get exactly what you want without annoying anyone or making them feel pressured. That's because you have more charm and charisma than the average person.

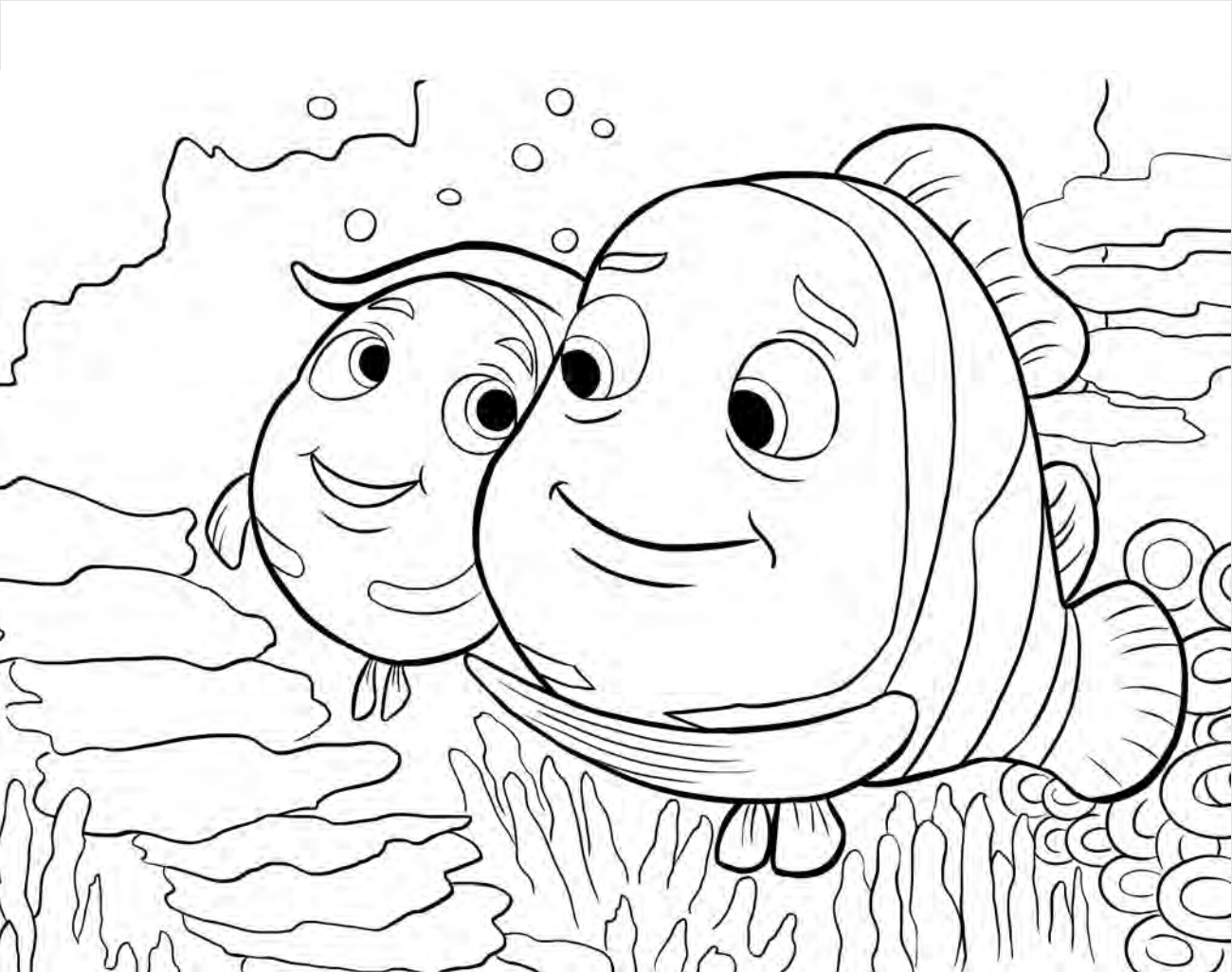


TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Who wrote the influential book "Areopagitica"?
- A. Aristotle
 - B. Plato
 - C. Sir Philip Sidney
 - D. John Milton
02. Where is the opera "Dialogues of the Carmelites" set?
- A. Italy
 - B. France
 - C. Spain
 - D. England
03. When was Berlin's Tegel Airport first given its time-saving hexagonal terminal complex, and substantially increased in capacity, function, international use and runway length?
- A. 1948
 - B. 1974
 - C. 1919
 - D. 1925

Answers: 1.D 2.B 3.A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

Y	U	L	S
S	S	T	O
S	W	H	A
U	B	P	N

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

London, United Kingdom - Son Heung-min's double earned Tottenham a point from a pulsating 2-2 draw against Arsenal, as Liverpool moved into second in the Premier League with a 3-1 win over West Ham on Sunday.

Brighton climb up to third after beating Bournemouth 3-1, but Chelsea still cannot buy a goal as Mauricio Pochettino's men lost 1-0 at home to Aston Villa.

Spurs have still won just once in their last 31 away league meetings with Arsenal, but the optimism garnered under Ange Postecoglou's early weeks in charge was not punctured at the Emirates despite twice falling behind in the north London derby.

Arsenal's bright start was rewarded when Bukayo Saka's strike was deflected into his own net by Cristian Romero.

But for the fifth time in seven games under Postecoglou, Tottenham fought back from a goal down.

David Raya has displaced Aaron Ramsdale as Arsenal's number one goalkeeper as he was selected for the third consecutive game by Mikel Arteta.

The Spaniard justified that decision with a stunning save to deny Brennan Johnson his first Tottenham goal.

However, the visitors were not denied for long as James Maddison's cross was swept home by Son at the near post three minutes before half-time. Romero's afternoon went from bad to worse when he was harshly penalised for handball and Saka stroked home the resulting penalty to restore Arsenal's lead.

But the Gunners lost record signing Declan Rice at half-time to injury and that proved costly as an error from his replacement Jorginho gifted Tottenham an equaliser just a minute later.

Maddison was again the cre-

SONSHINE DAY

South Korean forward scores double as Tottenham hold Arsenal



Tottenham Hotspur's Son Heung-Min celebrates after scoring against Arsenal in their English Premier League match on Sunday (AFP)

Spurs have still won just once in their last 31 away league meetings with Arsenal, but the optimism garnered under Ange Postecoglou's early weeks in charge was not punctured at the Emirates

ator as he robbed the Italian midfielder and teed up Son for a cool finish into the far corner.

Liverpool's fearsome firepower on show

Liverpool cut Manchester City's lead at the top to two points as

Jürgen Klopp's men showed more promising signs of getting back to their best.

The Reds sank to fifth last season, but have the firepower that could make them the biggest threat to City's throne as champions.

Mohamed Salah opened the scoring from the penalty spot after he was upended in the box by Nayef Aguerd.

West Ham's only previous defeat this season came at home to City last weekend and they bounced back to fully merit their

equaliser before half-time when Jarrod Bowen's diving header found the far corner.

However, the Hammers were undone by a moment of magic when Alexis Mac Allister's inch-perfect chip picked out Darwin Nunez, who volleyed into the far corner.

Diogo Jota then came off the bench to make it 3-1 five minutes from time.

Mitoma makes instant impact

Brighton took advantage of dropped points for both north London sides to move up to third after coming from behind to beat Bournemouth 3-1.

Roberto De Zerbi made nine changes from the side that started the Seagulls' first ever European game in a 3-2 defeat by AEK Athens and paid the price in a slow start. Dominic Solanke fired Bournemouth in front after a glaring error from Brighton 'keeper Bart Verbruggen.

Milos Kerkez's own goal brought Brighton level in first-half stoppage time, but that did not stop De Zerbi sending on Kaoru Mitoma at the break.

The Japanese winger took just 16 seconds to put Brighton in front with a precise finish and Mitoma made sure of the points when he headed home Pervis Estupinan's cross 14 minutes from time.

Chelsea's disastrous start to Pochettino's reign goes on as the toothless Blues failed to score for a third consecutive game. Malo Gusto's straight red card for a lunge on Lucas Digne on the hour mark gave the home side a mountain to climb at Stamford Bridge. Villa made their man advantage count when Ollie Watkins' powerful strike beat Robert Sanchez from a narrow angle.

AFP

Ten Hag sees Burnley win as turning point in Manchester United season

Burnley, United Kingdom - Erik ten Hag believes Manchester United's 1-0 win at Burnley can prove a turning point in a troubled season as Bruno Fernandes' stunning strike snapped a three-game losing streak on Saturday.

The United captain produced a match-winning moment of quality when he connected sweetly on the volley from Jonny Evans' long pass just before half-time.

Victory hauls the Red Devils up to eighth in the Premier

League table and eases the mounting pressure on manager Ten Hag.

"This is only one win but what we have seen is that there is togetherness and fight - a real good spirit in the dressing room," said Ten Hag.

"What we have seen is when you have to defend with 11 and do it together, it is very difficult to play against this Manchester United."

Zeki Amdouni hit the post for Burnley and forced the under-fire

Andre Onana into a fine save in the first-half, but the Clarets remain without a win on their return to the Premier League and sink to the bottom of the table.

"We're very calm. We knew we had a very tough start in terms of the fixtures," said Burnley boss Vincent Kompany.

"The start is difficult in terms of results but hopeful. I don't see any reason to think this team lacks character or margin to grow."

United's injury crisis meant

that 35-year-old Evans started at centre-back for the first time in his second spell at the club.

The Northern Irishman went on to play a major role at both ends as, on top of teeing up Fernandes' stunning strike, he had a goal ruled out and helped marshal a United defence that had conceded 10 times in their last three games.

"It was the best night of my life," said Evans, who won seven major honours in his first spell at Old Trafford.



Manchester United's Hannibal Mejbri (L) battles for the ball with Burnley's English Josh Brownhill during their English Premier League match on Saturday (AFP)

Xavi hails Barcelona's new 'winning character' after 'epic' Celta comeback

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez praised his side's "winning character" after a sensational 3-2 comeback to beat Celta Vigo on Saturday and move top of La Liga.

The coach, who signed a new deal until 2025 this week, celebrated with his 50th victory in La Liga, as Robert Lewandowski's brace and Joao Cancelo's late winner helped his team triumph despite entering the final 10 minutes two goals behind.

Jorgen Strand Larsen and Anastasios Douvikas struck for the visitors, who seemed on course for a surprise win against the champions, but Barcelona produced a comeback which Xavi called "epic".

"We didn't play well (but) came up with the epic, showing winning character," Xavi told reporters. "Historically we have lacked that... this shows the generational change we have, they didn't give up, two nil down at home."

"I think this generation fights



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates after scoring against Celta Vigo in their Spanish league match on Saturday (AFP)

until the end... what happened today is a tremendous turning point of winning character, we didn't play well but it's about character, faith, the epic."

Wily Celta coach Rafa Benitez set up in his typically defensive

fashion, unlike Barcelona's recent visitors Real Betis and Royal Antwerp, whose attacking intent made them lambs to the slaughter. Barcelona hit 10 goals in their previous two matches, with Xavi saying it was the best they had

played in his reign, but this performance was largely at the other end of the spectrum.

"(Winning) tastes good, but is it better than the day against Betis or Antwerp? No, because this is not our path," said Xavi.

Celta counters

Barcelona controlled the opening stages, albeit without creating much danger, but Celta Vigo pushed ahead against the run of play after 19 minutes.

Andreas Christensen played Strand Larsen onside after a corner was only partially cleared, and the Norwegian forward finished clinically past Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

At the other end Joao Felix could not control a nicely scooped Frenkie de Jong through pass, before the Dutch midfielder sustained an ankle problem and was replaced by tenacious teenager Gavi. Spanish reports said De Jong would be sidelined for up to five weeks.

AFP

Leao fires Milan level with leaders Inter, Juventus falter at Sassuolo

Milan, Italy - Rafael Leao ended a difficult week with the only goal in Saturday's 1-0 win over Verona which drew AC Milan level with Serie A leaders Inter Milan, while Juventus fell to their first defeat of the season, 4-2 at Sassuolo.

Portugal winger Leao netted his third goal in as many league matches in the eighth minute at a sodden San Siro to move Milan up to second on 12 points from five games.

Inter defend their 100 percent start at rock-bottom Empoli on Sunday.

Leao's winner was one of the few highlights of a largely uninspiring performance from a much-changed Milan side missing injured captain Davide Calabria and France pair Mike Maignan and Theo Hernandez.

But it was a welcome three points after being destroyed by local rivals Inter last weekend and failing to capitalise on their dominance in Tuesday's Champions League stalemate with Newcastle United.



AC Milan's Rafael Leao scores against Verona in their Italian Serie A match on Saturday (AFP)

Milan's star man Leao, wearing the skipper's armband in Calabria's absence, answered some of his critics following poor displays in both of those matches, even becoming a figure of fun for falling over his own feet while trying to backheel in a goal against Newcastle.

"He just needs to keep going and realise that when you become a great player you need to overcome or at least deal with a

lot of pressure," said Milan coach Stefano Pioli.

Kick-off was delayed by nearly half an hour due to a sudden hailstorm which battered Milan, and the away fans then ruined the pre-match minute's silence in honour of former Italian president Giorgio Napolitano, who died aged 98 on Friday.

Napolitano, who was head of state between 2006 and 2015, was a leading member of Italy's Communist Party from the 1970s until its dissolution in 1991, while Verona's hardcore support is among the most right-wing in a country where fascist fan groups are widespread.

A large, notoriously far-right section of Lazio fans also booed and sang through the minute's silence in their team's 1-1 home draw with Monza.

Milan supporters meanwhile drowned out the Verona supporters with an enthusiastic applause, started by both sets of players, as they were also remembering former Italy midfielder Giovanni Lodetti.

INDIA RUN RIOT

Iyer, Gill help India crush Australia to clinch series

Indore, India - Indore, India - Shreyas Iyer and Shubman Gill hit attacking centuries to help India thrash Australia by 99 runs in a rain-hit one-day international on Sunday to clinch the series 2-0.

Iyer (105) Gill (104) put on a dominant second-wicket stand of 200 to lay the foundations for India's 399-5 after being invited to bat in Indore.

KL Rahul's 52 and an unbeaten 72 by T20 sensation Suryakumar Yadav contributed to the mammoth total and the bowlers then combined to hand India an unbeatable lead in the three-match series. The matches are a tune-up for the World Cup in India starting October 5.

Chasing a DLS revised target of 317 in 33 overs after rain interrupted play in the chase, Australia were bowled out for 217 in 28.2 overs.

Spinners Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja took three wickets each.

But the batsmen set up victory after a flying start and Iyer, 28, put doubts over his fitness to rest, hitting his third one-day century before being caught.

Iyer hit 11 fours and three sixes in his 90-ball knock.

The 24-year-old Gill, who hit 74 off 63 balls at Mohali in the first game, raced to his sixth ODI century and fifth this year with a single off Sean Abbott.



Shubman Gill (L) and Shreyas Iyer both hit centuries as India made 399 for 5 in the second ODI against Australia in Indore Sunday (AFP)

Gill's knock ended when he was caught by wicketkeeper Alex Carey off Cameron Green. He hit six fours and four sixes in his 97-ball innings.

Ishan Kishan was dismissed for 31 before Rahul and Yadav propped up the innings with fluent knocks.

Green took two wickets but gave away 103 runs off his 10 overs.

In reply, Australia lost two wickets for just nine runs and were 56-2 when rain interrupted play for over an hour and the tourists resumed with a new target. David Warner and Marnus

KL Rahul's 52 and an unbeaten 72 by Suryakumar Yadav contributed to the mammoth total

Labuschagne attempted to rebuild in their stand of 80 but the wheels came off the chase after their departure.

Ashwin broke the stand and then struck twice in one over to send back the left-handed Warner and Josh Inglis.

Green attempted to hit back but was run out, before Abbott led an unexpected charge with his 36-ball 54.

Number eight Abbott put on a ninth-wicket stand of 77 with Josh Hazlewood, who made 23.

The final ODI is on Wednesday in Rajkot.

Sodhi ends New Zealand's long wait for Bangladesh win



New Zealand's Ish Sodhi (L) celebrates after taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Soumya Sarkar

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Ish Sodhi claimed a career-best 6-39 as New Zealand claimed a first victory in Bangladesh in nearly 15 years on Saturday in a dramatic ODI where he was also reprieved from a 'Mankad' dismissal.

Sodhi's maiden five-wicket haul helped New Zealand clinch an 86-run win, bowling out Bangladesh for 168 in 41.1 overs after Tom Blundell's 68 had guided the visitors to 254 in the second ODI of the three-match series. The Kiwis last beat Bangladesh in their own backyard in October 2008. They then lost the next two series in 2010 and 2013, respectively, by 4-0 and 3-0.

Sodhi also played his part with the bat, scoring a vital 35 before he was the last man out after New Zealand won the toss and opted to bat.

Sodhi was earlier run-out at the non-striker's end by Hasan Mahmud when he had made 17, but Bangladesh captain Liton Das sportingly withdrew the 'Mankad' appeal as the Kiwi was walking back to the pavilion.

The leg-spinner showed no intention of returning the favour, dismissing Tanzid Hasan (16), Soumya Sarkar (0), Towhid Hridoy (4) after Kyle Jamieson removed Liton for six to give New Zealand the first breakthrough.

"It's a really good day. Historically, we haven't done well and nice to get the win. It was nice of Liton for calling me back after the Mankad," said man-of-the-match Sodhi.

Tamim Iqbal tried to rescue the side amid a free fall of wickets before he too fell to Sodhi for 44, leaving Bangladesh stuttering at 92-5.

Assefa smashes world record at Berlin Marathon as Kipchoge wins fifth straight title

Berlin, Germany - Ethiopia's Tigist Assefa smashed the women's marathon world record by more than two minutes in Berlin on Sunday as Kenyan Eliud Kipchoge won the men's race for a record fifth time.

Assefa clocked 2hr 11min 53sec, more than two minutes ahead of the previous world mark of 2:14:04 set by Kenyan Brigid Kosgei in Chicago in 2019.

"I wanted to break the marathon world record, but I couldn't imagine that it would result in a time under 2:12," said the 29-year-old.

"I am very happy."

She finished almost six minutes ahead of Kenyan Sheila Chepkirui, while Tanzanian Magdalena Shauri finished third, nearly seven minutes behind Assefa.

Assefa broke away early in perfect conditions in the German capital and continued her stunning time to become the first woman to set the world record in Berlin since Japan's Naoko Takahashi in 2001.

She crossed the line just after men's world record holder Kipchoge won his race in 2hr 02min 42sec.

Kipchoge finished 31sec ahead of countryman Vincent Kipkemoi with Ethiopian Tadese Takele third at 42sec.

Kipchoge's fifth win takes him past Ethiopian Haile Gebrselassie's four victories but the Kenyan finished outside his previous world record, set last year in Berlin, of 2:01:09.

"Sure, I expected myself to



Ethiopia's Tigist Assefa smiles after smashing the world record to win the Berlin Marathon on Sunday (AFP)

be able to set a world record again, but I can live with the fact that it didn't work out," Kipchoge said. "You can't do that every day. I hope I can repeat my victory again at the 2024 Olympics in Paris, but I would also be happy with the podium."

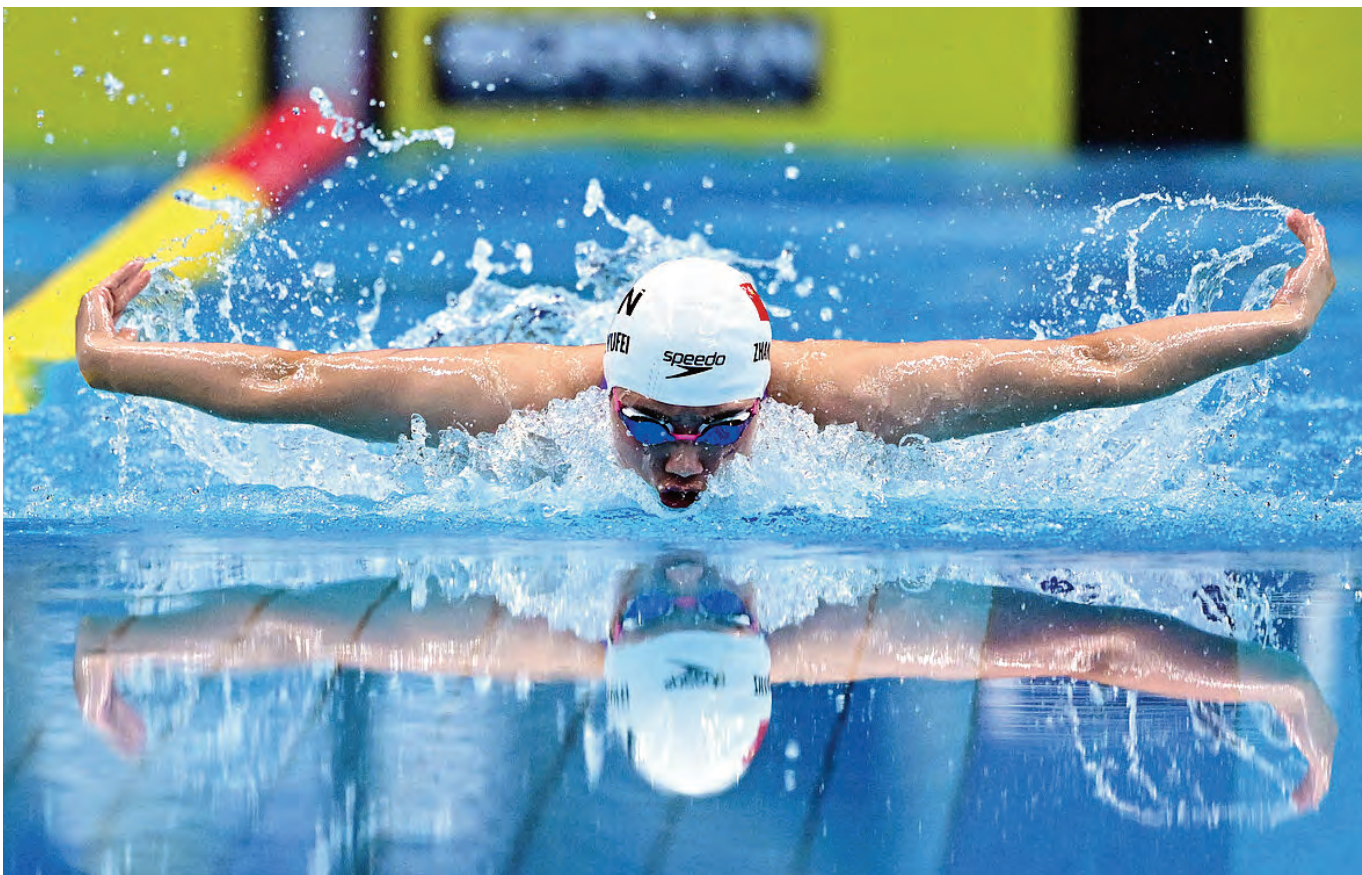
'Coming home'

Despite doubts after a surprise sixth-place at the Boston Marathon in April, 38-year-old Kipchoge came into the race confident, saying he felt he was "coming home" at a race he has won four times - and set the world record at twice.

Kipchoge and Ethiopian Derseh Kindie pulled away from the pack early, the two crossing the halfway point with a split of 60:21, slower than the Kenyan's 2022 world-record time of 59:51.

AFP

China dominate in pool and beyond



China's Zhang Yufei on her way to victory in the women's 200m butterfly final at the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games on Sunday (AFP)

Hangzhou, China - China won the first gold medal of the Hangzhou Asian Games and then cleaned up in the swimming events on Sunday, breaking several records in the process.

By the end of a highly successful day one for the hosts, they had pocketed 20 of 31 golds, while their nearest challengers South Korea had five.

China's medal rush began when Zou Jiaqi and Qiu Xiuping dominated the women's lightweight double sculls rowing for the first gold of the Games, finishing almost 10 seconds ahead of Uzbekistan.

It was especially satisfying for Zou, who hails from Hangzhou.

"I am very excited as it's my first Asian Games," she said, clutching her gold medal.

The home nation won six of the seven golds at the Fuyang Water Sports Centre rowing



venue with only Hong Kong's Lam San-tung and Wong Wai-chun getting in on the party by winning the men's pairs.

More golds rolled in for China in shooting, modern pentathlon, wushu and artistic gymnastics, in which they triumphed in the men's team event ahead of Japan.

But they saved the best for last in swimming, in what is always one of the most prestigious events at the Games and has extra significance with the Paris Olympics less than a year away. Olympic champion Zhang

Yufei, China's "Butterfly Queen", was among the winners as the hosts romped home in all seven races on the opening night in the pool, smashing a slew of Asian records.

Zhang successfully defended her 200m butterfly crown, cruising to victory ahead of teammate Yu Liyan in a new Games-record time of 2min 05.57sec.

That has been bettered this year only by Canadian star Summer McIntosh and Australia's Lizzie Dekkers, then Zhang claimed a second gold of the night in the women's 4x100m freestyle relay.

"I felt I could have gone even faster," she warned.

"My first mission was to take the gold for China. Next was to beat Jiao Liuyang's Games record, and I also did that.

"I actually felt the pool was a little slow for me and I told my

coach that I wasn't feeling in good form."

The first official day of the 19th Asian Games also saw medals handed out in fencing, judo and taekwondo.

Hong Kong's Edgar Cheung, already a hero to many in the southern Chinese city, added Asian Games gold to the one he won at the Tokyo Olympics two years ago in the men's foil.

Two of South Korea's five golds came in taekwondo, with Kang Wan-jin winning the men's individual poomsae and Cha Yea-eun doing likewise in the women's event.

North Korea, returning to major international sport for the first time since the Covid pandemic, got on the medals table when Chae Kwang Jin took bronze in the men's -60kg judo, which was won by Taiwan's Yang Yung-wei.

Sri Lanka beat Pakistan to set up India cricket final

Hangzhou, China - In-form Sri Lanka, fresh from a stunning Twenty20 series victory in England, beat Pakistan by six wickets on Sunday to reach the women's cricket final at the Asian Games and set up a clash with India.

Pakistan never got going on a difficult batting surface affected by days of rain at the Zhejiang University of Technology ground in Hangzhou, and could only muster a below-par 75-9 in their 20 overs. Left-arm medium pace bowler Udeshika Prabodhani led the Sri Lankan attack with three wickets and Kavisha Dilhari took two with her offspin.

Sri Lanka sauntered to their target with 21 balls to spare to spark wild celebrations as their players ran on to the field to high-five and hug each other.

Earlier, the Indians routed Bangladesh for 51 on the same ground with all-rounder Pooja Vastrakar, only drafted into the squad as a last-minute replacement, taking four wickets.

They wasted no time in racing to an eight-wicket victory with more than 11 overs remaining as Jemimah Rodrigues top-scored with an unbeaten 20.

Rodrigues is yet to be dismissed in the Asian Games, scoring 47 not out in the quarter-final against Malaysia, which was later abandoned because of rain.

It was the second time in just over a week that Sri Lankan cricketers had proven party-poopers by preventing a Pakistan-India major cricket final.

The country's men's team beat Pakistan in the semi-final of the 50-over Asia Cup in Colombo.

MARCO PERFECTION

Bezzecchi wins Indian MotoGP, Bagnaia crashes out

Greater Noida, India - Pole-starter Marco Bezzecchi won India's inaugural MotoGP in a near-flawless race on Sunday, but world champion Francesco Bagnaia crashed out after slipping on a turn.

Jorge Martin, who won Saturday's sprint race, just held on for second spot with Fabio Quartararo a close third at the Buddh International Circuit.

Italy's Bezzecchi, on a Ducati-VR46, won his third race of the season in 36 minutes, 59.157 seconds and punched the air in celebration in front of a raucous grandstand.

But it was heartbreak for Bagnaia, who lost control of his Ducati and the bike went for a somersault.

The Italian still leads the world championship with 292 points but saw his lead cut in the 13th race of the 20-race season. Martin is on 279 points followed by Bezzecchi on 248.

"Wasn't easy for sure because of the heat and everything. But I felt good on the bike," Bezzecchi told reporters.

Bezzecchi crashed out in the first lap of Saturday's sprint race before finishing fifth and said the incident motivated him to come up trumps. "After yesterday I was really motivated to bounce back because I think, yesterday also I



Ducati VR46 racing team's Marco Bezzecchi poses with the trophy on the podium after winning the Indian MotoGP Grand Prix on Sunday (AFP)

could have done a bit better than fifth," he said.

Bezzecchi said winning the first MotoGP in India was "fantastic" because he "liked the place and people" and the track from the moment he landed.

The track hosted Formula One for three years from 2011. Fairstreet Sports now has a seven-year deal with MotoGP's commercial rights holder Dorna

Sports to hold a race in India for seven years.

Last lap tussle

Spain's Martin, Bagnaia's nearest challenger in the title tussle, was given a scare by Quartararo in a dramatic last lap that had the number two and three fighting hard. Martin, who had some problems with his jacket's zipper during the final few laps, was left

exhausted after the duel with Quartararo and did not turn up for the post-race conference.

"Really difficult to be honest, especially the last lap," Quartararo, a Yamaha rider, said.

"During the race I was always a 1 or 1.5 second gap from the front guys... Last lap I could clearly see our weak point. We have to work on that part as we can hold the pace but not fight

with them."

Martin had a strong start to the race, jumping into the lead from his second position on the grid, with Bagnaia second and Bezzecchi third.

Bezzecchi soon went past Bagnaia with a clean overtake at a corner and kept up the pace to increase the gap to more than three seconds in the first five laps. AFP



Max Verstappen celebrates after winning the Japanese Grand Prix (AFP)

Verstappen closes in on title after Japanese GP win

Suzuka, Japan - Max Verstappen hailed his "predictable" Red Bull after taking a giant step towards a third straight title and helping his team clinch the constructors' championship by winning the Japanese Grand Prix on Sunday.

The flying Dutchman finished ahead of McLaren pair Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri in Suzuka to extend his runaway lead in the overall standings to 177 points over nearest challenger and teammate Sergio Perez.

Verstappen can win the championship at the Qatar Grand Prix next month and he may not even have to wait until the Sunday race if he seals the deal in the Saturday sprint.

Verstappen's champagne is still on ice but he celebrated Red Bull's second straight constructors' championship in Japan, even though Perez retired from the race.

Verstappen has won 13 of 16 races so far this season and he said his car "is just better this

year".

"The people are pretty much in the same spot and we know that they're good," he said.

"It's about working with an even better car this year. A bit more predictable this year as well."

Verstappen was back to his breathtaking best after a disappointing fifth-place finish at last week's Singapore Grand Prix.

He held off a double challenge from McLaren to take the lead ahead of Norris at the first turn.

First the Dutchman veered right to squeeze out Piastri, who was starting from second on the grid, then moved left to stop Norris from darting through the gap.

"I saw in the right mirror that Oscar had a little bit of a jump on me but at the same time I saw in my left mirror that Lando had a real jump on me," said Verstappen.

"Luckily nothing happened, it all got quite close - that's racing, that's how it goes at the start." AFP

Team World one win away from Laver Cup title repeat

Vancouver, Canada - Frances Tiafoe powered past Hubert Hurkacz and Taylor Fritz beat Andrey Rublev in straight sets Saturday as defending champions Team World built a commanding 10-2 lead over Team Europe in the Laver Cup.

Felix Auger-Aliassime and Ben Shelton added a doubles win for Team World, who take a 10-2 lead into the final day.

With each match win worth three points on Sunday, Team World will need just one victory to lift the trophy for a second time - after Europe claimed the first four editions of the event that began in 2017.

"We're just going to keep doing what we're doing," Team World captain John McEnroe said. "Felix said the job's not done - but we're pretty close."

Tiafoe had lost his last three matches against Poland's Hurkacz, but the 11th-ranked American turned the tables with a 7-5, 6-3 victory that thwarted Team Europe's hopes of building momentum in the wake of Casper Ruud's 7-6 (8/6), 6-2 victory over Tommy Paul.

Ruud's win gave Europe their first points of the event, after Team World swept Friday's four matches and Fritz opened day two with a 6-2, 7-6 (7/3) victory over Europe's highest-ranked player, world number six Andrey Rublev.

Norway's Ruud, ranked ninth in the world, admitted he felt some pressure taking the court with his team trailing 6-0 - and he acknowledged that he got away with "a bit of a steal" in the first-set tiebreaker, saving a set point at 6-5 before pocketing the set.

He was dominant in the second set, however, breaking Paul to open the set and breaking the



Frances Tiafoe of Team World plays a shot during his match against Hubert Hurkacz of Team Europe on Saturday (AFP)

American again with a blistering service return for a 5-2 lead.

Ruud served it out with a love game, but his hopes that it would be "a momentum shift" were dashed when Tiafoe opened the night session at Rogers Arena with a crowd-pleasing win over Hurkacz.

World number 16 Hurkacz got off to a strong start and had a set point against Tiafoe's serve at 5-4 in the first.

Tiafoe worked out of the jam, then grabbed the first break of the match in the next game before sealing the set with a hold at love.

Having broken Hurkacz to open the second set, Tiafoe was

freewheeling, delighting fans in the penultimate game with a behind-the-back shot to keep alive a rally that he won with a backhand volley.

"We all get lucky sometimes," said Tiafoe, who broke at love to seal the win, Hurkacz producing his only double-fault of the contest on match point.

Hurkacz was immediately back in action, teaming with France's Gael Monfils in the closing doubles won by Auger-Aliassime and Shelton 7-5, 6-4.

Eighth-ranked American Fritz had opened the day's action, rallying from a break down in the second set to beat Rublev. AFP

Sakkari downs Dolehide for Guadalajara title

Guadalajara, Mexico - Second-seeded Maria Sakkari ended her four-year wait for a second WTA title on Saturday, beating Caroline Dolehide 7-5, 6-3 to win the 1000 level Guadalajara Open.

Greece's Sakkari, ranked ninth in the world, had come up empty in six finals since her breakthrough victory in Rabat in 2019.

That included the Guadalajara final last year, when she lost to American Jessica Pegula, and a loss to Coco Gauff in the final at Washington this year.

An emotional Sakkari thanked her coach of five years, noting they'd waited "more than four years for a second title."

"We've heard so many bad things - that I will never win a title, that I'm a top-five player with only winning one title, that was very hard for me to overcome," she said. "I'm so happy that I did it here this week."

The victory came less than a month after Sakkari was unceremoniously dumped from the first round of the US Open, her third



Greece's Maria Sakkari (C) and Caroline Dolehide (R) of the US pose on the podium with former Argentine tennis player Gabriela Sabatini (AFP)

straight first-round exit at a Grand Slam.

Sakkari had said at Flushing Meadows she was "suffering on the court" and was "uncertain" about what to do about it.

This week, however, Sakkari has looked in total command, becoming the first player this year to reach the final of a WTA 1000 event without dropping a set.

Sakkari ended a fairytale week for Dolehide, ranked 111th in the

world and playing in her first career final.

Dolehide, who will rise to inside the top 50, came from a set down to beat Peyton Stearns in three tiebreaks in the first round, she beat eighth-seeded Ekaterina Alexandrova in the third round and saved four match points in her quarter-final win over Martina Trevisan.

In her first career semi-final Dolehide defeated 2020 Aus-

tralian Open champion Sofia Kenin.

Dolehide demonstrated the same grit she'd shown all week when she clawed back an early break in the opening set to take a 5-4 lead.

But Sakkari won the next two games, taking advantage of one of Dolehide's six double faults to break for 6-5.

Down 0-30 in the next game, Sakkari battled back to take the set, and finally gained the upper hand in the second with a break for a 3-2 lead.

That proved to be enough, although there was a tense moment in the seventh game, when Sakkari's 40-0 lead evaporated before she steadied herself to take the game with her third ace of the contest. She closed it out with one more break, converting her second match point.

When Dolehide's volley sailed long, Sakkari fell to the court and covered her face with her hands as the tears came. AFP

Ireland beat South Africa in statement World Cup win as England romp

Paris, France - Ireland moved to the brink of the Rugby World Cup quarter-finals by beating reigning champions South Africa 13-8 in a low-scoring but thoroughly absorbing match at the Stade de France on Saturday.

The world's number one ranked team showed they have what it takes to win the World Cup for the first time as they produced a statement victory.

Ireland absorbed near-constant pressure from the physically imposing South Africans and took their chances when they got them, while the Spring-



Ireland's scrum-half Conor Murray celebrates their victory against South Africa on Saturday (AFP)

boks' fly-half Manie Libbok spurned valuable kicking points.

England had earlier routed Chile 71-0 in Lille to all but guarantee their spot in the quarter-finals. But all eyes were on Paris and the clash of the world's two top teams produced a fascinating contest.

Ireland found the early going tough and Libbok's penalty put South Africa ahead in the first half before Mack Hansen found space on the right wing to collect James Lowe's long pass and touch down to give the Irish the lead. Cheslin Kolbe found acres of space to score for South

Africa but Libbok's kicking woes from earlier in the tournament returned and he failed with the conversion.

Johnny Sexton's penalty put Ireland ahead and in a heart-stopping finish, Ireland's defence was pushed to near breaking point before Jack Crowley slotted home a penalty to send the majority of the crowd into raptures.

"It was a scrappy old game and we couldn't seem to get into any flow and neither could they. To dog it out against a team like that is a testament to us and the management," Sexton said.

OMAN GULF T20I CHAMPIONS

Team coached by Duleep Mendis defeat UAE in final

Muscat - Oman cricketers seem to love making history in the shortest format of the game, in particular, when it comes to the inaugural edition.

Nearly 16 years after making their mark in the inaugural Asian Cricket Council (ACC) Twenty20 Cup in Kuwait, their first major title as Oman were adjudged joint winners with Afghanistan following a washout, the Men in Red have done it again.

On Saturday, Oman were crowned champions of the inaugural Gulf T20I Cricket Championship in Doha, Qatar.

In a thrilling final, Oman, led by Aqib Ilyas, defeated UAE by five wickets with four balls to spare.

Having won the inaugural ACC T20 Cup, and then again in 2015, the latest trophy of the inaugural Gulf T20I Championship is a "massive" achievement in the words of the team's head coach Duleep Mendis.

Mendis, the former Sri Lankan captain, is the architect of Oman's rise in the T20 format and he continues to deliver with his men since joining the team in September 2012. Under Mendis, Oman have qualified twice to the ICC T20 World Cup (2016 and 2021) and have won the ACC T20 in UAE.

The latest title assumes significance as this is the first edition of the Gulf T20I Championship and the regional cricket associations are hopeful that this tournament will be an annual affair and played across all the six GCC countries - Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait.

Aqib Ilyas led from the front at the Doha tournament, where the come-from-behind spirit was displayed in abundance by the team.

In his remarks after the title win, Mendis said: "I am very happy with the result. It was a show of character and grit by the



Oman players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Gulf T20I Cricket Championship in Doha on Saturday

OMAN'S BEST PERFORMERS



HIGHEST RUN-GETTER

Aqib Ilyas: 5 innings, 205 runs 50s - 2
Ayaan Khan: 6 innings, 182 runs 50s - 1

HIGHEST WICKET-TAKER

Bilal Khan: 6 inn, 10 wickets
Fayyaz Butt: 6 inn, 9 wickets

NOTABLE PERFORMANCES

Aqib Ilyas: 90 (52) vs UAE in the opening league match
Mehran Khan: 3/17 in

4 overs vs Qatar

Naseem Khushi: 64 (45) vs Saudi Arabia
Final: Aqib Ilyas 67 (33) and Ayaan Khan 53 (38)

MOST DISMISSALS

Naseem Khushi 7 [4 catches, 3 stumpings]

HIGHEST PARTNERSHIP

Jatinder Singh and Aqib Ilyas vs UAE. 93 runs for the second wicket

boys to have come back strongly to claim the title after two defeats in the group stage.

"The bowlers did a fantastic job throughout the tournament. We had few issues in the top order during the early matches but the lower order rose to the occasion to save us in a few games."

Mendis added: "The best part of this highly competitive tournament was that our players peaked at the right time as we won the last two matches in the league stage [against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait] to head into the final high on confidence."

The head coach also gave full marks to the captaincy of Ilyas, who displayed his class with batting and bowling and was also all praise for Ayaan Khan and the bowlers.

"There were so many contributions from the rest and it was heartening to see that the fielding came out good," he added.

Mendis said: "I am really impressed by the team's fighting qualities and the way they made a comeback in this tournament was just fantastic. Achieving this sort of success shows the team's character and strength and I hope they continue with this mentality ahead. It was a victory that will be remembered for long for the way the boys made a comeback."

Mendis added: "The win had a lot to do with the strong support we received from the OC chairman, Pankaj Khimji, Madhu Jesrani (OC secretary), Alkesh Joshi (treasurer) and other board members and support staff.

Chasing a target of 164 after restricting UAE to 163/5, Oman rode on Ilyas' knock of 67 and an unbeaten 53 from Ayaan to reach the target.

Shoaib Khan contributed a vital 22 after the team was reduced to 11 for two. A 66-run stand between Ilyas and Shoaib put the team back on course.

Earlier, Bilal Khan and Ilyas picked up two wickets apiece to restrict the UAE to 163. Skipper Muhammad Waseem top scored with 46. Earlier in the tournament, Oman reached the final despite two defeats in the round-robin format.

Oman lost their opening match to UAE by 22 runs but exacted revenge for the trophy.

Oman bounced back to defeat the hosts Qatar by 19 runs but lost to Bahrain in one of the most thrilling games as Mendis' men went down by one run.

Oman then demolished Saudi Arabia by 47 runs and booked a

place in the final with a massive 68-run win over Kuwait on Friday.

Leading from the front

Ilyas emerged as the tournament's highest scorer with 90, which came in the opener against the UAE. His 52-ball innings was studded with ten boundaries and four maximums. Ilyas also scored a valuable half-century in the title clash against the UAE and was the tournament's second-highest run-getter with 205 runs in five innings. He ended with an average of 41. His all-round effort in the final (67 and 2/24) earned him the player of the final award.

Ilyas was given good support by Ayaan Khan, who finished the tournament with a total of 182 runs at an average of 36.4. Ayaan was the only other Omani cricketer to win the player of the match award as he was selected for his all-round display against Saudi Arabia with 34 runs and 2/16.

Besides Ilyas and Ayaan, the only other batter who scored a fifty for Oman was wicketkeeper Naseem Khushi, who hammered 67 against Saudi Arabia.

Khushi also set another record with the most dismissals in the tournament with seven that included three stumpings and four catches.

His excellent display behind the stumps led him past former Oman skipper and wicketkeeper Sultan Ahmed for the most dismissals in T20Is with 18, out of which seven were recorded in the first Gulf T20I Championship. Sultan had held the record of 17 dismissals.

The bowling attack that was lauded by Mendis was led by pacer Bilal Khan, who emerged as the tournament's second highest wicket-taker with 10 wickets, just one behind the tournament's best of 11 by Ali Naseen of the UAE.

Fayyaz Butt picked a total of nine while the best bowling spell by an Oman at the tournament was from Mehran Khan with 3/17 against Qatar. Fayyaz Butt's 3-29 against Bahrain was another fruitful spell.

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SKI GONDOLA

Above all

AS THE PLANET GETS WARMER, SKI GONDOLA MAKER DOPPELMAYR GOES URBAN - A PROSPECT THAT OVERCOMES HURDLES LIKE ROADS, RAILWAY TRACKS

Austrian company Doppelmayr is well known for making gondolas for ski resorts, but its workshop is increasingly building cable cars for congested cities as climate change has opened up new markets.

A growing number of urban areas are adopting the cleaner, space-saving mode of transport: Doppelmayr's cable cars now glide over London, Mexico City and La Paz. Urban mobility currently accounts for 20% of sales for the world's biggest cable car maker as cities seek to decarbonise their public transport systems.

"We have evolved with our customers," said Reinhard Fitz, Doppelmayr's head of international business development. The 130-year-old company, which built its first ski lift in 1937, has yet to see a drop in demand from mountain resorts, Fitz said, adding, "But, climate change will of course cause demand to shift," he said. Doppelmayr's urban business began to take off about 15 years ago.

Guinness record

Its biggest urban project to date - holding the Guinness World Record for the largest public-transit cable-car system - is a 33km network of 10 ropeway lines connecting Bolivia's capital La Paz with another metropolis, El Alto. Its strongest market for urban mobil-

ity is Latin America, but the company is hoping to expand into Asia.

More than 80 cities and towns worldwide have already adopted aerial tramways, urban engineering expert Hanane Bengualou told AFP. Costing less than seven million euros per kilometre, cable cars are three times cheaper than tramways, Bengualou said.

"It's an innovative solution that uses up very little land and is quick to deploy, as it doesn't require any major work (on site)," she said.

The Paris region is among Doppelmayr's newest customers with a 4.5km ropeway project that will connect two suburbs, giving 20,000 residents access to the capital's subway system.

Scheduled to open in 2025, the 'Cable CT' line will offer an 18-minute travel time between Villeneuve-Saint-Georges and Creteil.

"Cable transport is clean, quiet and regular," said Laurent Probst, director-general at Ile-de-France Mobilités, which oversees public transport in the Paris region.

The costs associated with cable

cars are far lower and they can be quickly installed, making them the ideal solution for traffic-clogged regions, he said. In addition, they can 'cross obstacles' such as roads or train tracks, giving people a commute free of traffic jams, he added.

Attached to convention

Bengualou noted that cable cars also offer a cleaner option, as transport accounts for 35% of CO2 emissions in France. However, opposition by residents and complex administrative procedures have obstructed their development, with France's third-biggest city, Lyon, being forced to abandon its project in 2022.

Since cities are less prone to strong winds than open mountain areas, lighter single-cable technology is usually good enough for urban areas, though population density and other obstacles bring challenges.

Policymakers are often unaware that cable cars - still widely associated with ski resorts - are an option for urban transport

"We hope examples like the Paris region will bring awareness," he said, adding that "people are still very attached to conventional systems."

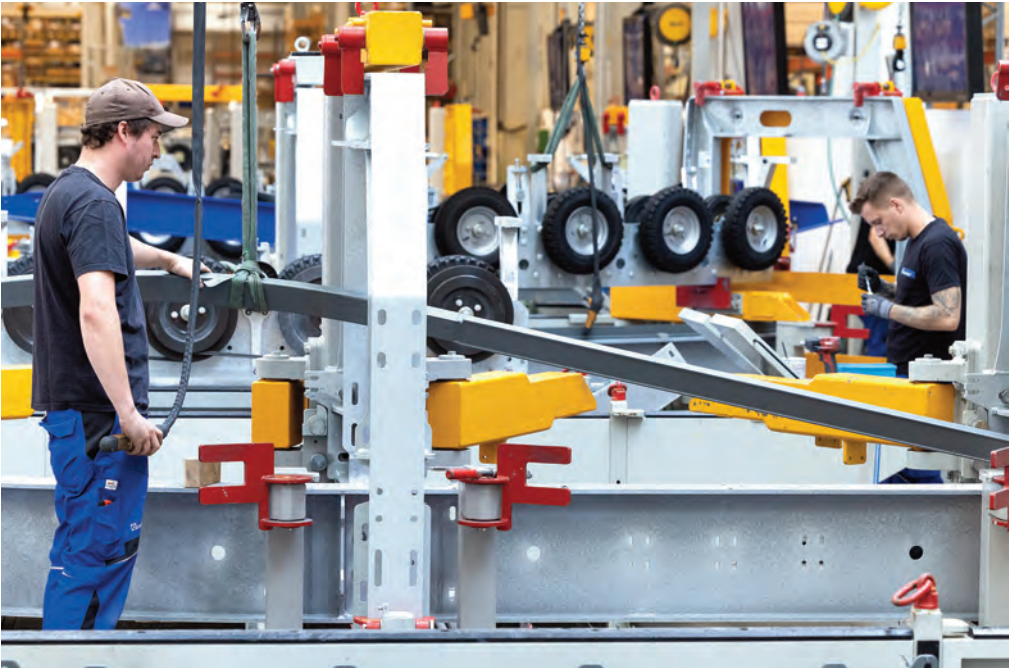
AFP



Policymakers are often unaware that cable cars - still widely associated with ski resorts - are an option for urban transport

REINHARD FITZ

Tourists are seen in the cabin of the Pfanderbahn cable car network, manufactured by Austrian ropeway company Doppelmayr and (below) employees work at an assembly line for the wider Paris region of Ile-de-France's first cable car network



ONLINE RUMOURS

For millions of Chinese tourists, Thailand used to be a happy land of water fights, lantern festivals, and delicious food... But thanks to social media rumours and a blockbuster movie, the kingdom's image among many Chinese people is now one of dangerous illegality and seedy scam border compounds - leaving visitor numbers plummeting.

Thailand is hugely reliant on tourism, particularly from China. The country welcomed more than 10 million Chinese visitors each year before the COVID-19 pandemic - numbers Bangkok is desperate to see return. But its struggling holiday industry has been hit by viral social media rumours claiming that tourists might be kidnapped and sent across the border to work in brutal scamming compounds in Myanmar or Cambodia.

Chinese tourist Jia Xueqiong spent a week in Thailand with her husband and daughter, despite her parents' disapproval. "They felt it was not safe here, and tried to persuade us not to come," the 44-year-old nurse told AFP outside Bangkok's unusually quiet Grand Palace. "All my friends said, 'You go first to explore, if it's ok, we will follow'," she said.

Her family and friends' concerns were stoked by No More Bets, a high-octane thriller claiming to be based on 'real events', about a computer programmer who ends up in a violent scamming compound in Southeast Asia after being trafficked through an unnamed country remarkably similar to Thailand. The movie has some basis in reality, people say.

Extensive reporting by AFP and other media has documented thousands of Chinese people lured to centres in Southeast Asia, mainly in Myanmar and Cambodia, to operate online scams fleecing victims for large sums.

Most of those involved are, however, tricked into it with fake offers of lucrative work - not dragged off the streets while on holiday - and so far, no such scam compounds have been found in Thailand.

Despite only being released in August, No More Bets has become the third-most popular film in China this year, raking in 3.8bn yuan (US\$521mn) and super-charging online discussion about the dangers of visiting Thailand.

Beijing student Leanna Qian, 22, told AFP that while she knew some of the stories were exaggerated, she was still concerned about travelling to the kingdom.

THRILLER SPOILER

BLOCKBUSTER MOVIE SCARES CHINESE TOURISTS AWAY FROM THAILAND FOR FEAR OF BEING KIDNAPPED AND MISTREATED



Chinese tourists watch the change of guards routine at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. (Inset) Tourists dip lotus bulbs in a water bowl at the Grand Palace

"I'm worried that we'll be taken to other places, such as Cambodia or Myanmar," she said.

Action call

Thailand welcomed a record-breaking 11 million Chinese tourists in 2019 - a quarter of all visitors that year, according to official data. But since the start of 2023, only 2.3 million Chinese tourists have come, and last week, the Thai government announced temporary visa-free travel for Chinese travellers in a bid to restart the flow.

Sisdivachr Cheewarat-tanaporn, president of the Association of Thai Travel Agents, told AFP that negative online chatter had played a role in the drop.

"Things don't happen in Thailand but Thailand is targeted," he said.

Rumours began in March online and spread rapidly, with posts shared and viewed millions of times. Topics about whether travel in Southast Asia was safe trended on Weibo.

The rumours grew so persistent, that

earlier this year, the Thai embassy in Beijing released a statement reassuring visitors that officials would 'take measures to

secure tourists' safety'.

And across the border, the president of the Cambodia Association of Travel Agents, Chhay Sivlin, told AFP that the situation was worse. She said her company has received no Chinese tour groups so far this year, and feedback highlighted many tourists' worries about safety.

"If the Chinese government helps, we will receive tourists soon because Chinese people listen to their government," she said.

Never return

Back in China, travel agents are switching their focus from foreign trips - which accounted for more than 40% of their tourism revenue pre-pandemic - to pushing domestic tours.

Business is also suffering the after-effects of Beijing's draconian Covid control measures, which saw around 1.2 billion people unable to leave China after its borders were shut in 2020.

Gary Bowerman, director of travel and tourism consulting firm Check-in Asia, said it took time for people to get used to travelling abroad again.

"Going out of the country again, you start hearing about these scams... It does have an impact on people's psychological willingness to travel," he said.

Meanwhile, domestic travel is booming - especially for younger people, who view it as an on-trend alternative to flying abroad, Bowerman explained.

In the office of a Beijing-based travel agency, which declined to be identified, staff were busy pushing domestic holiday promotions. The agency formerly employed more than 200 people but downscaled to only a few dozen as a result of the worsening global economy, visa difficulties, and a slow aviation industry recovery.

"There's not much willingness to go abroad," employee Guo said, adding,

"For Southeast Asia, there's also the fear that they could go but never return."

Outside Bangkok's Grand Palace with her family, tourist Jia dismissed the fears of many inside China. "It isn't like what's said on the internet, being scammed or other things. There is nothing like that at all," she assured.

AFP

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