

'Oman to record highest growth in GCC in 2023'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is expected to record the highest economic growth in the GCC region this year, due to the sultanate's increased hydrocarbon production capacity aided by the development of new gas fields.

The World Bank on Thursday predicted Oman's real GDP growth at 4.3 per cent for 2023, the highest economic growth among GCC countries.

As per World Bank forecasts, the Saudi economy is projected to grow at 2.9 per cent, the UAE's at 3.6 per cent, Qatar's at 3.3 per cent, Kuwait's at 2.7 per cent, and Bahrain's at 3.1 per cent.

However, average growth in the GCC is expected to slow to 3.2 per cent in 2023 and to 3.1 per cent in 2024, driven by the expected decline of oil prices from the highs reached in 2022. This comes after the GCC economies grew by a robust 7.3 per cent in 2022. Economic activity in the



GCC countries accelerated in 2022, outpacing the rest of the MENA region and the world average.

'The fastest growing economy within the GCC in 2023 is projected to be Oman, at 4.3 per cent growth. Despite weakening demand for oil, relatively high

growth is expected to be sustained by increased hydrocarbon production capacity, in particular aided by the development of new natural gas fields,' the World Bank said in a report released on Thursday.

The World Bank, however, expects Oman's economic growth

to slow next year to 2.4 per cent. The bank forecasts the sultanate's fiscal surplus at 2.5 per cent of GDP for 2023 against 5.4 per cent of GDP last year.

Recently, S&P Global Ratings revised its outlook on Oman to 'positive' from 'stable', mainly due to the government's improv-

ing fiscal performance. At the same time, S&P affirmed Oman's sovereign credit rating at 'BB-/B'.

Last year, S&P upgraded Oman's sovereign credit rating twice on improving fiscal position due to government reforms and higher oil prices.

S&P has now indicated that it could further raise ratings on Oman over the next 12 months if ongoing reforms further strengthen the sultanate's fiscal position, due to a continued reduction in government net debt and interest costs. 'A stronger economic growth trajectory could also contribute to an upgrade,' the ratings agency added.

On the inflationary situation, the World Bank said the GCC economies managed to keep their inflation well below global averages. The GCC countries maintained a stable peg between their currencies and the US dollar, a fixed exchange rate along with fuel subsidies and other interventions which helped contain inflation, according to the bank.

Consultant to be appointed to improve Oman Air performance

Our Correspondent
Muscat

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has ordered a consultant be appointed to improve the performance of Oman Air and a special team has been formed to study the Muscat Metro project, according to Said bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

Ma'awali made the statements when he was hosted by Majlis a'Shura on Thursday to discuss his ministry's plans and programmes in the transport and infrastructure sectors during the Tenth Five-Year Plan in line with Oman Vision 2040. He also revealed plans of the ministry's development budget for the year 2023 and the strategic directives of the communications and information technology sector.

According to Ma'awali, the ministry has formed a special team to study the Muscat Metro project and some preliminary studies have been conducted for the railway link with Saudi Arabia.

The minister added that talks are on to cut fuel prices in order to encourage both existing and new airlines to reduce airfares on the Muscat-Salah route.

Additionally, the minister informed that direct import from the ports of Oman increased seven per cent in 2022.

Speaking specifically about



In the course of a year, 450 citizens were employed in the telecommunications and information technology sector

SAID AL MA'AWALI

roads, he said 60 per cent of the Rusayl-Bidbid road expansion work was complete and expected to open in the first quarter of 2024.

Dualisation of the Ibra Road will be studied in cooperation with the North Sharqiyah Governor's Office, and the Saa'a-Hafeet and Mahadha Road in Buraimi will be among the priorities of the next Five-Year Plan.

"In the course of a year, 450 citizens were employed in the telecommunications and information technology sector, while the Makeen initiative was launched to provide jobs to young people and increase employment in the sector," Ma'awali said.

EU condemns attacks in Israel, urges 'restraint'

Brussels, Belgium - The European Union on Saturday condemned deadly attacks in Israel and a barrage of rockets fired from Lebanon that triggered Israeli strikes and called for "restraint".

"The EU expresses its total condemnation of these acts of violence. This must cease," the

bloc's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement after Friday's attacks in Israel.

Two British-Israeli sisters aged 16 and 20 were killed and their mother seriously wounded in a shooting attack in the occupied West Bank, while an Italian tourist was killed and seven oth-

ers wounded in Tel Aviv when a car rammed into people walking on a cycling path.

Borrell also condemned the "indiscriminate" rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

There has been an escalation of violence since Israeli police clashed with Palestinians on

Wednesday inside Jerusalem's Al Aqsa Mosque, with Israel bombarding both Gaza and Lebanon following the rocket fire by Palestinian fighters.

"We urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint, to avoid further escalation and promote calm for the ongoing religious

holidays," Borrell said.

"Israel has the right to defend itself. At the same time, any response must be proportionate."

The latest flare-up in tensions comes during what is both the Jewish Passover and the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

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Omani publishes guide on effective social media use

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Concerned about the lack of Arabic literature on effective participation in social media and tools to evaluate social media content easily, Khalid Zayid al Khanbashi, a public sector employee based in Muscat, has published *Guidebook to e-Publishing on Social Media Platforms for Public and Private Entities*.

Khanbashi claims it is the first Arabic guide to provide basic theoretical knowledge of successful interaction on social media platforms.

The guide, he informed, is characterised by direct and ease of language. "This is unique owing to the fact that there is no Arabic and English-language lit-



Khalid Zayid al Khanbashi

erature in the field; what is available is superficial and does not address the core issue. The available English literature, too, isn't much helpful in teaching how to devise a communication strategy or how to evaluate social media accounts easily," he lamented.

Speaking to Muscat Daily,

Khanbashi said he started writing the guidebook in November 2021 and completed it in March 2023. "I have tried to help readers devise a communication strategy."

The 52-page guidebook provides reliable basics for communication to account managers and social media hobbyists for effective online engagement.

According to Khanbashi, readers will learn that devising a communication strategy is the first thing that should be mastered before proceeding to publish on social media sites, the best practices for writing effective content and fruitful interaction on social networks. "They will also come to know the importance of these platforms for public establishments in raising

citizens' confidence in them, besides getting acquainted with media crisis management."

Khanbashi added that the book reveals the 15 most common mistakes made by social media account managers in the Arab world, especially in government entities. "This will give them the knowledge to protect themselves from many problems and guarantee successful interaction on these platforms."

About the challenges he faced in writing the book, Khanbashi said he had difficulty communicating with academics in obtaining the right information, besides the lack of online information on the topic.

The guidebook is available in the Kobo Books app of Google Play and Apple store.



ASMED launches online academy to boost entrepreneurship

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED), in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy, launched the Riyada Academy platform last week.

A statement issued by ASMED said that the academy is an electronic training platform specialised in developing entrepreneurial projects.

"The academy will provide practical steps for the success of SMEs in an innovative manner. It targets school and university students, government and private

sector employees, as well as entrepreneurs, jobseekers, and those interested in the field of entrepreneurship."

The platform provides training courses for owners of SMEs and startups, providing them with basic skills to manage and operate their enterprises in accordance with global and digital best practices, and qualify them through virtual courses and workshops.

The Riyada Academy platform also contains a library specialised in entrepreneurship, with a capacity to engage up to 10,000 users, and provides virtual educational content without

fees, in addition to the ease of preparing courses on the platform by trainers.

Meanwhile, according to ASMED's statistic the total number of SMEs registered in the country until September 2022 was 210,877, while the number of SMEs registered with the authority until December 2022 was 104,141.

The statistics show that the number of active enterprises that obtained the Entrepreneurship Card (Riyada) was 37,489, and their contribution to exports amounted to more than RO2bn, according to September 2020 data.

1 DEAD, 11 INJURED IN TOURIST BOAT FIRE IN KHASAB



One person died and 11 others were injured when three tourists boats caught fire in Khasab in Musandam on Saturday. Royal Oman Police said in a statement that Musandam Governorate Police Command, in coordination with Coast Guard and the Civil Defence and Ambulance Department in Musandam 'dealt with a report of the burning of three tourist boats in the fishermen's port in the wilayat of Khasab, which resulted in the death of a European person and injuries to 11 others' (Supplied photo)

Air trough to cause rains in several governorates

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman will be affected by an air trough till Tuesday, which is likely to cause isolated rains and occasional thundershowers in several governorates.

According to the National Multi Hazard and Early Warning Centre, rains and thundershowers associated with downdraft are expected over the governorates of Dhofar and Al Wusta.

The impact will extend to North and South Sharqiyah and the Al Hajar mountains, as well as its adjoining areas, with isolated rain.

The peak of the impact is expected to be experienced on Sunday in the governorates of Dhofar and Al Wusta.

During the period of inclement weather, strong downdrafts are expected of speeds ranging between 28km/h to 64 km/h.

Wadis are expected to flow and the Civil Aviation Authority has advised exercising caution in low-lying areas.

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Tender No	Description	Eligibility	Tender Fee (RO)	Last Date of Sale Tender Documents	Bid Submission Date
T/245565 9/2023	Building Advanced Metering infrastructure (AMI) including Designing, Implementation configuration, Upgradation, installation, activation, and Operation of Customers smart Meters (AMR) in the Governorates with Build Own Operate Transfer Model (BOOT Model) including Communication Infrastructure	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board in Excellent Grade and International Companies that have sufficient experience in the works mentioned.	RO /- 2,500 (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	4/5/2023	29/5/2023

The tender document can be purchased from Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) e-tendering page (Supplier Login) from the date of publication of this announcement until 2023/5/4. The applicants shall pay the tender fee through electronic payment gateway through Supplier Login. Applicants who are not registered with Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) shall register from <https://owwsc.nama.om/Business-with-Us/Vendor-Registration> to have the login credentials of Supplier portal. All applicants who have paid the tender fee shall have access to the Tender Documents through Nama Water Services e-tendering page (Supplier Login). All participating Companies shall submit a Bid Bond of 1% of the bid value in a sealed envelope to Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) Chairman of Tender Committee not later than 3:00 pm on the bid submission date. Bid Bond must be obtained from a Bank registered in the Sultanate of Oman and it should be addressed in favour of Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services). The bid along with all required documents shall be uploaded through Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) e-tendering page not later than 3:00 pm on the date specified above. For more details refer to Tender Page of our website www.owwsc.nama.om or Email to: tender@owwsc.nama.om



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China's Huaxin buys 60% stake in Oman Cement for approximately \$193mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

China-based Huaxin Cement Company has completed the acquisition of a majority 59.58 per cent stake in Oman Cement Company for an estimated purchase price of US\$193.1mn.

Huaxin Cement completed the transaction via Abra Holdings Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary incorporated in Mauritius.

Earlier in March, the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) – which owned 59.58 per cent stake in Oman Cement through its subsidiary Investment Authority SPC – started the process for exiting its investment in Oman Cement.

In March, Investment Authority SPC entered into a sale purchase agreement with Huaxin (Hong Kong) International Holdings Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Huaxin Cement, for the sale of Investment Authority's entire shareholding in Oman cement to Huaxin, comprising 59.58 per cent of the issued capital of Oman Cement.

In April 2023, pursuant to the



terms of the agreement, Huaxin assigned its right to own the sale shares to Abra Holdings.

the completion of the deal and that Huaxin now owns 59.58 per cent stake through Abra Hold-

ings in the capital of Oman Cement.

"The buyer and seller are now in the stage of adjusting the purchase price, after which the buyer will submit an offer to the rest of the shareholders as described in the previous announcement," Oman Cement said.

In a disclosure to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, Huaxin confirmed that on April 5, 2023, the transaction has been completed and that the company now holds, through its indirectly wholly-owned subsidiary Abra Holdings, 59.58 per cent of Oman Cement's issued shares.

Huaxin noted that the financial results of Oman Cement will be consolidated into those of the Huaxin Group.

Oman Cement said that the buyer and seller are now in the stage of adjusting the purchase price, after which the buyer will submit an offer to the rest of the Oman Cement shareholders

On Wednesday, Oman Cement notified the Capital Market Authority, the Muscat Stock Exchange and its investors about

ings in the capital of Oman Cement.

"The buyer and seller are now in the stage of adjusting the purchase price, after which the buyer will submit an offer to the rest of the shareholders as described in the previous announcement," Oman Cement said.

MoCIIP kicks off survey of industrial establishments

Muscat – The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), will start the implementation of the annual survey of industrial establishments (for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022) for a period of three months, starting from today.

The survey of industrial establishments for this year targets more than 960 industrial establishments in various governorates of Oman from inside and outside the industrial areas, including ports areas, free zones, and the Special Economic Zone at Duqm.

The survey will be submitted electronically by logging into the link: <https://survey-tejarah.indstat.org>, while the digital system for industrial statistics aims at digitalising all stages of the industrial survey in the MoCIIP and contributing to speed and accuracy of access to industrial information.

The implementation of this annual survey comes within the outputs of the Manufacturing Strategy 2040, which relies in its plans on accurate statistics of the industrial sector in the sultanate, where its outputs are integrated with the statistics of the National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The MoCIIP clarified that, for the third time, the annual industrial survey will be implemented



electronically, as part of the ministry's plans for digital transformation, as it will help companies and industrial establishments to deliver their data accurately and facilitating the process of data collection, and it's reviewing and analysing.

Hamida bint Abdul Hussain al-Lawati, head of the manufacturing strategy - implementation and evaluation department at the MoCIIP, said, "Industrial information relies on complete statistical surveys, which have an influential role in following up and evaluating the Manufacturing Strategy 2040. It will also contribute to improving the per-

formance follow-up mechanisms and to know how to take corrective actions for facilities in a timely manner, while the digital system contributes to linking the industrial statistics with the key performance indicators (KPIs) of the ministry."

She stressed that these surveys contribute to measuring the growth rates in the manufacturing sector during the coming period, as a result of the continuous efforts and encouragement to adopt modern technologies in the field of industry in order to achieve the required economic diversification and activate the role of non-oil sectors.

Global growth to fall below 3% in 2023: IMF chief

Washington, US – A continued slowdown in almost all the world's advanced economies is expected to drag global growth below three per cent this year, the International Monetary Fund's managing director warned.

"With rising geopolitical tensions, with inflation still running high, a robust recovery remains elusive," Kristalina Georgieva said in a speech ahead of the IMF and World Bank's spring meetings next week.

"That harms the prospects of everyone, especially for the most vulnerable people and most vulnerable countries," she added at an event in Washington.

Global growth almost halved last year to 3.4 per cent as the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine rippled through the world economy, abruptly halting the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

While Asia's emerging markets are expected to see substantial increases in economic output – with India and China predicted to account for half of all growth this year – the good news will be outweighed by a slowdown expected for 90 per cent of the world's advanced economies.

"Growth remains historically weak — now and in the medium term," said Georgieva.

She added that world growth will likely remain at roughly three percent for the next half-decade, the lowest medium-term forecast since the 1990s.

Low-income countries are expected to suffer a double shock from high borrowing costs and a decline in demand for their exports, which could cause poverty and hunger to increase, Georgieva said.

"About 15 per cent of low-income countries are already in debt distress an additional 45 percent are near it," she added, calling on wealthier IMF members to do more to provide sup-



IMF chief calls on central banks to continue inflation fight

Washington, US – Central banks around the world should keep battling inflation by hiking interest rates despite ongoing concerns about financial stability, the head of the International Monetary Fund told AFP on Thursday.

Since last year, central banks have been raising their benchmark lending rates to tackle inflation, which rose to levels not seen for decades in many countries including the United States.

But their fight has been complicated by the recent collapse of Silicon Valley Bank after taking on too much interest-rate risk, setting off a period of turbulence in the banking sector on both sides of the Atlantic.

"We don't envisage, at this

point, central banks stepping back from fighting inflation," IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said in an interview ahead of the fund's spring meeting next week.

"They have to stay the course in a much more difficult, more complex environment," she said.

The biggest casualty so far has been Swiss banking giant Credit Suisse, which was pushed by regulators to merge with regional rival UBS on concerns about its long-term financial health.

But Georgieva said: "Central banks still have to prioritize fighting inflation and then supporting, through different instruments, financial stability."

AFP

port.

Georgieva added that US-China trade tensions – part of a broader realignment of the global economy – was also having a detrimental impact on world growth.

While there has been a long period in which decisions on production were guided by costs, "this is no more," she said.

"Today, the US, but also other countries, are saying I want to have security of supplies and I want to protect na-

tional security," she added.

"The question is how far they should go," she asked, adding that it was possible to guard both aspects "without completely undermining the foundation for growth."

Left unchecked, the long-term cost of trade fragmentation could be as high as seven percent of global economic output, she said in a speech earlier on Thursday to ambassadors and officials in Washington.

AFP

Ahlibank named as financial advisor for Port of Duqm's expansion plans

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Ahlibank's investment banking division has been appointed as the sole financial advisor and mandated lead arranger for the Port of Duqm's fundraising plans.

Port of Duqm Company is in preparation to set up a steel hub in the Duqm Port. Such set up requires sizable port facilities and therefore necessary financing will have to be raised by the Port of Duqm.

As part of a recent agreement signed between the two entities, Ahlibank has been appointed as the sole financial advisor and the mandated lead arranger to Port of Duqm's expansion plans.

Hanaa al Kharusi, senior general manager of wholesale banking at Ahlibank, stated, "We are delighted to have collaborated with the Port of Duqm Company in offering guidance for this pioneering venture in setting up of the steel hub that will accommo-



As part of a recent agreement signed between the two entities, Ahlibank has been appointed as the sole financial advisor and the mandated lead arranger for the Port of Duqm's expansion plans (Supplied photo)

date world-class companies at Oman's prestigious port city. This financing deal is a significant milestone as it represents one of the most strategic greenfield projects to be financed in Oman to date.

It will present an excellent long-term investment opportunity for local, regional and international financiers by facilitating

trade and fostering economic growth."

Reggy Vermeulen, CEO of Port of Duqm, said, "We are thrilled to share that the Port of Duqm Company has appointed Ahlibank as the sole financial advisor to raise the necessary funds for the set-up of steel hub in Duqm.

This strategic milestone will

provide more opportunities for the employment and In-Country-Value."

He further stated, "The partnership with Ahlibank is a testament to the Port of Duqm Company's commitment to serve Oman's Vision 2040 and continue supporting a sustainable future for Oman's economy."

World food prices down 20% on 2022: UN

Geneva, Switzerland – World food prices are still high but have fallen by a fifth compared to a year ago when prices soared to a monthly record high after Russia invaded agricultural powerhouse Ukraine, UN data showed on Friday.

Prices have fallen 20.5 per cent since March last year after a 12th straight monthly drop, the Food and Agriculture Organization said.

But in releasing its latest data tracking monthly changes in international prices of a basket of food commodities, the FAO said food remained expensive notably for developing countries highly dependent on imports.

The FAO said the fall in benchmark prices was "driven by declines in world quotations for cereals and vegetable oils."



The UN agency added: "A mix of ample supplies, subdued import demand and the extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative contributed to the drop."

A deal negotiated by Turkey and the United Nations allows Ukraine – one of the world's top grain producers – to export grain

through a safe corridor in the Black Sea.

It was agreed after the Russian invasion in February 2022 blocked 20mn tonnes of its grain in port. The FAO index averaged 126.9 points, down 2.1 per cent from the end of February and down by 20.5 per cent since

March 2022.

The fall was aided by international wheat prices sliding 7.1 per cent, notably on strong Australian output and improved crop conditions in EU states but also high Russian supplies and "ongoing exports from Ukraine from its Black Sea ports".

A record Brazilian harvest also saw world maize prices drop by 4.6 per cent, the FAO said.

FAO chief economist Maximo Torero said, however, prices remained "very high and continue to increase in domestic markets, posing additional challenges to food security... particularly so in net food importing developing countries," struggling additionally with weak currencies.

AFP

World Bank could lend \$50bn more over decade with reform

Washington, US – The World Bank’s ongoing reform could result in a US\$50bn lending boost over the next decade, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told AFP ahead of stakeholders’ meetings next week where key changes are expected to be announced.

Central bankers, finance ministers and participants from more than 180 member countries are expected to gather in the US capital for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank’s spring meetings in the coming week.

A key topic of discussion will be the World Bank’s evolution, amid a push for lenders to revamp and meet global challenges like climate change. The United States is the largest shareholder of the World Bank Group.

“I expect there to be an update of the bank’s mission to add building resilience against climate change, pandemics, and conflict and fragility to the core goals,” Yellen said in the interview with AFP Thursday.

She added that there needs to be a recognition that these challenges aren’t separate or conflicting but rather, inextricably linked.

“Second, there will be an announcement that the bank is stretching its financial capacity



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen

to meet these objectives, and adopting changes or endorsing changes that could result in an additional US\$50bn in extra lending capacity over the next decade,” Yellen said.

The move would be a significant resource boost marking a 20 per cent rise in the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development’s (IBRD) sustainable lending level. The IBRD is the World Bank’s middle-income lending arm.

Yellen also said there would

be an announcement on updating the bank’s operational model to “orient it towards the goals that we’re setting.”

Among other things, this includes creating more incentives for the mobilization of both domestic and private capital. “We seek additional reforms during the rest of this year,” Yellen said.

In March, the World Bank submitted an evolution plan to be discussed with its development committee on April 12, during the spring meetings.

Noting that World Bank President David Malpass has laid a “solid foundation” for the ongoing work, Yellen added that she expects US candidate Ajay Banga to be elected to the helm of the organization and continue the revamp.

Banga was the sole nominee for the position after Malpass announced this year that he would step down early.

Also on policymakers’ agendas next week are support for war-torn Ukraine and debt re-

structuring.

“We have seen some movement by China on participating in debt restructuring for Sri Lanka, which is a hopeful sign,” Yellen said.

As global growth slows, the World Bank previously warned that the outlook is especially tough for the poorest economies – which face sluggish growth driven by heavy debt burdens and weak investment.

Yellen had earlier said that China should move more quickly on some debt restructurings.

Discussions on this front will continue next week as a newly formed global sovereign debt roundtable gathers, she told AFP.

“We’re having useful technical discussions on important elements of debt restructuring. China has been participating, and we all continue to press China for improvements,” she said.

Washington will continue pushing for a speedier and more predictable operation of the G20 “common framework” for debt restructuring as well.

On Ukraine, Yellen said: “Once again, we will work with all of our allies to insist that Russia cease its brutality in Ukraine.”

She added that the United States would press for economic support alongside its partners on this front.

AFP

India pauses rate hikes citing global market 'uncertainty'

Mumbai, India – India’s central bank held interest rates Thursday for the first time in nearly a year because of “unprecedented uncertainty” in global markets but said it was committed to taming persistent inflation.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) left the benchmark repurchase rate at 6.50 per cent after hikes at all six of its prior meetings since May 2022.

It defied market expectations of a 25 basis points hike and recent increases by the Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank and the Bank of England.

“What we are witnessing today is unprecedented uncertainty in geopolitics, economic activity, price pressures, and financial markets never seen before,” bank governor Shaktikanta Das said in a webcast.

“The decision to pause on the repo rate is for this meeting only” and the bank’s Monetary Policy Committee remained “focused on withdrawal of accommodation”, he added. The RBI began raising rates after prices soared on the back of the Ukraine war.

Inflation remained at 6.44 per cent in February, above the RBI’s upper band of six percent, but down from a peak of 7.79 per cent in April 2022.

“Our job is not yet finished,



RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das

The Reserve Bank of India left the benchmark repurchase rate at 6.5% after hikes at all six of its prior meetings since May 2022

and the war against inflation has to continue,” Das said. “And this has to continue until we see a durable decline in inflation closer to the target.”

This week the World Bank cut its India growth forecast to 6.3 per cent from 6.6 per cent for the financial year to March 2024, citing “slower consumption growth and challenging external conditions”.

AFP

Swiss government to investigate why Credit Suisse crumbled

Zurich, Switzerland – The Swiss government has promised lawmakers a full report into the factors that lay behind the downfall of Credit Suisse, one of the world’s biggest banks, parliament said.

The emergency takeover by UBS has sparked unease and criticism within Switzerland, where Credit Suisse was a pillar of the country’s totemic banking sector.

Lawmakers want to ensure such a situation could never happen again.

Following a string of scandals, the collapse of three US regional banks in March left Credit Suisse looking shaky amid fears of contagion and shares nosedived.

Fearing a collapse that could have triggered a global banking crisis, a takeover was hastily arranged on March 19.

The government, the central bank and the financial regulators FINMA strongarmed UBS into the merger, before the markets reopened.



The country’s biggest bank will complete the takeover of the second largest in the coming months.

The economy committee of the National Council, the lower house of parliament, asked the government for an analysis of the determining factors behind the decline of Credit Suisse.

In a statement, the scrutiny body said it was “particularly interested in the triggers of this crisis, in the solution adopted and

the risks it involves, in the other solutions that would have been possible”, in FINMA’s monitoring of Credit Suisse “and the need for legislation.”

“This last point is beyond doubt for the committee.”

It wants the report to cover the roles played by rising interest rates; the type of credit the bank was issuing; speculative trading in derivatives; trading algorithms and high-frequency trading; ratings agencies; auditors; and risks

arising from the bank’s product structure.

The government accepted the request, parliamentary documents published Thursday showed, pledging to submit its conclusions within a year as part of its next report on systemically important banks.

The events leading to the takeover and the national-level measures taken, as well as the legislation on “too big to fail” banks “must be subject to in-depth examination,” the government said.

“The review will integrate external expertise.”

Like UBS, Credit Suisse was one of 30 worldwide Globally Systemically Important Banks -- deemed of such importance to the international banking system that they are considered too big to fail.

The National Council is to hold a three-day extraordinary session from next Tuesday devoted to the banking crisis.

AFP

WTO sees 'subpar' global trade growth in 2023

Geneva, Switzerland – The World Trade Organization said Wednesday that 2023 global trade growth would be slightly better than feared, but would remain “subpar”, weighed down by the Ukraine war and stubbornly high inflation.

Presenting their annual trade forecast, WTO economists said they expected to see the volume of global merchandise trade slow to 1.7 per cent this year – a full percentage point lower than in 2022.

That forecast was slightly better than feared last October, when the WTO projected 2023 trade growth would be as low as one per cent, but a far cry from the 3.4 per cent expansion initially projected a year ago.

The uptick from the October forecast was largely linked to China’s lifting of Covid pandemic controls, which WTO said was “expected to unleash pent-up consumer demand in the country, in turn boosting international trade”.

“Of course, a peaceful end to the war in Ukraine and the reduction of broader geopolitical tensions would also greatly improve the outlook for the global economy,” WTO’s chief economist Ralph Ossa told reporters in Geneva.

He added that vulnerabilities recently revealed in the banking sector posed risks, warning that “rapidly increasing interest rates could create further strains in financial markets, (with) implications for international trade”.

The organisation’s economists also estimated that real global GDP growth at market exchange rates would be 2.4 per cent this year, a notch above the 2.3 per cent forecast in October.

“Trade continues to be a force for resilience in the global economy, but it will remain under pressure from external factors in 2023,” WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said.



Sharp slump

The WTO’s report cautioned that “the pace of trade expansion in 2023 is still expected to be subpar, weighed down by the ongoing war in Ukraine, stubbornly high inflation, tighter monetary policy and financial uncertainty”.

The organisation said that goods trade was more resilient than expected for most of last year, despite the significant drag exerted by Russia’s war in Ukraine.

But in the end, trade growth ticked in at just 2.7 per cent in 2022 – significantly lower than the 3.5 per cent projected last October – following a sharp slump in the fourth quarter, the WTO said.

It pointed to several factors for the steep decline at the end of the year, including elevated global commodity prices, monetary policy tightening in response to inflation and outbreaks of Covid-19 that disrupted production and trade in China.

Higher commodity prices helped the value of world merchandise trade rise 12 per cent in 2022 to US\$25.3tn, the WTO said.

rate hikes in advanced economies have also revealed weaknesses in banking systems that could lead to wider financial instability if left unchecked.

“Governments and regulators need to be alert to these and other financial risks in the coming months.”

Central banks have hiked interest rates in efforts to tame high inflation, but the higher borrowing costs have raised fears about the health of the financial system following the collapse of three US regional banks last month.

Okonjo-Iweala stressed that the external pressures taking their toll on global trade made “it even more important for governments to avoid trade fragmentation and refrain from introducing obstacles to trade”.

She called instead for more multilateral cooperation on trade to “bolster economic growth and people’s living standards over the long term”.

Looking forward, the WTO said trade growth in 2024 should rebound to 3.2 per cent, while GDP picks up to 2.6 per cent.

But it warned that “this estimate is more uncertain than usual due to the presence of substantial downside risks, including rising geopolitical tensions, global food insecurity, the possibility of unforeseen fallout from monetary tightening, risks to financial stability and increasing levels of debt.”

AFP

Workers shortage shuts California ports

Los Angeles, US – Two of the busiest ports in the United States were shuttered Friday because not enough dockworkers turned up for work, a shippers representative said.

The shutdown comes as part of a long-rumbling dispute between shippers and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) focused on pay and the role of automation.

“The largest ILWU local on the West Coast has taken a concerted action to withhold labor at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, resulting in widespread worker shortages,” said a statement from the Pacific Maritime Association, the umbrella group that represents shippers.



In this file photo, US flag flies in the foreground as containers are seen at the Port of Los Angeles, San Pedro, California (AFP)

“The workers who did show up were released because there was not a full complement of ILWU members to operate the terminals.”

“The action by the Union has effectively shut down the Ports

of Los Angeles and Long Beach – the largest gateway for maritime trade in the United States.”

The ILWU insisted the only no-shows were those marking the Christian festival of Good Friday.

AFP

“Cargo operations are ongoing as longshore workers at the Ports remain on the job,” a union statement said.

The two ports -- known as the San Pedro Bay Port Complex -- move around 20mn shipping containers’ worth of goods every year, with a value of over US\$300bn. The complex is the ninth biggest port in the world by market share, port figures show, and plays a key role in keeping global supply chains moving.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, ports around the globe gummed up, as shippers struggled to meet demand for stay-at-home goods, a problem that persisted as countries opened up.

AFP



Mercedes-Benz wins Oman's Most Trusted Brand award for sixth successive year

Mercedes-Benz was named Oman's Most Trusted Brand in the Luxury Automotive category for the sixth consecutive year, placing the brand in the top 50 of all brands in Oman.

The award reflects the luxury car manufacturer commitment to being a customer-centric brand.

Held annually, the awards recognises market leading brands that deliver on their promise to consistently provide the highest standards of quality, reliability and customer experience.

This year's edition saw winners from across 50 companies recognised at a special ceremony held in the Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Said bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and was attended by representatives from the private and public sectors.

"It is a great honour to once again receive this award and to realise that we have been effectively building and strengthening a resilient bond of loyalty and trust with our clients in Oman," said Shaun Michael, Chief Executive Officer at Mercedes-Benz Oman.

"We believe that creating an excellent customer experience is inextricably linked to being one of the strongest brands in the industry."

Mercedes-Benz is known throughout the world for its sleek design, luxurious finishes and elegant touches that elevates every Mercedes-Benz vehicle.

This dedication to offering the ultimate luxury, matched by a premium level of service has made Mercedes-Benz one of the strongest brands in the industry to this day.

HCC defeats Ayan in Danube Group Ramadan Cricket Tournament final

In an exciting final played on Thursday night, HCC defeated Ayan Muscat by 5 wickets and won the Danube Group Ramadan Cricket Tournament organised by Al Hail Cricket Team.

Sheikh Irfan from Danube Group attended the final as the chief guest, while Doshambe al Balushi and Captain Waleed of OCT Al Hail CT were also present for the award ceremony.

In the Final match, the HCC captain won the toss and was selected to Field first. Ayan Muscat went on to score 84 runs in stipulated 10 overs for the loss of 8 wickets, while Ishtiaq Hussain top scored with 22 runs and other useful contributions came from Ayaz with 14 runs and Shafeeq with 10 runs.

For HCC, Gireesh took 2 wickets giving away 10 runs respectively. In reply, HCC fumbled to a measurable 85 at the end of 10 overs losing 5 wickets.

Gireesh was the top scorer with 23 runs, played as Captain innings helped his team to win the game in the last ball.

Gireesh was declared man of the match final, man of the series for his all-rounder performance and he was adjudged as Best bowler of the tournament as well. Shafeeq of Ayan Muscat was declared Best Batsman of the tournament.

The main Sponsors for the Tournament are Danube Group, who are sponsors for this grand event for the fourth year in a row, Oman Oasis Company and Baab Al Hail Trading. The entire Al Hail Management is grateful to all sponsors for their full-hearted support for this event.



Apollo Hospitals with MoE marks Qaranqasho with students

Students at Al Tarbiya Al Fikhriya School, Al Khuwair, celebrated Qaranqasho with schoolmates and teachers supported by Apollo Hospitals, Sultanate of Oman, in coordination with the Ministry of Education.

The spirit was high as they played on the air castle, greeted cartoon characters, and enjoyed the Qaranqasho song. They eagerly awaited their turn for face painting and henna.

Huda al Araini from the Ministry of Education said, "I like the activities and enjoyed the smiles on the students' faces. I think it is a good gesture from Apollo Hospitals Muscat and I hope this co-operation continues to grow."

Al Tarbiya Al Fikhriya, (Intellectual Education), is a school for intellectually challenged children. The students enrol at the age of six years and continue till the ninth grade, that is up to 17 years of age.

The school was established in 1984 with 69 students, but now at their new premises in Al Khuwair the strength has gone up to 195 students.

"We always have a corporate event during the holy month of Ramadan, but this year we decided to have a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative and go straight into the community and make a difference. We are grateful to the Ministry of Education for giving us this wonderful opportunity," said Debra Sanjay, COO, Apollo Hospitals Muscat.

Throughout the event Apollo's medical team was present ready to provide consultation and support led by Dr Shackle Mounding, Department of Pediatrics and Narratology.



Renaissance appoints Issa al Aufi as Chief People Officer

Renaissance Services has appointed Issa al Aufi as its new Chief People Officer. A seasoned human resource professional with over 15 years of experience in the field, Issa joined the company in March this year.

Having held positions in companies across various sectors like oil and gas, aviation, real estate, FMCG and banking, Issa brings his capabilities in effectively managing complexities and challenges of organisations with large, diverse workforce across hierarchies.

His expertise ranges from Labour Law, conflict resolution, change management, communication, compensation and rewards and relationship management among others.

A Bachelor of Accounting and Master of Business Administration from Sultan Qaboos University, Issa joins Renaissance from Ahli Bank and has previously held positions in Oman Refreshment Company, Saraya Bandar Jissah, Oman Airports Management Company, Oxy, PDO and the Ministry of Defence.

He is also a visiting lecturer on HR related topics in various colleges in Oman.

Welcoming Aufi, CEO Stephen R Thomas said, "Renaissance is proud of its diverse workforce, which is driving its success. Issa brings with him the right combination of skills and understanding of the challenges and potential of attracting, nurturing, and retaining great people."

On his part, Issa said, "Renaissance's range of services solutions and the way these are delivered is outstanding. The company's acknowledgement that its success comes from its frontline staff, and how it cares for them is exemplary. I feel honoured to be part of this culture and look forward to contributing to its purpose and vision."

Renaissance is the leading accommodation, services solutions and IFM company in Oman, listed on Muscat Stock Exchange. The company has invested over US\$520 million in Oman employing over 2,600+ Omani nationals contributing to local growth, building potential and creating opportunities.

Renaissance is committed to safety, efficiency, green awareness, and sustaining in-country value. The company has built a strong local supply chain with 61 per cent of procurement within Oman and is passionate about building a sustainable future by investing in substantial CSR programmes every year.

Renaissance owns and operates Renaissance Village Duqm, Oman's largest workforce accommodation facility, in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).



Issa al Aufi

Ooredoo gives boost to SMEs with 50% discount, other benefits for Riyada cardholders

In keeping with its aim to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across Oman in going digital, Ooredoo offers Riyada cardholders amazing discounts on its Business Internet Plans and Shahry Digital Mobile Lines.

Companies registered with the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises (Riyada) can now enjoy up to 1Gbps Internet speeds at capped rates, plus they will receive a 50 per cent discount on Shahry digital lines.

After all, Ooredoo understands that technology is critical to sustainable success!

Saied al Lawati, Director of Business Marketing & ICT Solutions at Ooredoo, said, "Ooredoo has always made supporting small and medium sized enterprises in Oman a key priority as they generate employment, drive growth and therefore further shape Oman's economy."

"Their importance was recently highlighted by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's meeting with a number of small business owners and entrepreneurs," Lawati added.

With Ooredoo's wide range of convenient and affordable plans and services, Lawati said, "companies of all sizes can now enjoy increased speeds, as well as additional voice and international calling discounts, so they continue to digitise their operations and processes to ultimately thrive in the long term."

Riyada cardholders can opt for the Ooredoo Internet Professional (OIP) plans starting at just RO37 for 20Mbps speed while they go all the way up to 1Gbps for just RO399.5.

Meanwhile, Shahry Business Packs start from just RO5 after the 50 per cent discount with 14GB included, and go all the way up to RO45 after discount, which offers a generous 2TB of data!

Riyada cardholders can visit ooredoo.om/riyada or call 95011503 to find out more about Ooredoo's business internet solutions.

Existing Ooredoo customers can benefit from this service by contacting their account manager.



Saied al Lawati



The journey of Ramadan 2023 for Apollo Hospitals, is determined to serve the society by connecting healthcare and community, as Apollo considers the prime responsibility is to provide high quality clinical care to all the

patients by developing robust quality standards as well as by using expert diagnoses and medical treatment plans, in addition to enhanced infection and safety protocols to render the most appropriate treatment.

All the teachers at the co-education school are qualified in special education.

"The children are taught in academics and in adaptive behaviour; in addition teachers develop individual plans for each child as the development varies from child to child depending on the challenges.

"We have students here from Muscat, North Batinah and Dhkhiliya, but there are families from other governorates such as Dhofar, who stay in Muscat so that their child can benefit from the education," explained Hashim Said al Ameri, Principal, Al Tarbiya Al Fikhriya School.

The enthusiastic children of all age groups expressed their happiness and gratitude.

The principal also thanked the Apollo Hospital for the innovative idea and support for the celebration with entertainment, games and goodies marking the true spirit of Qaranqasho.

Ameera Hamad al Badi, Human Resources Manager at Apollo Super Speciality Hospital explained how significant the day is. "Qaranqasho is a tradition in Oman on the 15th of Ramadan. It has been a pleasure and an honour for us to be associated with these lovely children and to be part of their happiness.

"Through this initiative the children who, as we saw, found great happiness in small details which we sincerely hope stays with them for long term."

From the seventh grade to ninth grade the students go through vocational training in areas such as agriculture, sewing, life skills and managing business office.

MHD Automobiles opens new flagship showroom for Jetour brand in Azaiba

Mohsin Haider Darwish Automobiles LLC, the official distributor of the renowned automobile brand from China - Jetour, to Oman, recently opened its new flagship showroom in Azaiba.

"We are thrilled to announce the launch of our brand new car showroom, designed to provide our customers with a personalized experience and bringing them the best range of vehicles we have to offer from Jetour," said Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD Automobiles.

Highlighting the opening of the new showroom, he said, "Our team has worked tirelessly to ensure that every aspect of the showroom reflects the brand's global reputation and features, from the sleek and modern design to the latest technology and taking into consideration every detail to create a space that is both inviting, spacious and appealing."

The three models showcased by Jetour include the X70FL, X70 Plus and X90 Plus, with other models set to arrive later this year. Each vehicle features a distinct characteristic of city-based SUVs that accommodate advanced technology and the highest-quality safety and luxury.



"At the heart of our new showroom is our commitment to customer service. Our team of experienced professionals and

sales staff are on-hand to provide expert advice and guidance on everything from vehicle features to financing options.

"We understand that purchasing a new car is a significant investment, and we want to ensure that our customers have all

the information they need to make an informed decision. We are incredibly proud of our new showroom and are confident



that it will exceed our customers' expectations. We look forward to welcoming everyone and providing them with an exceptional automotive experience," he added.

The Jetour X70FL boasts a 1.5L turbocharged engine, with a maximum of 156hp and maximum torque of 230N.m, while the Jetour X70 Plus is a slightly larger variant of the X70 with a redesigned front and rear to give the vehicle a sportier feel.

The Jetour X90 Plus combines intelligent safety and a comfortable driving experience

with multi-functional features, enhanced by a powerful 1.6TGD engine that ensures a smooth and responsive drive for both city and long journeys.

The Jetour brand is created for those who desire modern technology, comfort, adventure, and affordable luxury. Jetour commits to creating the best Chinese luxury cars covering SUV/MPV at an affordable price.

Interested customers can get in touch with any of the brand's sales personnel on 2453 3373 or via WhatsApp on 7146 1999 to request for a test drive.



Bank Muscat wins 'Best Bank in Oman' award from EMEA Finance

Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, has won four awards from EMEA Finance including the Best Bank in Oman award for its contributions to the sultanate's banking sector.

Mohammed Sultan al Habsi, Chief Representative, UAE Representative Office, Bank Muscat, received the awards on behalf of the bank at a glittering ceremony held in Dubai, which was attended by senior bankers from the Middle East.

The winners were chosen on a number of criteria including quality of products, financial performance, value of assets and revenues, satisfaction of customers, usage of state-of-art technology in different banking services.

The recognition from EMEA Finance reconfirms the bank's continuing leadership in the banking sector in Oman and validates its strategy of providing the best services and banking products to suit all segments of society.

EMEA Finance awards are one of the most prestigious accolades given to leading banking institutions in the region.

With over four decades of experience, Bank Muscat provides its customers with reliable, dynamic and innovative banking services and products, aiming to maintain its market leadership. It provides a wide range of retail, corporate, wholesale and investment banking services as well as asset management and private banking offerings.

Bank Muscat holds the distinction of being consistently voted as the Best Bank in Oman by leading local, regional and global institutions because of its innovations and market leadership across various banking facilities and digital banking services.

In the past, the bank has been awarded across multiple categories, including the Best Private Bank, Best Investment Bank and the Best Asset Manager in Oman by EMEA Finance and Oman's Most Trusted Brand.

Towell Auto Centre wins 'Majestic Mogul Award' for 2022

Towell Auto Centre (TAC) - a leading business house in the automobile industry in Oman since 1972 - has won the prestigious Majestic Mogul award from TotalEnergies for the fourth time, and two years in a row, said a press release.

On receiving the award, the company said it has once again demonstrated its excellence and commitment to providing high-quality services to its customers.

The award was received by Krishna Iyer Subramani - AGM of Towell Auto Centre during the recent TotalEnergies Marketing Middle East (TEMME) Distributor Convention held in Barcelona, Spain from March 6 to 9.

The Majestic Mogul is an annual program that is keenly con-



tested by TEMME's distributors across the Middle East and CIS regions. The contestants are judged on various quantitative and qualitative parameters in

alignment with TEMME's strategy.

TAC was crowned as the winner for their overall performance in the top-notch Heavy Weight

category for the year 2022.

It's important to note that this is the fourth time TAC has won this award and it is a proud achievement for the company.

Talking about the success, a senior spokesperson from TAC said, "It's an honour to receive such a prestigious award. This is the result of relentless effort by the Lubes and Battery Division Team of Towell Auto Centre. This would have not been possible without the extended support of TotalEnergies Marketing Middle East team members."

Towell Auto Centre has been the authorized distributor for TotalEnergies Automotive & Industrial Lubricants in Oman since 2001 providing high-quality lubricants to its customers. Total-

Energies has a wide range of lubricants that cater to the needs of different types of industries. The company's commitment to providing high-quality products has helped it earn the trust of its customers.

TAC's success in winning the Majestic Mogul award for the fourth time in a row is a testament to the company's commitment to providing high-quality services to its customers.

The company's dedication to excellence has helped it maintain its position as a leading business in the automobile industry in Oman. TAC's success is also a reflection of the strong partnership it has with TotalEnergies Marketing Middle East (TEMME).

P&G undertakes campaign to donate 10mn litres of clean drinking water to children and families this Ramadan

Procter & Gamble (P&G), home of leading brands such as Pampers, Tide, Ariel and Herbal Essences, is collaborating with key retailers across the region to step up as a Force for Good, this Ramadan, by launching a campaign to accelerate efforts to help provide access to clean drinking water to people in need.

The global outreach program, P&G Children's Safe Drinking Water, aims to transform the lives of communities around the world by providing 25bn litres of clean drinking water by 2025, and forms part of P&G's wider efforts to support goal six of the UN Sustainable Development Goals on clean water and sanitation.

Access to clean drinking water is a challenge for two billion people around the world, and the burden to care for family household water needs disproportionately falls on women and affects children.

Through its Children's Safe Drinking Water Program, P&G is partnering with Save the Children to provide clean drinking water to families in Ethiopia, Somalia, Nigeria and Kenya.

Major supermarket chains



across the region will run the P&G '1 pack = 1 day of clean water' campaign in alignment with the spirit of generosity in Ramadan, enabling shoppers to contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #6 that seeks to ensure water and sanitation for all.

The campaign aims to raise awareness about the global water crisis and encourages shoppers to make a difference by purchasing products that sup-

port the cause. This initiative is expected to have a significant impact on improving access to clean drinking water in underprivileged communities.

Rohini Venkateswaran, vice president - country manager East Gulf & Sales Strategy & Planning Gulf at P&G said, "P&G is committed to working towards our goal of making a positive impact on communities in need, and we believe that this partnership will help us further the reach

and impact of the programme.

"We aim to bring further awareness to the clean water crisis and expand the reach of P&G's Children's Safe Drinking Water Programme that has been transforming lives for nearly 15 years. Our longstanding collaboration with our retailers across the Gulf, offers an opportunity to demonstrate the power of brands to enact positive change.

"By combining our resources and expertise, we hope to pro-

vide access to clean drinking water and make a positive impact on the health and well-being of children and families most in need."

The campaign will run throughout Ramadan in the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain, across major supermarkets, where P&G will donate the equivalent of one day of clean water for every purchase of P&G brands such as Always, Head & Shoulders, Crest, Ariel, Pampers and more.

P&G introduced the Children's Safe Drinking Water Program in 2004, working with NGOs around the world to bring clean drinking water and education on proper sanitation and hygiene. Clean drinking water is made possible through the P&G Purifier of Water packets invented by P&G laundry scientists.

Ten litres of dirty water can be transformed using just one P&G Purifier of Water packet, a bucket, a spoon and a cloth in 30 minutes. Since its inception, the programme has provided more than 20bn litres of clean water to people in 93 countries around the world.

N Korea tests underwater nuclear attack drone

The test, as claimed by North Korea, was in response to South Korean and United States military drills

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea claimed on Saturday it had tested another underwater nuclear attack drone, in its latest response to South Korean and United States military drills, though analysts have questioned whether Pyongyang has such a weapon.

In recent weeks, North Korea has tested what state media have described as an underwater nuclear-capable drone, and also carried out the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

"A national defence science research institute in the DPRK carried out a test of underwater strategic weapon system from April 4 to 7," the official Korean Central News Agency said.

"The underwater nuclear attack drone 'Haeil-2'... cruised 1,000 km of simulated underwater distance ... for 71 hours and 6 minutes."

KCNA added that 'the test warhead accurately detonated underwater. The test perfectly proved the reliability of the underwater strategic weapon system and its fatal attack ability'.

North Korea has claimed to have conducted three tests of underwater drones in less than three weeks so far.



This undated picture taken from the period of April 4 to 7 and released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Saturday shows an underwater strategic weapon system submerging in the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan (AFP)

On March 23, it claimed to have conducted the first test of the Haeil, which means tsunami in Korean, able to unleash a 'radioactive tsunami' as it blamed US-South Korea exercises for a deteriorating regional security situation.

Five days later it said it had carried out a second test. In response South Korean Defence Minister Lee Jong-sup told

MPs Seoul was 'capable of monitoring and detecting such drones infiltrating underwater'.

Satellite imagery has also indicated a high level of activity at North Korea's main nuclear complex after leader Kim Jong Un ordered the production of weapons-grade nuclear material be ramped up. North Korea last year declared itself an 'irreversible' nuclear power and Kim recently called for an 'exponential' increase in weapons production, including tactical nuclear weapons.

South Korea and the United States on Wednesday staged joint air drills involving at least one US nuclear-capable B-52H strategic bomber, Seoul's military said. North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion, and has responded to other recent drills with a spate of increasingly provocative banned weapons tests.

North Korea is seeking to diversify its delivery mechanisms in addition to increasing its nuclear stockpile.

Russia has also reportedly developed a similar weapon - nuclear-capable Poseidon torpedoes - but mastering the complex technology required for such weaponry might yet be beyond North Korea, experts said.

But the North's claims about the tests should not be 'easily dismissed for being exaggerated', Choi Gi-il, professor of military studies at Sangji University, told AFP.

"While the North could have exaggerated the degree of success to some extent, they appear to show Pyongyang's underlying confidence in this technology, some of which could have been transferred from Russia."

Russia and North Korea have not officially commented on the transfer of the underwater drone technology, Choi added.

AFP

A national defence science research institute in the DPRK carried out a test of underwater strategic weapon system from April 4 to 7

Thousands without power in Canada after ice storm

Montreal, Canada - Hundreds of thousands of homes in eastern Canada remained without power on Friday, two days after an ice storm killed three people and caused widespread property damage, particularly in Montreal.

About 400,000 homes in Quebec were in the dark, down from 1.1mn at the height of the outages.

"We have restored power to over 50 per cent of the customers affected by the outages," said electricity provider Hydro-Quebec.

"Our teams are hard at work and we are confident that a further 200,000 customers will have their power back by the end of the day," the utility company added.

Some homes though will be without electricity until Sunday, potentially Monday, said Hydro-Quebec spokesman Regis Tellier.

More favourable weather conditions should 'accelerate the restoration of service', he said.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault said that a third person



A resident stands next to a fallen tree branch in front of a home in Montreal, Canada on Friday (AFP)

had died from storm-related causes when he used a portable generator inside his home about 40km (25 miles) northwest of Montreal, succumbing to carbon monoxide poisoning.

A resident of eastern Ontario was killed by a falling tree on Wednesday, and a 60-year-old Quebec man died when he was crushed by a tree branch while trying to clear his land early on Thursday.

Montreal, which accounted for about half of the power outages, opened six temporary

emergency shelters where residents spent the night.

At one, located in the Verdun neighbourhood, about 30 people came to warm up, drink coffee, eat and charge their electronic devices on the first day of the long Easter weekend.

"It was mostly boring," said 28-year-old teacher Isabelle, who declined to give her last name.

"I had planned to work and it delayed me a bit, but it's not the end of the world," she told AFP.

AFP

Russia formally charges US journalist

Moscow, Russia - Moscow has formally charged US journalist Evan Gershkovich with espionage, Russian news agencies reported on Friday, accusations rejected both by the reporter and his employer.

The charges against *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich are the first of their kind in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union, prompting an outcry from media outlets, rights groups and foreign governments.

Investigators from the FSB, the state security service that succeeded the KGB, 'charged Gershkovich with espionage in the interests of his country', state-run agency TASS said, citing a law enforcement source.

"He categorically denied all accusations and stated that he was engaged in journalistic activities in Russia," TASS said.

The *Wall Street Journal*, one of the leading US newspapers, said it heard of the charges through the media reports and rejected them.

"As we've said from the beginning, these charges are categorically false and unjustified, and we



Evan Gershkovich (AFP)

He denied all accusations and stated that he was engaged in journalistic activities in Russia

continue to demand Evan's immediate release," the newspaper said in a statement.

It has previously called Gershkovich a 'trusted and dedicated reporter'.

The case has been classified as secret, limiting the amount of

information available.

His arrest comes as Moscow's relationship with Washington has seriously deteriorated because of the Ukraine offensive.

Washington has long accused Moscow of arbitrarily arresting Americans in order to secure the release of detained Russians.

US President Joe Biden has called for Gershkovich's release. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre earlier described the allegation of espionage as 'ridiculous'.

The arrest led the State Department to summon the Russian ambassador and Secretary of State Antony Blinken pressed the case in a telephone call to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, only their third one-on-one interaction since the Ukraine offensive began in February 2022.

Appeals in Washington

The case has drawn bipartisan alarm in politically divided Washington, where the Democratic and Republican leaders of the Senate issued a rare joint statement on Friday to seek Gershkovich's freedom.

"We strongly condemn the wrongful detention of US citizen and *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, and demand the immediate release of this internationally known and respected independent journalist," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Republican leader Mitch McConnell said.

"Let there be no mistake: journalism is not a crime," the Senate leaders wrote. "We demand the baseless, fabricated charges against Mr. Gershkovich be dropped and he be immediately released." Schumer and McConnell also reiterated their 'condemnation of the Russian government's continued attempts to intimidate, repress and punish independent journalists and civil society voices'.

The State Department has not yet formally determined that Gershkovich is 'wrongfully detained', a designation that would open up a more robust US response including efforts by the US envoy on hostage affairs.

AFP

Bear kills jogger in Italy

Rome, Italy - A bear attacked and killed a jogger on a woodland path in north-west Italy, the first case of its kind, a source close to the case told AFP on Friday.

Andrea Papi, 26, was killed out running on Wednesday in the mountainous region near his village, Caldes, in the Trentino region, said the source.

His family raised the alarm when he failed to return and a search team found his body overnight.

He had suffered deep wounds to the neck, arms and chest and an autopsy concluded he had been attacked by a bear, the source added, confirming Italian news reports.

AFP

As Colombian volcano rumbles to life, villagers resist evacuation

Murillo, Colombia - Smoke billows from the crater of a snow-capped Andean volcano, reminding local inhabitants of the threat of another potential deadly eruption.

Yet at the foot of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in the Colombian Andes, thousands of villagers are staying put to tend to their crops and pack animals, despite an urgent call from the government to evacuate.

Luis Canon admits he is afraid but says he sees no other option than to 'resign' himself to his fate.

"If you leave things here, the crops, the animals, when you come back there is nothing," the 50-year-old, dressed in a traditional hat and poncho, told AFP.

The eruption threat has loomed since the end of March when the number of daily tremors within the volcano shot up from 50 to 12,000.

The government raised the alert level from yellow to orange and ordered the evacuation of



Aerial view of Murillo municipality near the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in Murillo, Tolima Department, Colombia (AFP)

7,500 people living in the foothills and flanks of the volcano. But that did not convince many of those dwelling in danger zones to leave.

"The villagers have cows, horses, sheep, goats and poultry, and that in some way prevents them from moving and taking part in the preventative evacuation ... because of the fear that they will be stolen," said presidential adviser Luis Fernando Velasco. So the government said

it was adopting 'exceptional measures to move around 80,000 animals ... away from the alert zone'.

More than 57,000 people live in areas that could be affected by a new eruption.

'Great fear'

Authorities fear that a major Nevado del Ruiz eruption could cause the kind of devastation that rocked the area in 1985.

In a matter of hours, an eruption of lava melted part of the volcano's snowcap, creating raging torrents of mud, ash and rocks that streamed down the mountainside and buried the town of Armero, killing 25,000 people. It was the worst natural disaster in the country's modern history.

The entire world became captivated by the fate of 13-year-old Omaira Sanchez, who spent three days buried up to her neck in muddy water with her legs trapped by the debris from her destroyed home in the town of Armero.

With rescuers helpless to free her, she died in agony under the gaze of journalists and villagers alike.

A picture of her haunted expression made the front page of

newspapers all over the world.

Luis Londono, 65, remembers that 'very scary' November 13.

People heard a roar in the dead of night and fled for their lives 'crying and shouting that it was the end of the world'.

A villager in the municipality of Herveo, home to 9,000 people some 30km to the northeast of the volcano, Londono fears another such tragedy.

"There is great fear that the Nevado will explode," he said.

Like many others, though, he has not heeded the call to evacuate the mountainous area where peaks rise up to more than 5,000 metres (16,400 feet).

Nicknamed the 'sleeping lion', the volcano lay dormant for decades after that 1985 eruption.

But 10 years ago there was a new eruption.

Every so often, 'some ash' falls but Cecilia Gallego, a villager from Herveo, said she feels 'calm'.

AFP

Israel calls up police and army reservists after deadly attacks

Jerusalem - Israel began calling up police and army reservists on Saturday after separate attacks killed three people, including an Italian tourist, in Tel Aviv and the occupied West Bank.

Despite appeals for restraint, violence has surged since Israeli police clashed with Palestinians inside Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque on Wednesday, with Israel bombarding both Gaza and Lebanon in response to rocket fire by Palestinian fighters. The Italian was killed and seven other tourists wounded when an Israeli Arab ploughed a car into pedestrians on the Tel Aviv seafront on Friday evening and flipped over before being shot dead, police and emergency services said.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni named the dead man as Alessandro Parini, 36.

Police identified the driver as a 45-year-old from the Arab town of Kfar Kassem in central Israel.

"The attacker was neutralised," a spokesman told AFP. Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which rules Gaza, said the attack was a 'natural and legitimate response' to Israel's 'aggression' in the Al-Aqsa mosque.

Earlier on Friday, two British-Israeli sisters aged 16 and 20 were killed, and their mother seriously wounded when their car was fired on in the Jordan Valley in the occupied West Bank.

The army said it had launched a manhunt for the perpetrators.

Following the Tel Aviv attack, Prime Minister Benjamin Ne-



Israeli police gather next to a car used in a ramming attack in Tel Aviv on Friday (AFP)

tanyahu instructed the police to 'mobilise all reserve border police units' and directed the army to 'mobilise additional forces', his office said.

Police said four reserve battal-

ions of border police would be

deployed in city centres from Sunday, in addition to units already deployed in the Jerusalem region and in the central city of Lod, which has a mixed popula-

Despite appeals for restraint, violence has surged since Israeli police clashed with Palestinians inside Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, with Israel bombarding both Gaza and Lebanon

One hit was identified among the assailants, an army statement said.

Cross-border strikes Friday's attacks came after Israel

launched air strikes and an artillery bombardment before dawn in response to rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

It was the heaviest rocket fire from Lebanon since Israel fought a 34-day war with Iran-backed fighter group Hezbollah in 2006 and the first time Israel has confirmed an attack on Lebanese territory since April 2022.

Israel 'struck targets, including infrastructures, belonging to the Hamas fighter organisation in southern Lebanon', the army said. The Lebanese army said it had found and dismantled a multiple rocket launcher in an olive grove in the Marjayoun area near the border, still loaded with six primed rockets.

In Gaza, the Israeli army said it had hit two tunnels and 'two weapon manufacturing sites' in response to the 'security violations of Hamas'.

It said air defences had intercepted 25 rockets from Lebanon on Thursday, while five had hit Israeli territory. Israel 'will not allow the Hamas fighter organisation to operate from within Lebanon', it said.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which patrols the area along the border, urged restraint, noting: "Both sides have said they do not want a war." On Friday evening, the army said it had shot down a drone that had entered Israel's airspace from Lebanon.

AFP

Iraq president slams Turkish bombardment of Kurdish region

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraqi President Abdel Latif Rashid condemned Turkey on Saturday for bombarding an area near Sulaimaniyah airport in the autonomous Kurdish region, a flashpoint between the two governments.

"Turkish military operations against the Kurdistan region continue to take place, the last being the bombardment (o Friday) against Sulaimaniyah civilian airport," Rashid said in a statement.

Rashid, who is himself a Kurd from Sulaimaniyah, said such actions by Turkish forces have 'no legal justification' and serve only to 'terrorise civilians under the pretext that hostile forces are present in Iraq'.

He was referring to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which has a presence in Iraq's Kurdistan region and is blacklisted as a 'terrorist' organisation by Turkey and its allies.

Contacted by AFP, a source at the Turkish defence ministry denied any involvement in Friday's bombardment saying 'Turkish armed forces undertook no such activity'.

The afternoon bombardment caused a small fire near the airport which was quickly brought under control, a statement from airport security said. Turkey has repeatedly sought to remove the rebel PKK group in air and ground operations using drones to target them.

On Monday, Ankara halted flights to and from Sulaimaniyah until at least July 3, blaming increased PKK activity in and around the airport.

The Turkish foreign ministry said at the time that PKK activities were posing a 'threat' to air security.

In early March, a Turkish drone strike in northern Iraq killed two Yazidi fighters affiliated with the PKK, days after a similar strike killed three other fighters. The PKK has waged an insurgency in Turkey that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1984.

Turkey has also carried several incursions into neighbouring Syria to push back Kurdish-led fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Ankara considers to be an extension of the PKK.

On Saturday, SDF leader Mazloun Abdi denounced the bombardment against Sulaimaniyah airport, saying it was a sign of Turkish irritation at the support given to the SDF by the province's dominant faction, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Turkey regards the SDF and its main component, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as an offshoot of the PKK, even though the force is backed by the United States as the mainstay of its campaign against the Islamic State group in Syria.

AFP

Canada repatriates 14 from IS camps in Syria

Montreal, Canada - Canada repatriated four women and 10 children from Islamic State camps in northeastern Syria this week, police said on Friday.

This is the fourth repatriation operation conducted by the Canadian government of its nationals held in camps under Islamic State (IS) control in Syria.

Three of the women were arrested at the airport before appearing in court on a 'terrorism peace bond application', a type of restraining order, police said in a statement. One of them, an unidentified 38-year-old woman, was transported to Alberta in

western Canada and released on bail pending a hearing on conditions of her status.

"This is not a criminal charge," her lawyer, Lawrence Greenspon, told AFP, adding that the prosecutor will want to ensure that the person follows the conditions for a period of up to one year'.

The other two, Ammara Amjad and Dure Ahmed, 'will remain in custody until their next hearing, which is scheduled for Tuesday'. 'Everything was good' regarding the fourth woman, said Greenspon, who is representing all four repatriated women.

AFP

Pope skips Good Friday procession due to cold weather

Rome, Italy - Pope Francis, who is recovering from bronchitis and last week spent three nights in hospital, did not attend the traditional 'Way of the Cross' prayer service on Good Friday, the Vatican said.

Some 20,000 people took part in the ceremony at the Colosseum in Rome, which was dedicated to victims of conflict, with a young Ukrainian and a young Russian praying for peace and brotherhood.

It was the first time that Francis, 86, has missed the annual service, which falls two days before Easter - Christianity's most important holiday - in the 10 years of his papacy.



Italian Cardinal Angelo De Donatis shake hands with Rome mayor Roberto Gualtieri during the Way of the Cross prayer service in Rome on Friday (AFP)

"Due to the intense cold of the past days, Pope Francis will follow this evening's Way of the

Cross from Casa Santa Marta, joining the prayer of those who will gather with the Diocese of

Rome at the Colosseum," the Vatican said in a short statement. Santa Marta is the Argentine pontiff's residence within the Vatican.

An unusual cold snap in Rome has seen night-time temperatures fall to 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit) this week. Christians commemorate Good Friday as the day Jesus Christ died on the cross.

The Way of the Cross service commemorates the 14 stations of Jesus's suffering and death, from his condemnation to his burial.

Francis was discharged from a Rome hospital on April 1 after a three-night stay for a

bronchial infection. The pontiff has suffered increasing health issues in recent years, and it was his second stay in hospital since 2021.

Ahead of the Way of the Cross, Francis presided over the celebration of the Passion of the Lord within St Peter's Basilica on Friday afternoon, arriving in a wheelchair.

The pope has participated in various events since his hospital release, including washing the feet of 12 young prisoners on Holy Thursday.

On Sunday, he is expected to lead Easter mass at St Peter's Square.

AFP

Iraq's Saddam Hussein still revered in Jordan 20 years later

Amman, Jordan - Twenty years after the fall of his regime, the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein remains admired and popular in Jordan where his image can still be seen across the country.

The instantly recognisable face peers out from everything from bumper stickers to mobile phone cases in neighbouring Jordan, despite symbols and images associated with his rule being outlawed in Iraq itself.

On March 20, 2003, then US president George W. Bush launched Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' with a ground invasion by 150,000 US and 40,000 British troops, under the pretext of destroying Iraq's alleged arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.

Saddam appeared for the last time in public on April 9, just hours before the announcement of the fall of Baghdad.

Having ruled Iraq with an iron fist since 1979, Saddam went to ground until his hiding place was

discovered by US troops eight months afterwards.

He was later tried, convicted and hanged on the morning of December 30, 2006.

In Iraq, it is an offence to display photographs or slogans of the toppled dictator and arrests are still sometimes made.

Last October, four people were detained in Anbar province, between Baghdad and the Jordanian border, for 'glorifying the defunct regime during National Day celebrations'.

But in Jordan, many people fondly remember Saddam for his support for the Palestinian cause, Arab nationalism and resistance to Western intervention in the Middle East. "Tens of thousands of Jordanians graduated from Iraqi universities in various fields during Saddam's era with free scholarships," MP Khalil Attiyeh told AFP.

He said Saddam supported the Palestinian uprising, or in-



Shaher Abu Sharkh, a 67-year-old Jordanian mobile phone accessory merchant holds up a cell phone cover showing the image of Iraq's late ousted dictator Saddam Hussein in his shop in Amman on April 5 (AFP)

tifada, and gave money 'to the families of the Palestinian martyrs and rebuilt the houses of those who had them demolished by the enemy'.

Attiyeh believes it is normal for 'Jordanians to adore him and not to forget him, and to keep his photos, showing loyalty to this heroic leader'. Salameh Blewi, 67,

a Jordanian contractor who visited Baghdad in the 1980s, called Saddam 'an honourable and honest Arab leader, with honourable positions'.

'We all love him'

"Despite the (1980-1988) war with Iran, Iraq was a country of riches, but after Saddam, it was plundered by the corrupt," Blewi said. Iraq's former premier Mustafa al-Kadhemi said in a March television interview: "Since

parency International ranks Iraq as one of the 25 most corrupt states in the world.

Saddam's brutal legacy has done little to sway many Jordanians, and its aftermath only reinforces their views.

"Jordanians know that Saddam Hussein is a brave and nationalist Arab leader who defended Arab causes valiantly. We all love him," said Shaher Abu Sharkh, 67, who sells mobile phone accessories in Amman.

"What happened was not the fall of Saddam's regime, but rather the fall of Iraq. Unfortunately, Iraq ended after Saddam and was systematically destroyed," Zuhair Amleh, 70, sells vintage books in Amman's Hashemite Plaza square.

"Unfortunately, Iraq cannot return to what it was like before, he said. "Those ruling Iraq now are sectarian and agents of Iran," he added.

AFP

Tens of thousands of Jordanians graduated from Iraqi universities during Saddam's era with free scholarships

KHALIL ATIYEH

2003, the money that has been wasted exceeds US\$600bn."

It went to 'the corrupt and parties in power', Kadhemi charged. Graft watchdogs Trans-

INDIA

Country records 6,155 fresh COVID cases

Infections have seen an upward trend in the past few days. Overall active cases stands at 31,194

New Delhi - The country recorded 6,155 fresh COVID-19 infections in the last 24 hours, marking a marginal increase from Friday's tally of 6,050 cases, the Union health ministry stated in a bulletin on Saturday. COVID infections in the country have seen an upward trend in the past few days, with the daily fresh infections at 2,994 on April 1, 3,824 on April 2, 3,641 on April 3, 3,038 on April 4, 4,435 on April 5, 5,335 on April 6 and 6,050 on April 7. The overall active cases stands at 31,194, as of Saturday, with the daily positivity rate at 5.63 per cent, the Health ministry stated further in its release. With 3,253 recoveries in the last 24 hours, the overall count stood at 4,41,89,111, the bulletin stated, adding that the overall recovery rate is currently at 98.74 per cent.

Under the nationwide vaccination drive, a total of 220.66 crore vaccine doses (95.21 crore second doses and 22.87 crore precautionary doses) have been administered, as of Saturday, of which 1,963 doses were administered in the last 24



A healthcare worker collects a nasal swab sample of a passenger for COVID-19 testing amid a recent surge in the Coronavirus case, at the railway station, in Bikaner on April 5 (ANI)

hours. The ministry further stated that the weekly positivity rate currently stands at 3.47 per cent. On Friday, Delhi reported 755 fresh COVID cases, in a

continuing upward spiral in infections. Neighbouring Bihar reported 17 new cases. The superintendent of Patna's Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (IGIMS)

said: "Cases have increased due to recklessness and lax observance of COVID protocols. It could also be attributed to the changing weather pattern. But hospitals and the Bihar govern-

ment are on alert." "Compared to other states, the situation in Bihar is still normal. Two patients were detected with COVID on Friday. They are receiving treatment

and there is no need to panic," he said. Amid a nationwide upward trend in the COVID cases, Union Health Minister Dr Mansukh Mandaviya on Friday

chaired a review meeting with health ministers of all states and Union Territories through video conferencing. Mandaviya urged state Health ministers to conduct mock drills at hospitals on April 10 and 11 to assess their preparedness in handling a surge in cases. He also urged states to identify emerging hotspots by monitoring trends of influenza-like illness (ILI) and severe acute respiratory infections (SARI) cases and sending sufficient samples for testing of COVID-19 and Influenza; and ramping up whole genome sequencing of positive samples. It was observed that 23 states and UTs had average tests per million below the national average. "Irrespective of the new COVID variants, the five-fold strategy of 'Test-Track-Treat-Vaccinate and Adherence to COVID Appropriate Behaviour' continue to remain the tested strategy for COVID management. This would facilitate the undertaking of appropriate public health measures," Mandaviya said. ANI

Pawar's opinion on Adani will not affect Opposition unity, say Congress leaders

Nagpur, Maharashtra - Responding to NCP patriarch Sharad Pawar's remarks on the report by US short-seller Hindenburg Research against the Adani Group, the Congress on Saturday said while the senior Opposition leader may hold a divergent view, the issue was grave in nature. The statement comes after Pawar's explosive claim on the Hindenburg report, saying that there are more important issues such as price rise and farmers' issues that the Opposition should raise instead of giving undue importance to the report by the US short-seller. On Pawar's advice to the Opposition in the televised interview that it should, instead, focus on other pressing issues such as price rise, the Congress' Maharashtra chief Nana Patole said the grand old party has raised farmers' issues, among others, on multiple forums time and



NCP chief Sharad Pawar addresses a press conference on JPC demand and Adani row, on Saturday (ANI)

again. "He might have a personal opinion, which is different from ours. In the alleged coal scam, a court committee was set up and a JPC was also constituted to look into it. There is no harm in having both. Now people are asking why the PM is afraid of the Adani issue. If the PM says there's nothing to hide, why are

they (BJP) afraid of it (a JPC)? The PM is not ready to talk about the Adani issue and its fallout on LIC money, SBI money or the provident fund money," said Patole. Former Maharashtra chief minister and Congress leader Ashok Chavan said the NCP chief's statement won't hurt Opposition unity in next year's

Lok Sabha elections. "Whatever he has said is his personal view. His party supported the Opposition's call for a JPC on the Adani issue. Now, if Pawar Saheb is saying this, then I believe he articulated his personal opinion. I don't think this statement of his will make any difference to Opposition unity ahead of the general elections next year. However, if the Opposition takes a unanimous decision on any issue, all Opposition forces and leaders should speak in the same voice and put up a united front," said Chavan. "We have never directly targeted Adani or any industrialist, but this is also about the money that common people have invested... since it has brought some charges (against Adani Group) in the public domain, they need to be investigated and that's precisely what we demanded," added Chavan. ANI

Kesavan, C Rajagopalachari's great-grandson, joins BJP

Chennai, Tamil Nadu - In another blow to the Congress ahead of next year's Lok Sabha elections, C R Kesavan, the great-grandson of India's first Indian Governor-General, C Rajagopalachari joined the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) on Saturday. Speaking to reporters after his saffron switch, Kesavan said: "Modi's people-centric policies, corruption-free governance and reform-led inclusive development agenda have transformed India from a fragile economy to the fifth largest economy in the world." Kesavan resigned from the Congress on February 23, saying that he has not even seen vestiges of the values that made him work for the party with dedication for over two decades. Kesavan shared his resignation letter to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge

Kesavan shared his resignation letter to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Twitter

on Twitter saying he could no longer concur with 'what the party symbolises, stands for or seeks to propagate'. His resignation came within a month of the desertion by former Union minister AK Antony's son, Anil Antony, who parted ways with the party after coming out in support of Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the controversial BBC documentary series. Anil Antony joined the BJP on April 6, in the presence of Union Ministers Piyush Goyal

and V Muraliedharan. Kerala BJP chief K Surendran and senior party leaders Tarun Chugh and Anil Baluni were also present on the occasion. Earlier, on February 23, Kesavan said: "I can no longer, in good conscience, say that I concur with what the party presently symbolises, stands for or seeks to propagate. This is why I had recently declined an organisational responsibility at the national level and also refrained from participating in the Bharat Jodo Yatra." While saying that it was time for him to tread a new path, Kesavan had said that he had not spoken to anybody and did not know 'what will unfold next'. "It is time for me to chart a new path and, therefore, I resigned from the primary membership of the Congress," he had said. ANI

Ukrainian minister to visit India

New Delhi, India - A Ukrainian minister will visit India from Sunday in the first face-to-face talks between the two countries since Russia's invasion of its European neighbour last year. India imports much of its military hardware from Russia, and is walking a delicate balancing act between its increased security cooperation with Western countries and its reliance on Russia for defence and oil imports. Emine Dzhaparova, Kyiv's first deputy foreign minister, will 'exchange views on the current situation in Ukraine' with a senior member of India's foreign ministry, according to an Indian government statement. AFP

Winter offensive: Another disappointment for Russia?

Paris, France - Russia announced its winter offensive in Ukraine with great fanfare, but the ill-fated campaign has been another disappointment for Moscow. As spring arrives, the two armies are deadlocked with troops stretching from the shores of the Black Sea to north-east Ukraine - and the Kremlin has once again been forced to take the long view after failing to make a breakthrough. Here's how Russia suffered a bitter setback, and what could happen next: **Battle for Bakhmut** Bakhmut has become the longest and bloodiest battle in Ukraine. Both sides have endured heavy losses in the eastern industrial city, home to around 70,000 people before the war. They have waged a war of attrition for months, and the city has taken on huge symbolic importance even though analysts



A Ukrainian serviceman prepares to fire a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) from a launcher during a training exercise in the Donetsk region on Friday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

say it has little strategic value. The Russian mercenary outfit Wagner has been spearheading the attack and claimed on Monday that it had captured Bakhmut city hall - but Wagner's chief

Yevgeny Prigozhin has said his forces are still suffering losses. **Stalled offensive** Russia captured just 70sqkm across Ukraine in March, said

Leo Peria-Peigne of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI). The Russian army 'lacks trained men' and has 'artillery ammunition supply problems', he told AFP.

American analyst Michael Kofman said 'the Russian offensive is going about as poorly as expected'. "The question is, how much will Russian forces exhaust themselves and be forced to ration ammunition?" Kofman warned that Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov is 'exhausting the force with an ill-timed, feckless set of offensive operations, whose gains will not change the strategic picture for Russia, but could leave Russian forces more vulnerable'.

War of attrition

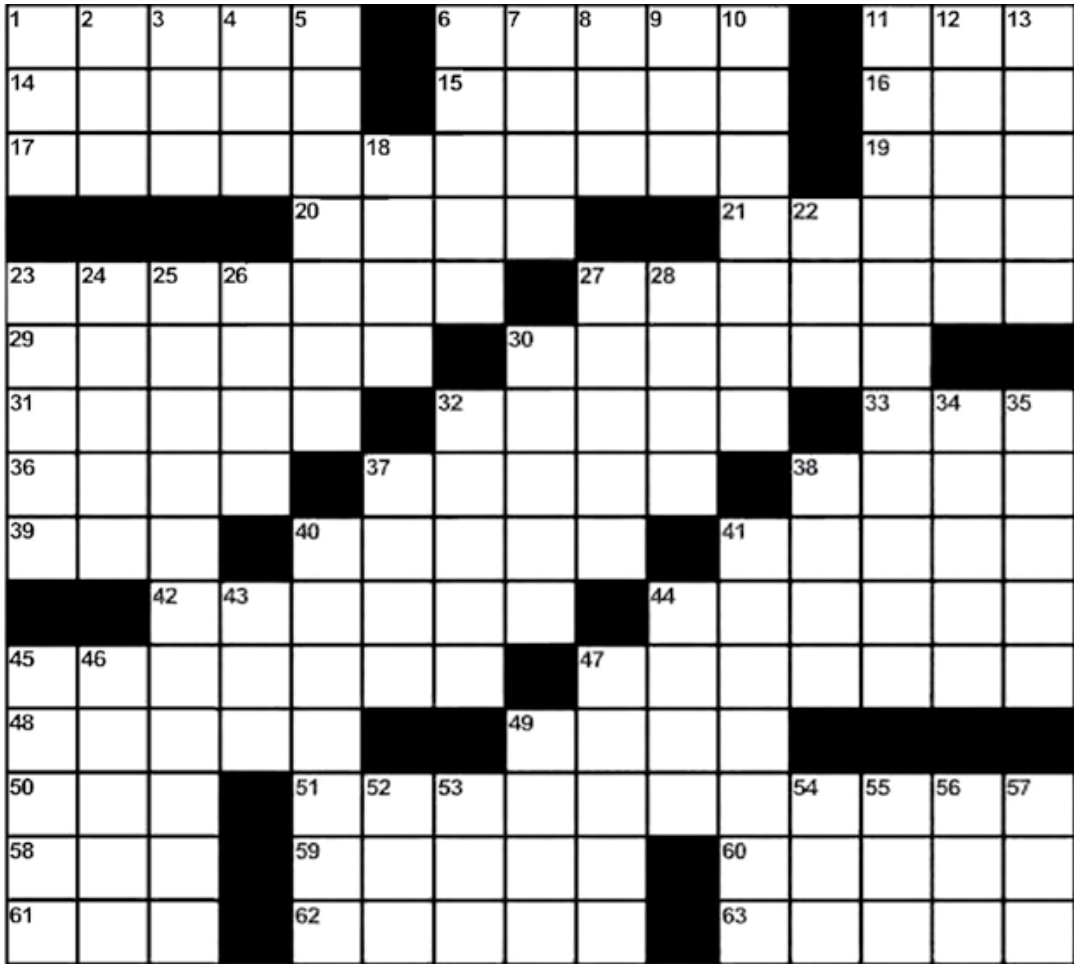
The war has decimated forces and drained resources on both sides for more than a year. "Ukraine has expended a lot of its forces keeping cities without much strategic importance," said Alexander Khramchikhin, an independent military analyst in Moscow. But former Ukrainian defence minister Andriy Zagorodnyuk said he had 'serious

doubts that [Russian forces] can upscale their operation', arguing it would not be sustainable. Kofman said he believed that 'the Russian military likely has the manpower and reserves to mount a stubborn defence' against a Ukrainian counter-offensive, with 'minefields and trenches' at its disposal.

Western support

Ukraine has access to Western intelligence, training and weapons, with heavy-duty tanks and long-range artillery arriving on the battlefield. The outcome will depend 'on the speed and scope of Western deliveries and the ability of Russian air defences to intercept this kind of weaponry', said Igor Korotchenko, editor of the Moscow-based *National Defence* journal. Korotchenko, who is under Western sanctions, said such deliveries to Ukraine 'prolong the conflict'. AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Guy hiding in children's books

6) Helps in a criminal activity

11) Jeweler's item

14) "Up the creek," is one

15) Amend an atlas

16) Genetically coded stuff, for short

17) Fox and Lloyd went back

19) Dinghy driver

20) Arcing shots

21) Sound from a henhouse

23) Guts and other innards

27) Agents' needs

29) Form in the mind

30) Did some house work?

31) Darlings

32) Informative, informally

33) Bride's title

36) Gets something down

37) Musical qualities

38) Look good on

39) There's no fool like this kind

40) Cut off, as relations

41) '70s dance hal l

42) Lumberyard cutter

44) Cosmetic application

45) Ghostly entities

4 7) Alfa Romeo alternative

48) Make more exciting (with "up")

49) Jazz combo, often

50) "By the time I count to three" follower

51) The parolee was back ...

58) As to

59) Phobias

60) Break in two

61) Driving-exam curve shape

62) Womb resident

63) Aden's land

DOWN

1) One skilled at repartee

2) Fuss, to Shakespeare

3) Set fire to

4) "How stupid of me!"

5) Western and Spanish dishes

6) Caribbean resort island

7) "All_ are off!"

8) Bird that can't take flight

9) Cigarette ingredient

10) State in detail

11) The elevator provided back ...

12) Make it so, legally

13) "On your_ get set ..."

18) "Watch out!"

22) Superhero creator Stan

23) Part of DVD

24) Having no drawbacks

25) The ones making you slow down are back ...

26) Big- ticket items

27) Crouch in fear

28) L's meaning, some- times

30) Extend, as a subscrip- tion

32) Spectacular stars

34) Xerox competitor

35) Bit of gravel

37) Class evaluation

38) Watches the kids

40) "The Jeffersons" was one

41) "The Wizard of Oz" character

43) "Asp" or "vamp" at- tachment

44) Hi's wife, in comics

45) Mountain feature

46) Maine flora

47) Use a steam iron

49) Drive-_

52) Wedding announce- ment word

53) Tit-for-_

54) "Norma _" (1979 movie)

55) Scary cinematic street ceding

56) Time immediately pre- ceding

57) "Speed" of many bikes

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

There is a hero deep inside of you, and you just might get a glimpse of them today when you notice a problem or danger that no one else notices. Your quick action will be essential for creating a safer environment for the people you love, and it will also create a lot of positive buzz about you. Your profile is getting higher and as the day goes on, your confidence will build. It might inspire you to try something that you've always been a bit too intimidated to try before.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You will be absolutely exuding confidence even if you don't feel particularly proud of what you've been doing. This type of bravado will be very useful for you today, so don't try to alter the positive opinions people will be forming of you by pointing out your own faults. That's nothing but self-sabotage. Focusing on your flaws will only drag you down and disappoint others. People have faith in you and you have to turn that into faith in yourself.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

You probably won't be in a very aggressive mood today. Mellow yellow is more your color right now. But don't think that this laid-back attitude won't have its advantages, because it certainly will! By being more approachable and relaxed, you will unknowingly invite more people of all walks of life to talk to you. This could be the beginning of a very social time for you. And if you are single and ready to mingle, get ready to meet a brand-new candidate!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

When drama erupts on the scene today, avoid it at all costs. Just keep your head down, mind your own business, and resist the urge to go find out what the fuss is about. Getting caught up in a power struggle right now is not going to be a good move. Even if you try to stay objective, it simply won't be possible. So it's much better to stick to your own work and keep your eyes on your own paper. If someone asks you to get involved, you should tell them no, and accept the consequences.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Are you worried that there is too much happening in your life right now? Think about those days that are filled with boredom and how difficult they can be, and then consider yourself lucky that you are being kept so active and busy right now. You are very popular, so enjoy it! Try to be grateful for the jam-packed schedule you have. There are many people who would trade places with you in an instant. The grass is always greener on the other side. Be content with how things are today.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

There are a lot of things going on in your life already, so it's not an easy day for new beginnings. Instead of starting yet another new project or trying yet another new activity today, stick with the tried and true for now. There will be a much better time to debut your newest ideas or meet new people, and it's coming soon enough, so just hold your creative horses. In the meantime, keep busy with your usual tasks and social events. They will keep you happy.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You need to pay closer attention to the numbers today, especially when you're reviewing any of your budgets, bank statements, or tax returns. This is not a day to gloss over details and just hope that everything turns out all right! Numbers could also be important socially speaking. If you get some new cutie's phone number, make sure you get it right! Little mistakes now could create big problems later, so double-check everything.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

It's time for you to build a few new hopes and give your subconscious something new to dream about at night. Take time today to picture where you want to be and who you want to be with in five or ten years, and don't forget to include family and friends in that beautiful scenario. Visualize the brightest future you can possibly imagine, and don't worry about falling short of those expectations. It's important to keep your focus on the bright side.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You could receive an inexpensive but meaningful gift today, and it will be no bargain basement purchase! It will be more like a gift of an idea, an inspiration that will create a spark in your mind. This spark could grow into a flame of new romantic feelings, it could become a brilliant new idea, or it could just fizzle out into a warm and pleasant feeling. But enjoy the eureka moment, because it's nice to be reminded that life is still full of surprises.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You have mastered an immense challenge recently that few people could have handled, but you might be feeling like no one noticed! This resounding lack of praise is disappointing and inappropriate. You deserve praise for your accomplishments. You can always pat yourself on the back, you know, so why not? Give yourself a treat today and promise yourself that the next time someone else does something wonderful, you'll be the one cheering the loudest. Lead by example.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

There might be a lot of drama going on in your life today, but none of it is centered around negative energy or anger, which is good. There are just a few different people with differing agendas working against each other, and you're getting caught up in the middle of it all. Choosing sides is a huge mistake, although staying completely neutral will be next to impossible. Just try your best to get everyone to meet somewhere in the middle. If anyone can do it, you can.

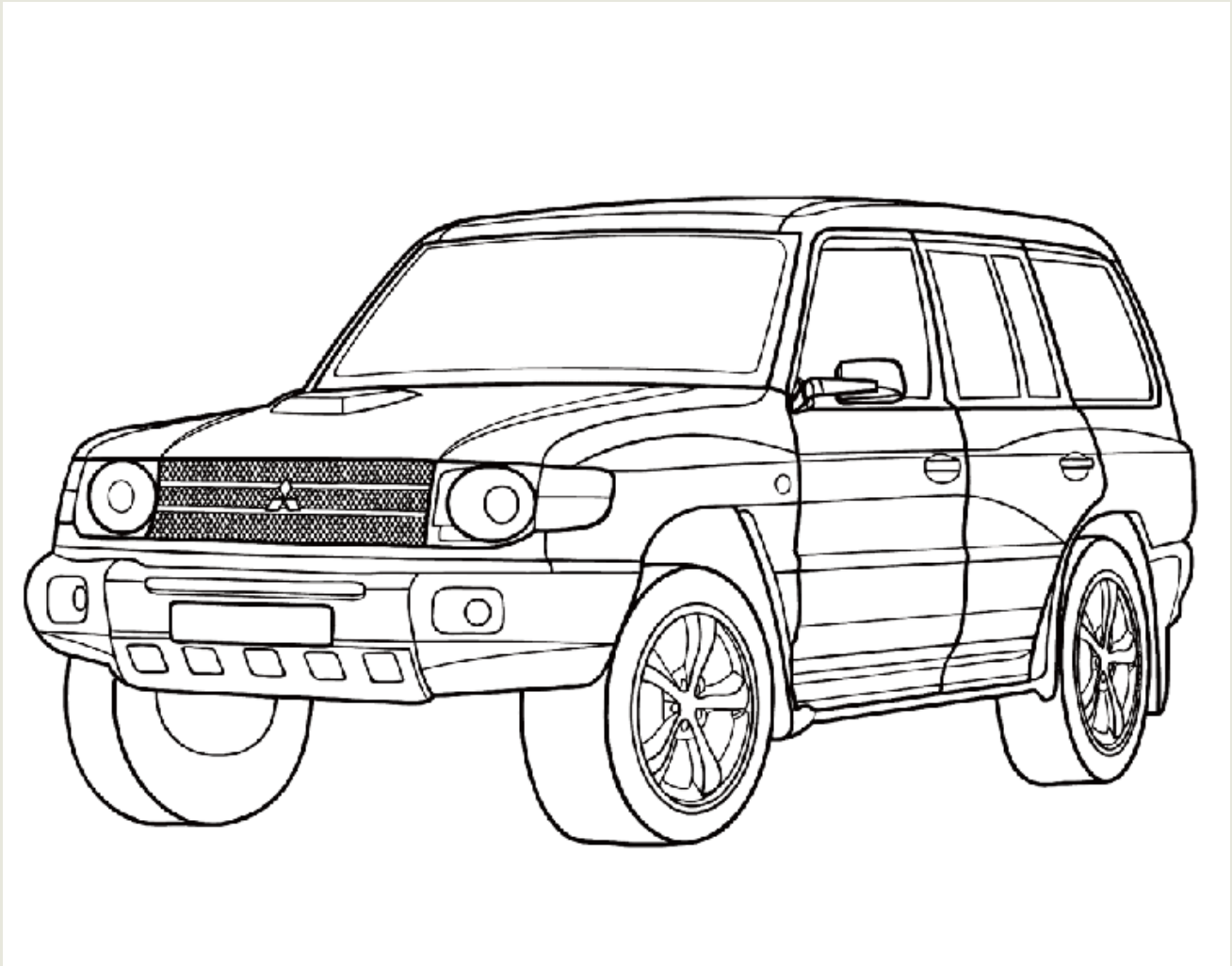


TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Which extra element did Einstein include in his understanding of general relativity, which he had not previously included in the theory he published in 1905 of special relativity?
- A. Electromagnetism
- B. Time
- C. Mass-energy equivalence
- D. Gravity
2. Anthony Wilding is the only New Zealander in what sport's Hall of Fame?
- A. Surfing
- B. Golf
- C. Tennis
- D. Archery
3. Who was shot by Valery Solanas on 3 June 1968?
- A. Larry Hagman
- B. John Lennon
- C. Ronald Reagan
- D. Andy Warhol

Answers: 1.D 2.C 3.D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

Y	I	I	R
B	E	D	S
U	I	R	S
A	G	A	A

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

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

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

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

BEST OF THE REST

Man Utd move to third but Rashford injury sours routine win over Everton

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester United moved ever closer to a return to the Champions League next season as Scott McTominay and Anthony Martial struck to deepen Everton's relegation fears in a 2-0 win at Old Trafford.

Victory takes Erik ten Hag's men up to third and opens up a six-point cushion over fifth-placed Tottenham.

But the three points came at a cost as Marcus Rashford hobbled off nine minutes from time, which could prove to be a major blow in the Red Devils quest for more silverware this season in the FA Cup and Europa League.

Only Jordan Pickford and some wayward United finishing prevented Everton from being on the end of a hiding even before the half-time whistle as the Toffees failed to do their bid to beat the drop any good.

Ten Hag bemoaned his side's reliance on Rashford for goals after the England international hit his 28th of the season in a 1-0 win over Brentford on Wednesday.

But Rashford had a rare off day in front of goal before ap-



Manchester United's Anthony Martial (R) scores against Everton in their English Premier League football match at Old Trafford on Saturday (AFP)

United's inability to turn their dominance into goal highlighted their need for a new number nine, but Martial's return to fitness is a welcome boost heading into the final two months of the season

pearing to pull up with a groin injury.

Pickford got down low to his left to deny his international colleague when one-on-one before Rashford headed his next big

chance wide.

Antony then struck the post from a well-worked corner and Aaron Wan Bissaka somehow skewed the rebound wide with the goal gaping.

Martial boost

Everton's revival under Dyche has been built on defensive solidity but the Toffees were incapable of halting the steady flow of United chances.

Pickford stood tall to save another one-on-one from Antony and then rushed from his goal to block from Rashford.

The opening goal finally arrived on 36 minutes when McTominay, who has been in fine goalscoring form for Scotland, netted his first Premier League goal of the season.

Jadon Sancho picked out the midfielder's run into the box and he smashed the ball past Pickford at his near post.

Everton stemmed the tide towards their own goal after the break but still needed their goalkeeper to keep the score down as Bruno Fernandes saw a header tipped over.

United's inability to turn their dominance into goal highlighted their need for a new number nine, but Martial's return to fitness is a welcome boost heading into the final two months of the season.

An error from Seamus Coleman ended any hope of an Everton fightback as he was robbed by Rashford, who squared for the Frenchman to tap home his first goal since February.

Christian Eriksen made his return from an ankle injury for the final 13 minutes, but that positive news was soon overshadowed by the sight of Rashford limping gingerly around the pitch and down the tunnel ahead of a crucial fortnight for United. They face Sevilla in the Europa League quarter-finals over the next two midweeks before a trip to Wembley to take on Brighton in the FA Cup semi-finals on April 23.

AFP

Celta frustrate nine-man Sevilla with late comeback in La Liga

Seville, Spain - Celta Vigo produced a stunning late comeback to draw 2-2 at Manchester United's Europa League opponents Sevilla in La Liga on Friday.

The draw prevented Sevilla from climbing away from the danger zone.

The hosts, who had Pape Gueye sent off after only 19 minutes, led through Youssef En-Nesyri and Marcos Acuna's strikes as the clock ticked down.

However Miguel Rodriguez pulled one back for Celta in after 89 minutes and Gonzalo Pacioncia levelled in the third minute of stoppage time.

Acuna was sent off for dissent late on, leaving Jose Luis Mendilibar's struggling side with nine men.

Sevilla, who face United in the first leg of the Europa League quarter-finals on Thursday, had looked certain to secure their second victory from two



Miguel Rodriguez of Celta Vigo celebrates after scoring against Sevilla in their La Liga match on Friday

matches under Mendilibar.

Provisionally 13th, Sevilla sit five points above the relegation zone, having played a game more than the teams beneath them.

The hosts' task became harder against a Celta Vigo side in good form when midfielder Gueye was sent off for two yellow cards after just 19 minutes.

Despite their numerical disadvantage, Sevilla battled well at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan and took the lead when En-Nesyri headed home well from Suso's corner shortly before half-time.

Acuna smashed home the second with nine minutes remaining after winning the ball in the centre circle, driving forward and unleashing a rocket from distance which fizzed into the bottom corner.

The record six-time Europa League winners seemed to have some wind in their sails, ahead of their trip to Old Trafford.



Lecce's Joel Voelkerling Persson (C) fights for the ball with Napoli's Min-jae Kim during their Italian Serie A match at the Via del Mare stadium in Lecce on Friday (AFP)

Nervy Napoli squeeze past Lecce ahead of Milan showdown

Milan, Italy - Napoli had unfortunate Antonino Gallo's own goal to thank for getting their Serie A title bid back on track with a 2-1 win at Lecce on Friday, while AC Milan were held to a goalless draw by Empoli.

Napoli are 19 points clear of closest challengers Lazio after Gallo's unwitting backpass from a Mario Rui cross slipped through the fingers of surprised Lecce goalkeeper Wladimiro Falcone midway through the second half.

The hosts had been deservedly level with Napoli at the Stadio Via del Mare after Federico Di Francesco's powerfully struck finish cancelled out Giovanni Di Lorenzo's 18th-minute header.

Di Francesco's second league goal of the season was his team's first since mid-February and had a tired-looking Napoli at risk of

slipping to another defeat after they were hammered 4-0 by champions Milan last weekend.

Instead Lecce stay eight points above the relegation zone in 16th while Napoli take another step towards a historic Scudetto with their seventh straight league away win, earned without top scorer Victor Osimhen.

"It wasn't easy getting the result after that defeat (to Milan)... this result gives us some comfort ahead of the coming matches," Napoli coach Luciano Spalletti told DAZN.

Nigeria forward Osimhen might be back for Wednesday's first leg of the all-Italian quarter-final with third-placed Milan -- who face Empoli in Friday's late match -- but they look to have lost his replacement Giovanni Simeone to a thigh injury he suffered late on.

"Osimhen wants to play every

match... but these are situations that need to be assessed properly," added Spalletti. As it stands Spalletti's team only need four more wins from their final nine matches to secure the title, and that target will get smaller if Lazio fail to beat Juventus.

However it will be all change if Juve have their 15-point penalty for illicit transfer activity revoked later this month, as they are 11 points behind Lazio ahead of their clash at the Stadio Olimpico on Sunday.

Milan flopped at the San Siro ahead of Napoli's visit as Stefano Pioli's much-changed side failed to break down defensive Empoli.

The hosts thought they had claimed the points in the final moments when substitute Olivier Giroud netted but his strike was rightly ruled out for handball after he celebrated.

AFP

Lens beat Strasbourg to keep pressure on PSG

Paris, France - Lens claimed their fourth straight win with a 2-1 victory over Strasbourg on Friday to close the gap on Ligue 1 leaders Paris Saint-Germain to just three points.

The northerners have 63 points and are second behind PSG who travel to Nice on Saturday after back-to-back defeats.

Marseille are third, three points behind Lens with Monaco a further three points adrift in fourth before those clubs visit Lorient and Nantes respectively on Sunday.

After a rough start against their relegation-threatened rivals, Lens found a way through thanks to an impressive move concluded by Polish winger Przemyslaw



Kevin Danso (R) of Lens gets away from Strasbourg's Kevin Gameiro during their French Ligue 1 match on Friday (AFP)

Frankowski in the 11th minute.

Frankowski latched onto a pass from former Strasbourg midfielder Adrien Thomasson, with the goal initially refused as offside but validated after a VAR viewing. Strasbourg lacked sharpness on their rare chances in front of goal with Lens adding a second in the 65th minute thanks to Facundo Medina's low deflected shot.

The side from Alsace pulled a goal back with five minutes to go with a curling Kevin Gameiro effort catching Brice Samba napping in the Lens goal.

The visitors chased the equaliser but instead finished a man down after Habib Diallo was sent off in injury time.

Confident Oman ready for ACC Men’s Premier Cup in Nepal

Muscat - A confident Oman are ready to have a go at the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) Men’s Premier Cup – an integral part of ACC’s new pathway structure – to be held in Nepal from April 18 to May 1.

Ten Associate nations will battle it out in Nepal capital Kathmandu with the winners securing a direct qualification for the ACC Men’s Asia Cup 2023. The top-three teams at the event will also qualify for the ACC Emerging Cup 2023.

Zeeshan Maqsood will lead the national team while Aqib Ilyas, who makes a return from injury, has been named the vice-captain of the 14-member squad.

The trip to Nepal will serve as the start of a ‘dream mission’ for Team Red as they not only chase a maiden place in the Asia Cup but also prepare themselves for the ICC Men’s ODI Cricket World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe in June-July, where they hope to qualify for the World Cup in India later this year.

Oman have never qualified for the Asia Cup and the tournament provides yet another opportunity for them to showcase their potential as a top Asian Associate nation.

Oman have been placed in a tough group that includes hosts Nepal who have also qualified as one of the two teams from Asia for the ICC World Cup Qualifier.

The other teams in Group A include Qatar, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Group B comprises the UAE, Hong Kong, Kuwait, Bahrain and Singapore.

Oman skipper Zeeshan Maqsood expressed confidence ahead of the team’s departure on Monday.

He said: “We have been preparing hard for the tournament. We have played a few practice matches and the boys are in good shape.

“All the players have been going through rigorous training sessions and the fitness level has been one of the priorities. With the onset of the holy month of Ramadan, the training did affect us but we have managed our sessions. There is no let-up in our energy levels and we are confident that we have the potential to beat any Associate nation team.”

Oman squad: Zeeshan Maqsood (captain), Aaqib Ilyas (vice-captain), Jay Odedera, Kaleemullah, Shoaib Khan, Kashyapkumar Prajapati, Adeel Shafique (wicket-keeper), Jatinder Singh, Mohammad Nadeem, Sandeep Goud, Bilal Khan, Ayaan Khan, Naseem Khushi (wicket-keeper), Fayyaz Butt, Duleep Mendis (chief coach) Madhu Jesrani (manager).



Oman team for the ACC Premier Cup 2023 in Kathmandu, Nepal

TIM GAME WINS IT FOR KIWIS

Seifert blasts New Zealand to Twenty20 series win over Sri Lanka

Queenstown, New Zealand - Tim Seifert was the match-winner for the second straight game as New Zealand clinched the T20 series against Sri Lanka with a tense four-wicket victory in Queenstown on Saturday.

Seifert blasted a career-high 88 off 48 balls to fire the Black Caps to 183-6 from 19.5 overs after the tourists had posted 182-6 in the third and final game at John Davies Oval.

The opener struck 10 fours and three sixes in an innings that bore many of the hallmarks of his unbeaten 79 when New Zealand levelled the series at Dunedin on Wednesday.

Captain Tom Latham provided the only meaningful support with 31 off 23 and New Zealand’s middle order nearly conspired to lose the game after Seifert departed with four overs remaining.

Needing to score at little more than a run-a-ball at that stage, the Black Caps stuttered.

Needing 10 runs to win off the final over bowled by Lahiru Kumara (3-38), Mark Chapman struck a six off the first ball before he was the first of three New Zealand wickets to fall.

With two still needed off the last two deliveries, Rachin Ravindra held his nerve to find a gap in the outfield and secure the 2-1 series win.

Latham conceded the run chase should not have become so competitive in the shortest format. Captain Dasun Shanaka said his team adjusted gradually to New Zealand conditions and suggested Sri Lankan cricket officials should take careful note.

“I think it’s about preparation. We should make sure when we come here again, we should come at least two weeks, three weeks before we play,” Shanaka said. “Once we got into the T20 series we started looking a different team.”

Sri Lanka gave themselves a shot at victory after Kusal Mendis struck a rapid 73 off 48 balls, taking full advantage after being dropped by Daryl Mitchell at slip when on 10.

The opener-wicketkeeper went on to hit six fours and five sixes in his 12th half-century, falling just short of his career-high score of 79.

Having been asked to bat, Mendis was the dominant figure in an opening stand of 76 with Pathum Nissanka (25 off 25), before putting on a further 46 with Kusal Perera (33 off 21).

The way Timmy Seifert went out there and played was really important but obviously it wasn’t ideal going down to the last couple of balls.

TOM LATHAM

New Zealand’s Tim Seifert plays a shot during the third Twenty20 match against Sri Lanka in Queenstown on Saturday (AFP)

tight at the death.

“They put us under pressure so it was good to see the way the

guys responded to that,” Latham said.

“The way Timmy Seifert went

out there and played was really important but obviously it wasn’t ideal going down to the last couple of balls.

“I’d say we always had it under control though.”

It completes a disappointing

tour for Sri Lanka, who lost the Test and ODI series by the same 2-0 scoreline but were more

Vincent Kompany's Burnley secure promotion to the Premier League

London, United Kingdom - Burnley boss Vincent Kompany said even he is surprised at the speed at which his side secured promotion to the Premier League after they won 2-1 at Middlesbrough on Friday.

A 19-game unbeaten league run has taken the Clarets 19 points clear of third-placed Luton, who have just six games remaining, at the top of the Championship. Burnley still have seven games to play, making their promotion the quickest of the Championship era.

“It’s Easter and there’s seven games to go and we’re already celebrating. We didn’t expect it,” Kompany told Sky Sports.

“We wanted to experience this at some point but quicker is better sometimes as well.”

The decision to act swiftly to land the former Manchester City captain after his first managerial spell at Anderlecht came to an end has proved a masterstroke.

Many feared the worst when Burnley’s six-year stay in the English top flight came to an end last season.

Due to the terms of a controversial leveraged takeover by an American consortium in late 2020, a “significant proportion” of a £65 million (\$78 million)

Burnley players celebrate after securing promotion to the Premier League

loan had to be repaid when they were relegated.

Nearly £70 million worth of players departed, but Kompany has put together almost an entirely new squad at a fraction of the cost, with his knowledge of the Belgian market and connections at City helping to land bargains.

“This was a complete surprise, this was not our plan,” said Burnley chairman Alan Pace. “Vincent and I talked about it in the summer, we gave ourselves two, three years was our plan. I think what you’ve seen is a lot of magic coming together. “This team is very, very good. You hear Vincent say it every week. They’re surprising each and every one of us every day, they’re phenomenal.”

Full-back Connor Roberts scored the decisive goal 24 minutes from time at the Riverside when the Welsh international turned home Nathan Tella’s cross. Ashley Barnes had given

Kompany’s men the perfect start before Chuba Akpom levelled from the penalty spot with his 27th goal of the season.

Burnley’s victory also helped Sheffield United edge closer to a Premier League return as Middlesbrough remain in fourth.

The Blades now have an eight-point cushion in second and a game in hand after Iliman Ndiaye scored the only goal in a 1-0 win over bottom-of-the-table Wigan at Bramall Lane.

Rahm lurks as delayed Masters second round resumes

Augusta, United States - After a rainy night in Georgia, the delayed second round of the 87th Masters got under way on Saturday with Spaniard Jon Rahm quickly reducing the advantage of early clubhouse leader Brooks Koepka.

Rahm made a birdie on the par-3 12th hole to move within two strokes of Koepka, who finished his second round Friday on 12-under par 132 before the weather stoppage.

Friday’s play was cut short after stormy weather descended on Augusta National, with three of the course’s trademark tall pine trees blowing over. While organizers said that no spectators had been injured by the falling trees, the spectacular images will have injected some caution into tournament officials’ plans for play during what is expected to be a wet and windy Saturday.

Temperatures have dropped sharply in the area, falling from 87 degrees F (30.5 C) in the bright sunshine of the opening round to 50 (10) for awaiting those returning to finish their second round.

While the rain, which continued during the night, will have further softened an already unusually forgiving course, those players who have completed their second round won’t have to contend with any wind and rain until the third round, which is scheduled to begin later on Saturday.

Two-time major champion Collin Morikawa, who sits six strokes behind Koepka, is certainly glad to have his second-round work done.

“I think (Saturday) is going to be the worst, 51 high, really windy,” he said.

“(It’s going to) be a very tough weekend. These first two days have been some of the easiest I’ve seen Augusta play... in my four times here. There hasn’t been wind.”

Jon Rahm of Spain plays his shot from the 12th tee during the second round of the Masters Tournament in Augusta on Saturday (AFP)

Friday’s play was cut short after stormy weather descended on Augusta National

tend with any wind and rain until the third round, which is scheduled to begin later on Saturday.

Two-time major champion



JADEJA, SANTNER AND RAHANE HAND MUMBAI A DRUBBING



Ajinkya Rahane of Chennai Super Kings plays a shot during his blazing knock of 61 off 27 balls against Mumbai Indians at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Saturday. Rahane's whirlwind start meant the rest of the batters could afford to take their time to settle down. Ruturaj Gaikwad continued his fine run with an unbeaten 40 as Chennai defeated Mumbai by seven wickets for their second victory.

TODAYS MATCH

MATCH 13
2 PM
GUJARAT TITANS vs KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS

MATCH 14
6 PM
SUNRISERS HYDERABAD vs PUNJAB KINGS

Lucknow win spin shootout to beat Hyderabad in IPL

Lucknow, India - Krunal Pandya's 3-18 led a wounding spin attack for Lucknow Super Giants to out-class Sunrisers Hyderabad on a slow pitch during Friday's five-wicket victory in the Indian Premier League.

The visitors wilted under a relentless 13 overs of spin and managed to cobble together just 121-8 after electing to bat first.

Veteran leg spinner Amit Mishra, who missed last year's tournament, vindicated his return to the IPL with 2-23 in four overs on the slowest pitch of the season so far.

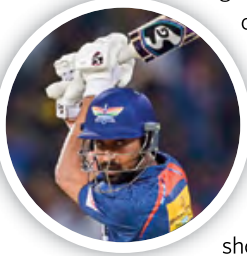
"I am happy to play a limited role for the side," said Mishra, 40. "There is less bounce on this black soil wicket, and that's the beauty of different conditions in the IPL. We did well to win in these conditions."

The Sunrisers tried hard to fight fire with fire but their own spin attack took too long to yield results with too small a total to defend.

Lucknow scored 127-5 in 16 overs and Pandya also shone with the bat, scoring 34 off 23 balls for the third wicket.

But it was his left-arm spin that sealed the win, with Mayank Agarwal sent back for eight and Aiden Markram falling for a golden duck during his debut as skipper on consecutive balls.

AFP



OPENING BLITZ

Buttler, Jaiswal power Rajasthan to top of IPL table

Guwahati, India - Blazing half-centuries from England's Jos Buttler and Yashasvi Jaiswal helped Rajasthan Royals climb to the top of the IPL table with a 57-run hammering of Delhi Capitals on Saturday.

Last year's runners-up Rajasthan posted 199-4 after an attacking 98-run opening stand between the left-handed Jaiswal (60) and Buttler (79) in their second home at Guwahati.

New Zealand's left-arm quick Trent Boult led the bowling charge with a double-wicket maiden over to restrict Delhi to 142-9 as Rajasthan bounced back from their previous loss.

Boult and leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal took three wickets each.



Yashasvi Jaiswal of Rajasthan Royals celebrates with Jos Buttler after hitting a half-century against Delhi Capitals

Rajasthan, who won the first edition of the Indian Premier League in 2008 under late Australian great Shane Warne, have won two of their three matches to lead the 10-team T20 tournament.

David Warner's Delhi slumped to their third loss of the season in as many matches.

The left-hander made 65 and got past 6,000 IPL runs but his

valiant knock got little support from the other end.

Delhi's Rovman Powell fell for two after he made the XI in place of Australian import Mitchell Marsh, who flew back home for his wedding and will return in a week.

Jaiswal, 21, provided Rajasthan with an explosive start after being invited to bat first, the rising Indian opener smashing five boundaries in the opening over.

Buttler, who batted with stitches on his finger after getting hurt while fielding in the previous match, soon took over as he hit Anrich Nortje for three straight fours in the next over.

Rajasthan lost their way in the middle but Buttler, who reached his second 50 of the season with a six, soon changed gears with Shimron Hetmyer (39 not out).

Buttler, who got the orange cap for leading the season's batting chart, was later substituted by spinner Murugan Ashwin under the new impact player rule.

AFP

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REUNITED



A visitor walks past a black and white photograph by Michael Halsband, depicting portraits of Jean-Michel Basquiat (right) and Andy Warhol, during a preview of 'Basquiat X Warhol. Painting Four Hands' exhibition

IN PARIS

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION IN THE HISTORY OF ART



A visitor - standing next to *Mind Energy* (right) - looks at *Pontiac No. 5*, during a preview of 'Basquiat X Warhol. Painting Four Hands' exhibition. The two paintings were made by Basquiat and Warhol in 1985

There are vanishingly few great collaborations in the annals of fine art. For a brief moment in the 1980s, Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat showed the world how it was done.

It started with a bang. Warhol (54) met Basquiat (22) for lunch in October 1982 and took a polaroid of them together.

Basquiat took it to his studio and returned just two hours later with a portrait. Warhol was stunned by its brilliance.

Soon they were working together on portraits that combined their favoured tropes: Basquiat's masks, skulls, graffiti and obscure symbols; Warhol's pop-art

imagery, logos and newspaper headlines.

The brief, intense collaboration lasted from 1983 to 1985 and produced some 160 works.

An unprecedented number of them - 70 - have been brought together for a show at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris that opened on Wednesday, mostly plucked from private collections.

"It's definitely the most successful collaboration in the history of art between two great artists. It's never been matched at this level or in this short space of time," said Dieter Buchhart, the show's lead curator and a Basquiat expert.

In room after room, two different aesthetics, generations and temperaments collide - and find an unexpected synergy.

"It is neither Warhol, nor Basquiat, but

a third artist that emerges," said Suzanne Page, the museum's artistic director.

"There was a great generosity between the two. They played with and provoked each other," she told AFP. "Warhol allowed himself to be completely subverted by Basquiat's interventions."

At their best, it is hard to tell where one artist begins and the other ends, as in the monumental, 10-metre-long 'African Masks'.

Others are unexpected, *Ten Punching Bags*, never shown in their lifetimes, has the bags suspended in a line and decorated with the face of Jesus Christ inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, drawn by Warhol with the word 'judge' and a crown of thorns added by Basquiat.

Cartoonist Keith Haring, a close friend of both - and who makes a cameo in the exhibition - praised their collaboration at the time as a 'conversation in painting'.

But there were doubters as well. Many felt portraits should be the singular vision of an individual artist.

Their supporters saw the two artists more like great jazz musicians, riffing off each other. Basquiat was inspired by the master, Warhol was reinvigorated by his young friend.

"It released an incredible energy," said Page, and on a more straightforward level, they shared an intuitive genius for composition and combining colours.

If Basquiat was the more serious, the more socially engaged - 'carried by anger' at the invisibility of black people -

Warhol was not as detached as he sometimes came across.

"He accepted the social engagement side of Basquiat, and shared it," Page said. "Warhol was engaged too, in his own way. He was a very complex creature."

What might have been seen as insolence in Basquiat's approach - scrawling over works that Warhol had left around his Factory studio, for example - was totally accepted by the elder artist.

Their collaboration ended happily. But within two years both were dead - Warhol following routine surgery and Basquiat from a heroin overdose. Already global superstars, their fame would only continue to grow.

AFP

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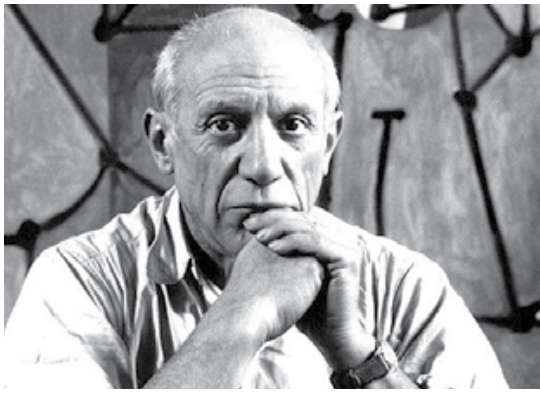


PICASSO LIVES ON



Picasso is someone who appropriated things, people. His work often spoke of violence and... - often with brutal, even courageous honesty

EMILIE BOUVARD



King of the \$100mn club

Pablo Picasso, who died 50 years ago this week, remains the star of art auctions, with several of his works commanding record sums. Five works by the Spanish artist have been sold for more than US\$100mn (€93mn), 16 for more than US\$50mn, and 39 for more than US\$30mn, according to AFP's count.

Most expensive: US\$179.4mn
The Women of Algiers (Version O), painted in 1955, is the most expensive work by Picasso ever sold at auction, going for US\$179.4mn on May 11, 2015, fivefold what the seller had paid 18 years earlier.

At the time it was the biggest art auction sale in history. It was dethroned in November 2017 by the sale of *Salvator Mundi* attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, which went under the hammer for US\$450mn and holds the record to this day.

Previous record-holders
In the last 20 years, two other Picasso works have held the record for the biggest art auction sale: *Boy with a Pipe*, from May 2004 to February 2010, and *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust* from May 2010 to May 2012, according to an AFP database.

US\$4.7bn in a decade
With sales of Picasso works adding up to US\$4.7bn over the past ten years, according to Artprice's annual reports, no other artist can touch his totals. Andy Warhol (US\$3.4bn) and Claude Monet (US\$2.6bn) lag well behind the King of Cubism.

3,000 pieces sold annually
Picasso was not only a painter, his oeuvre also includes sculptures, drawings, ceramics, engravings, lithographs, illustrated books and ballet costumes. These have appeared in 31,745 auctions in ten years - an average of more than 3,000 objects up for sale every year. AFP



Hungry for more Appetite for the Spanish master is inexhaustible

Why can't the world get enough of Pablo Picasso? On the 50th anniversary of his death, it seems the appetite for the Spanish master is inexhaustible. Picasso's ceramics, Picasso's sculptures, Picasso and feminism, Picasso's use of white, celebrity photographs of Picasso... the list of exhibitions marking the half-century since his death on April 8, 1973 runs on and on. "Picasso gobbles everything up, and still we are hungry for more," grandson Olivier Widmaier-Picasso told AFP, adding that he was "fascinated by the number of curators, historians and researchers that continue to find new angles to explore." Explaining his ubiquity is another matter. The genius of his talent seems largely beyond dispute, and this combined with his emergence at the start of the 20th century, just as the last obstacles to free expression were being dismantled, leaving him free to explore in every direction. And he simply never stopped, working from his teens right up to his death on the Cote d'Azur at 91. "He remains above everyone," said

Bernard Blistene, a former director of the Pompidou Centre modern art museum in Paris. "The permanent invention, the journey across all the great currents of modernity, the continuous experimentation for 80 years, the desire to please and displease... all of it is without equal," Blistene told AFP. **No more muses** The MeToo movement has slightly rattled the elevated plinth on which Picasso's reputation stands, as accusations that he was an abusive misogynist towards his wives and girlfriends trigger calls for a reappraisal. "We must stop talking about the women in his life as 'muses'. Some committed suicide, others sank into madness," said Emilie Bouvard, former curator at the Picasso Museum in Paris. The exception was Francoise Gilot, the only mistress who dumped Picasso and lived to see 50 years pass since the death of 'the tyrannical, superstitious and egotistical being' that she denounced in a famous book in the 1960s. But the damage has been limited. Picasso still regularly tops the list for highest-grossing artists at auction: His

paintings generated US\$494mn last year alone, according to Artprice. There is a balance to be found, said Bouvard. "Picasso is someone who appropriated things, people," she said. His work often spoke of violence and sexuality - often with brutal, even courageous honesty - but he also turned those feelings on the women in his life. "Dealing with this question means speaking differently but fairly about Picasso," said Bouvard. That only opens up more ways to prime the pump of the Picasso industry. An exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum this summer, promising to reevaluate the artist 'through a feminist lens', is being curated by comedian Hannah Gadsby, one of Picasso's most outspoken critics. Meanwhile, crowds are flocking to a much lighter retrospective at the Picasso Museum in Paris curated by fashion designer Paul Smith. It suggests the sexual politics have done nothing to undermine the simple pleasure that comes from seeing Picasso's work. "I made it very decorative because the idea is that young school children and teenagers will come and see his

work in a different light," Smith told AFP. "Many of us have already seen Picasso many times around the world, so we hope to show it in a new way." AFP

Seeberger

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