



Royal Orders conferred on ROP officers

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Supreme Commander, conferred the Order of Royal Commendation and medals of excellent service and competence on senior officers of Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Sunday.

The medals were pinned by Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, in a ceremony held at Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences, Nizwa, to celebrate ROP Day, which falls on January 5.

Sayyid Shihab congratulated the officers on the Royal felicitation which, he said, reflects appreciation for the continuous efforts exerted by ROP personnel under the wise leadership of H M the Sultan, Supreme Commander.

The ceremony was attended by Lt Gen Hassan Mohsin al Shuraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, Maj Gen Abdullah Ali al Harthy, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations, Maj Gen Khalifa Ali al Siyabi, Assistant Inspector

ROP MARKS ANNUAL DAY

Day marked graduation of 46th batch of cadet officers, 43rd batch of university cadet officers, 10th batch of service system cadet officers and 54th batch of specialised cadet officers

General of Police and Customs for Administrative and Financial Affairs, and several other senior ROP officers.

The ceremony also marked the graduation of the 46th batch of cadet officers - holders of Diploma in Law and Police Sci-

ences, the 43rd batch of university cadet officers, the tenth batch of service system cadet officers and the 54th batch of specialised cadet officers. The batches included officers from Internal Security Service and Royal Court Affairs.

The celebrations commenced with a salute to Sayyid Shihab and the commandant of the parade requesting him to inspect the front row of the column. The graduates presented a military show before the dais, and the chief guest handed over awards

to top graduate officers.

This was followed by the protocol of handing over the banner of Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences by the 46th to the 47th batch of cadet officers.

The column of the parade chanted the ROP anthem and took the Oath of Loyalty. They chanted 'Long Live His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Supreme Commander' thrice, after which they saluted Sayyid Shihab, marking the end of the parade.

A column of ROP cavalry paraded past the dais to the accom-

paniment of musical tunes rendered by the ROP band.

The names of winners of ROP awards for 2023 were announced during the ceremony, which was attended by Royal Family members, ministers and advisers, Camillus Wambura, Inspector General of Police of Tanzania, members of State Council and Majlis A'Shura, director generals at government units, sheikhs and dignitaries of Dakhliyah, and commanders of Sultan's Armed Forces, ROP, security and military services.



Central Bank ends use of some banknotes

Muscat - Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has issued a circular ending the use of certain denominations of currency which will be withdrawn from circulation within a maximum period of 360 days. These denominations will be deemed out of circulation and have no legal tender value after December 31, 2024.

The denominations listed in the circular include banknotes of the fifth issue of 1995, banknotes of the upgraded issue of 2000, RO1 commemorative

banknotes of 2005, RO20 commemorative banknotes of 2010, banknotes of the upgraded issue of 2011 and 2012, RO1 commemorative banknotes and upgraded RO50 of 2019.

CBO directed all banks operating in the sultanate to accept the aforementioned banknotes and replace these during the aforementioned period. The bank also directed all institutions and retailers to accept these banknotes from the public and deposit these in banks operating in the sultanate.

King Hamad of Bahrain confers Royal Order on Sayyid Theyazin

Manama, Bahrain - Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tariq al Said was received by King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa of Bahrain, in the presence of Prince Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Bahrain, at Al Safriya Palace on Sunday.

Sayyid Theyazin conveyed to King Hamad greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, as well as his wishes for good health and happiness to the King, and continued progress to Bahrain.

The king welcomed Sayyid Theyazin and requested him to convey his greetings to His Majesty the Sultan, and wishes for further progress and prosperity to the Omani people.

King Hamad commended the pioneering role played by H M



Sayyid Theyazin receives the Order of Shaikh Isa bin Salman al Khalifa - First Class from King Hamad on Sunday

Sultan Haitham in strengthening Omani-Bahraini relations, praising the progress witnessed by Oman under his leadership.

The king held cordial talks with Sayyid Theyazin affirming his pride in the solid deep-rooted fraternal bilateral relations, which are growing steadily, in light of the two countries' keenness to constantly develop these to meet the aspirations of their peoples.

Later King Hamad conferred the Order of Shaikh Isa bin Salman al Khalifa - First Class on Sayyid Theyazin in recognition of his role in enhancing Omani-Bahraini relations.

Sayyid Theyazin expressed gratitude and appreciation to the king for conferring the prestigious order on him, praising the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to him during his visit.

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Bangla polls: Sheikh Hasina wins fourth term

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Best destinations - Where to go in 2024

CPA doubles fine for selling e-cigarettes

Our Correspondent Muscat

Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has doubled the penalty for selling electronic cigarettes and e-shisha from RO500 to RO1,000.

Decision No 756/2023 issued by Salim bin Ali al Hakmani, Chairman of CPA, recently bans the trade of e-cigarettes and e-shisha, and their accessories.

Without prejudice to the penalties stipulated in the Consumer Protection Law, the decision stipulates an administrative fine not exceeding RO1,000 for anyone who violates its provisions. The fine will be doubled in the event of the violation being



repeated.

If violations continue, an administrative fine of RO50 will be imposed for each day, provided that it does not exceed RO2,000.

The decision was issued on December 31 and will be effective from the day following its publication in the Official Gazette.

In 2015, CPA issued two decisions - one banning import of e-cigarettes and e-shisha and the other prohibiting trading in these, with penalties as high as RO500.

In a recent interview with Muscat Daily, Dr Jawad al Lawati, a senior consultant in public health focused on tobacco control, said, "There are no

definitive studies yet clearing vaping of health risks. However, its many pitfalls are apparent. Some vaping devices contain nicotine, increasing risks of passive smoking and introducing children to the habit."

Dr Lawati emphasised that while vaping is marketed as a 'healthy' alternative to conventional smoking, sufficient research on the subject is lacking. Alarmingly, with nearly 20,000 flavours available to vapers, children are often lured to these enticing aromas.

Highlighting the risks, in February 2020, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 2,807 cases of vaping-associated lung injuries and 68 resultant deaths.

Oman offers two new oil and gas concessions

Muscat - The Ministry of Energy and Minerals signed a concession agreement for oil and gas exploration in concession areas No 38 and 74 with CC Energy Development on Sunday.

The company will conduct geological and geophysical studies and seismic surveys necessary for oil and gas prospecting in the designated zone.

Located in southwestern Dhofar, Concession Area No 38 is spread over approximately 17,425sqkm, while Concession Area No 74, in the southeastern part of the governorate, covers an area of 3,064sqkm.

The agreement was signed by H E Salim Nasser al Aafi, Minister

Agreement inked with CC Energy Development for concession areas No 38 and 74 in Dhofar

of Energy and Minerals, and Marwan Shafiq Salloum, Director of CC Energy Development.

H E Aafi said that the agreement reflects the ministry's commitment to expand exploration and prospecting for oil and gas resources in the sultanate. The agreement also underscores the confidence of local and international investors in Oman.



Solution available but non-functional

Muscat International Airport has been grappling with the challenge of endless queues and limited immigration counters, resulting in significant crowd congestion. Travellers arriving from distant destinations endure prolonged waiting times, impacting the overall airport experience. People have called for urgent solutions to enhance the immigration process at the airport focussing on strategies that can mitigate queue-related issues. What can be done to improve the immigration process at Muscat International Airport? Here's what *Muscat Daily* readers said –

Lateef Shahdad
Board Member of Oman Switzerland Friendship Association

The first improvement should be the use of new digital technology, like face recognition, e-recognition or any other automated access control system. The other most important thing is to use all the counters or open new counters as well as open priority counters. In other international airports of the world, they use priority counters, family counters, elderly

travellers' counters, etc. Long passenger queues and waiting time can be easily taken care of with these measures. Simultaneously, passenger capacity must be assessed on a timely basis and the number of counters assigned accordingly. Parallely, digital technology must be used to be ready for the future.

Mohammad al Balushi
Cashier

I think a good solution can be to have a pre-registration system and online check-in procedures that can empower passengers to submit necessary documentation in advance. This not only expedites the verification process but also facilitates smoother transitions. Also, regular training programmes for immigration staff on the latest technologies and customer service can improve procedural effectiveness.

Salim al Rashdi
Businessman

Advanced biometric systems and automated kiosks must be introduced that can significantly expedite the immigration process at Muscat International Airport. This will save time that is needed for verification through facial recognition and fingerprint scans. Such steps will also reduce manual workload.

Ahmed Amri
Private sector employee

Addressing the issue of long queues requires a practical and patient solution. During peak

hours (mainly nights), the number of immigration counters and staffing must be increased. By optimising manpower allocation, the airport can manage the influx of passengers more effectively, minimising waiting time.

Sourabh Saxena
Private sector employee

Restarting e-gates at the earliest and increasing counters for manual immigration will improve the immigration process at Muscat International Airport.

Shabana
Psychologist

Working e-counters and more official counters will smoothen the process. Last week, passengers had to stand for more than two hours in immigration queues.

Amal al Hajari
Private sector employee

Travellers with families and children suffer the most. I've had the worst experience ever at immigration. We travelled twice in four months and both the times were horrible, having to stand for long time with children.

Anfal Shams
Photographer

The solution is already there, but never working. The e-gates in the old airport never had any issues. The new ones are always out of order.

? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion has mandated all fuel stations to provide charging points for electric vehicles. What other measures should be adopted to encourage people to opt for electric vehicles?

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by *Muscat Daily*. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.com

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

Share your comments in not more than 50 words along with your full name and profession before next Sunday, 10am, via WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram

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MoCIIP approves special offers, discounts for Accession Day

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), in collaboration with Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Consumer Protection Authority, has announced a national campaign - for the period from January 11 to February 11 - for discounts and promotional offers on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's accession to

power.

A statement issued by MoCIIP said, 'The ministry calls on all commercial centres and establishments to participate in the National Campaign for Discounts and Promotional Offers under the slogan Oman Renewed Renaissance.'

Those who wish to be a part of the campaign can join by submitting their list of goods to alfahdiya@tejarah.gov.om

'Commercial entities can use the approved identity for promotion by scanning the barcode.'



Pact inked to boost sports development for students

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education, through Omani School Sports Association, has signed a comprehensive cooperation programme with Oman Football Association for an ambitious project aimed at enhancing sports development for students.

The signing, which took place on Sunday, marks a significant step in bridging education and sports in the sultanate.

The programme - under the patronage of H E Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambosaidi, Undersecretary for Education and Chairman of Omani School Sports Association, and Sheikh Salem bin Said al Wahaibi, Chairman of Oman Football Association - outlines a series of targeted initiatives.

These include organising football tournaments for school students, facilitating technical

and administrative cooperation, and notably, promoting women's football through a special girls' football festival for schools.

The cooperation reflects Omani School Sports Association's commitment to nurturing football talent in schools and offering enhanced opportunities to both male and female students. The programme aligns with Oman Vision 2040, focusing on empowerment through rehabilitation and training programmes for sports teachers.

H E Ambosaidi emphasised the comprehensive nature of the agreement, highlighting its focus on tournaments and advancement of football, including girls' football. The partnership with Oman Football Association, he noted, is a testament to the sultanate's dedication to fostering school sports and sports in general.

Appreciating the collabora-

tion, Sheikh Wahaibi described the programme as a mission aligned with both parties' aspirations. "The partnership is expected to focus on selecting, training and refining promising talents from schools, aiming to nurture a new generation of players capable of achieving desired outcomes for clubs and national teams."

Sheikh Wahaibi also underscored the shared visions and strategic goals that facilitated this partnership. He expressed hope of the programme's expansion and its role in creating a stimulating environment for young talent. "The partnership is seen as a critical step following the launch of the Talented Centres project, which is anticipated to yield quality outcomes."

The collaboration marks a significant stride in developing student sports in Oman.

Bids invited to build five bridges on Sohar-Buraimi road

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) has invited bids for five bridges on the Sohar-Buraimi road.

In a statement, MTCIT said that in cooperation with the Secretariat General of the Tender Board, the ministry has announced a tender for the construction of five bridges on the Sohar-Buraimi road for companies registered with the Tender Board, graded as 'Excellent' and specialised in construction and maintenance of ports, roads, bridges, railways and dams.

The last date for submitting investment offers is January 15. MTCIT is implementing more than 240 projects listed under 19 programmes related to priority sectors of Oman Vision 2040.

It has confirmed earmarking over RO890mn for strategic road projects in the current Five-Year Plan. These projects are expected to fortify the nation's infrastructure, making it world-class and ensuring seamless interconnectivity across various logistics and economic sectors.

The projects include devel-



opment of alternative roads and specialised ports, and enhancing operational capacity of existing ports like Khasab, Shinas, Suwaiq and Dhakut. Significant emphasis has been placed on collaborative efforts with the private sector, as seen with initiatives related to marine and land services such as marine crew replacement, ship repair and luxury ship berthing.

The ministry's key ventures include the Sharqiyah Expressway, connection roads for Batinah Expressway and road dualisation projects in various governorates.

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FOREX RATES	
(RO1 equals)	
India	217.20
Pakistan	722.96
Bangladesh	285.37
Philippines	144.92
Sri Lanka	842.27
*Rates as on January 07 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

China's cargo throughput at ports rise in 2023

China's cargo and container throughput at the country's ports logged robust expansion during the first 11 months of 2023, official data showed.

The country's cargo throughput at ports totalled 15.51bn tonnes during the first 11 months of 2023, an increase of 8.4% year-on-year, according to the Ministry of Transport.

Specifically, foreign trade cargo throughput at the ports rose 9.6% over one year earlier, according to the ministry figures.

In the same period, China's ports handled 280mn twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) of containers, climbing 4.9% year-on-year in the first 11 months of 2023 compared to the same period a year ago.

Bank lending rises 5.2% in October; deposits jump 10%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Total bank lending in Oman grew by more than five per cent in the first ten months of 2023 while deposits jumped by more than 10 per cent as compared to the same period of 2022, according to the Central Bank of Oman.

Total outstanding credit extended by the sultanate's banking sector (both conventional and Islamic banks) grew by 5.2% to RO30.4bn as of October 2023 against the same month of the previous year, the CBO said in its monthly statistical bulletin.

Of the total outstanding credit, bank credit to the private sector demonstrated increased growth of 6.2% year-on-year to reach RO25.6bn in October. Non-financial corporations received the highest shares of the total private sector credit, at approximately 45.7%, followed by household sector at 44.6%. The share of financial corporations was 5.8% while other sectors received the remaining 3.7% of total private sector credit.

Conventional banks' total outstanding credit grew by 3.6% year-on-year in October this year. Conventional banks' credit to the private sector increased 4.9% to RO20.3bn while their



Total outstanding credit extended by Oman's banking sector reached RO30.4bn at the end of October 2023, while total deposits rose to RO28.2bn

overall investments in securities increased by 6.4% to RO4.7bn, the CBO data showed.

Banks' investment in govern-

ment development bonds decreased by 7.7% year-on-year to RO1.9bn in October, while their investments in foreign securities dramatically rose by 64.8% to RO1.4bn.

On the other hand, total banking sector deposits in Oman grew by 10.1% to RO28.2bn at the end of October 2023 against the same period a year ago.

Total private sector deposits increased by 8.8% to RO18.6bn. In terms of sector-wise composition of private sector deposits, the biggest contribution was from household deposits at 50.5%, followed by non-financial corporations at 31.3%, financial corporations at 15.3% and other sectors at 2.9%.

Aggregate deposits held with the conventional banks increased by 9.9% year-on-year to RO22.9bn at end-October 2023. Private sector deposits, which accounted for 66.2% of total deposits with conventional banks, increased by 8.1% as of October 2023 to reach RO15.2bn.

Government deposits with conventional banks witnessed an increase of 4.2% at RO5.2bn and deposits of public enterprises increased by 37.8% to RO1.8bn.

RO7.1bn Islamic assets

Total assets of Islamic banks and windows in Oman increased by 11.6% on a year-on-year basis to reach RO7.1bn at the end of October 2023.

Islamic assets now constitute about 17.4% of the total banking system assets in Oman as of the end-October 2023.

Islamic banking entities provided financing of RO5.9bn at the end of October 2023, recording a growth of 12.1% over that a year ago. Total deposits held with Islamic banks and windows increased by 10.7% to RO5.2bn.

OIFC gets licence to operate as payment service provider

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Investment & Finance Company (OIFC) announced on Sunday that the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has granted its final approval and licence for OIFC to operate as a payment service provider in Oman.

'We are pleased to inform the shareholders, Muscat Stock Exchange, and the public that the CBO has granted the company its final approval and licence to operate as a payment service provider in Oman,' the company said in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

OIFC further stated that the licence will enable the company to offer new digital payment services, such as the Khedmah e-Wallet, and a variety of payment channels for its clients.

OIFC Group reported a net profit of RO3.549mn for the first nine months of 2023, compared to RO4.382mn for the corresponding period of the previous year.

In its third-quarter 2023 report, OIFC mentioned that the company is engaged with multiple principles to explore new business opportunities.

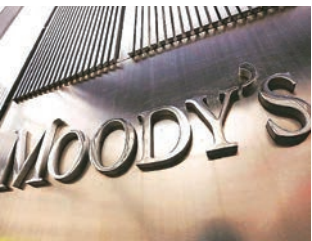
Moody's upgrades Bank Nizwa rating with stable outlook

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Moody's Investors Service has upgraded Bank Nizwa's long-term foreign and local currency deposit ratings to Ba1 from Ba2.

Furthermore, Moody's recent rating action included upgrading Bank Nizwa's Base Credit Assessment (BCA) and Adjusted BCA ratings from b1 to ba3. This significant achievement highlights the bank's outstanding financial prowess and underscores the success of its strategic initiatives.

While the upgraded deposit rating is influenced by government support, the BCA rating serves as a testament to Bank



Nizwa's standalone creditworthiness. With these upgrades, Bank Nizwa now stands on par with major banks, marking a significant milestone in its journey of excellence in the finance sector.

Commenting on Moody's rating action, Khaled al Kayed, Chief Executive Officer of Bank Nizwa said, "The recent upgrades by Moody's are a resounding ac-

knowledge of Bank Nizwa's resilience and stability. Our robust capitalisation, coupled with the consistent trajectory of improving profitability, has been underscored by these upgrades, further solidifying our position in the financial landscape. The upgraded credibility bestowed by Moody's upon Bank Nizwa resonates powerfully with both investors and depositors."

As per Moody's, Bank Nizwa has made strategic advancements, fostering cautious growth and fortifying risk management systems. This concerted effort is distinctly reflected in the bank's financial performance metrics and its robust capital position.

Sohar International gets central bank approval to start Saudi operations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sohar International Bank announced that it has obtained a no-objection certificate from the Saudi Central Bank (SAMA), paving the way for the commencement of Omani bank's operations in the thriving Saudi market.

With a focus on innovation, pioneering digital solutions, and customer-centric ethos, this strategic move aligns with the bank's trajectory of growth, Sohar International said in a press statement.

The presence of Sohar International in the Saudi Arabian market not only positions the



bank as a key player in the region but also opens doors for Omani corporates aspiring to venture into Saudi Arabia.

As the second-largest bank in the sultanate, Sohar International has garnered a commendable

experience, expertise, and advisory for corporates.

Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer at Sohar International, said, "The bank's entry into the Saudi Arabian market goes beyond geographical expansion; it symbolises a conduit for opportunities, bolstering connections between both countries. As Sohar International ventures into international markets, it serves as a means of bringing the best of the world to Oman, while simultaneously showcasing the best of Oman to the world. This underscores the nation's economic strength, resilience, and its pioneering take on strategic financial initiatives."

COMMENTARY

Glimpses of Oman's General Budget 2024

The recently released Oman's Budget 2024, encompassing the financial programme of the country reveals the objectives, priorities, strategies and the resources, paving the way for all-round improvement in the socio-economic structure of the country.

The Financial Plan has been crafted against the backdrop of numerous global challenges, as indicated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), such as geopolitical tensions, weakening economic growth, oil price volatility, increasing interest rates, climate change and natural disaster, which all had a role in denting the global financial stability and the individual countries as well.

The sultanate's 2024 budget lays down the guide-posts for accelerating the growth and creating a conducive business environment. Achievement of fiscal sustainability, stimulating national economy, accelerating non-oil revenue, improving spending efficiency, attracting foreign investments, controlling deficit, lowering of public debt, stabilising the inflation rate, sustaining employ-

ment creation, implementation of high-priority projects, fulfilling basic needs, continuing welfare subsidies and harnessing human resources are all the chosen areas for priority.

It is heartening to note that the proactive steps taken in the earlier years towards the management of the economy under the broad framework of the 10th Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025) have yielded positive results during 2021 to 2023. Overall reduction in fiscal deficit in 2021 by RO1.233bn, achievement of fiscal surplus by RO1.146bn in 2022 and RO931mn in 2023 have therefore added new dimensions to the five-year development plan of the country.

Going by the strategies being followed towards management of the fiscal figures, it is likely that the year 2024 will again end with a decent amount of fiscal surplus, though Oman Budget 2024 projects a fiscal deficit of RO640mn. Any upward swing in oil price from \$60 per barrel, being taken in budget against the global price of \$80 projected by IMF for 2024, will augur well for this optimism and favourable

shift in the fiscal position.

In terms of real GDP growth, the main indicator for assessing the efficiency of the economy, Oman will achieve 2.3% in 2023 and 2.4% in 2024. However, the biggest impetus being given towards acceleration of investments in projects in the country will



AV MANOHAR
The author is the Chief Executive Officer of Wisdom Business and Training Services LLC

pave the way for enhancing the income stream and contributing to the growth of the economy in the future.

Reduction in public debt by RO2.4bn in 2023 i.e from RO17.6bn in 2022 to RO15.2bn in 2023 is a notable achievement. The surplus generated from oil revenue has been substantially deployed to reduce the borrowings and consequently the debt service costs. Debt as a % of GDP works out to 35%

now and is aligned with well managed economies.

The expected fiscal deficit of RO640mn is proposed to be funded by external borrowings by RO240mn, (in 2020, it was RO2bn), substantially reduced from the earlier years and RO400mn from sovereign reserves, as

in earlier years.

Despite the heightened financial shocks faced globally in 2023, inflation was minimal at 1.03% in 2023 in Oman, thanks to the measures taken towards curbing inflation in the area of subsidies on food and fuel.

It is heartening to note that the above salient measures such as strengthening of public finance, reduction in public debt and rebound in oil prices have re-

sulted in enhancing the credit rating from the various agencies such as Moody's, S&P and Fitch Ratings and the outlook for the country, which will set the trend for generating higher inflow of Capital into the country by way of investments.

While analysing the income stream, the proportion between hydrocarbon and non-hydrocarbon which was 72:28 in 2023 is expected to become 68:32 in 2024, which is indeed a good development. The 5.7% increase in non-hydrocarbon revenue by RO190mn (from RO3.33bn in 2023 to RO3.52bn in 2024) has made a shift in this ratio, which is a welcome feature.

Gross revenue is estimated to grow by 9.5% over the budget 2023 in 2024 to touch RO11.01bn. Gross spending is likely to go up by 2.6% over 2023 budget in 2024 to RO11.65bn (RO3.07bn for defense & security, RO4.453bn for civil ministries expenditure, RO1.05bn for public debt service, RO900mn for development projects and RO2.177bn towards social protection contributions, subsidies and other expenditure).

As the spending is more than the in-

come generation, Oman's Budget 2024 carries a fiscal deficit of RO640mn, working out to 6% of the total revenue and 1.5% of the GDP of the nation.

Oman's investment and development landscape includes proposed spending of RO3.9bn in 2024 through government's investment arms namely RO1.25bn by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), RO1.5bn by Energy Development Oman (EDO) and RO1.14bn through development budget allocations. Besides, Oman Future Fund, Oman Development Bank, Public Private Partnership Programme shall continue to enhance the investment climate in Oman.

Overall, Oman's Budget 2024 is a well-crafted blue-print of action, comprehensively covering different facets of the economy and balancing between the challenges on hand and the objectives set for achievement in future.

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

Markets expect interest rate cuts and brighter 2024 for economies

London, UK – With the world leaving behind a year when interest rate decisions and high inflation were the main agenda topics, markets expect less inflationary pressure, easier conditions, and a brighter year in 2024.

The US Fed, which began increasing its benchmark policy interest rate in March 2022, gradually raised it from 0.25% to a range between 5.25% and 5.5%, a 22-year high, and kept it constant during the last three monetary policy meetings.

Starting from July 2022, the European Central Bank (ECB) increased its fixed interest rate from 0% to 4.5% gradually until September and kept it unchanged during the last two meetings.

Beginning its rate-increase cycle earlier, the Bank of England (BoE) raised its benchmark rate from 0.1% to 5.25% from December 2021 to August 2023, while it held the rate at the same level during the last three meetings.

The Bank of Canada also raised its policy rate from 0.25% to 5% from March 2022 to July 2023 and kept it steady in the last three meetings. From April 2022 to November 2023, the Reserve Bank of Australia raised its cash rate from 0.1% to 4.35%.

On the other hand, the Bank of Japan's policy rate has been at



US Federal Reserve headquarters in Washington, DC

minus 0.1% since 2015. Despite discussions, the bank has never abandoned its loose monetary policy, even in the post-pandemic period when the world decided to implement tight policies.

The People's Bank of China has also adopted a different stance by decreasing its one-year loan prime rate since 2021 from 3.85% to 3.45%.

Given that the major central banks have kept interest rates unchanged for the last few months, markets do not expect a rise in interest rates this year, and

some banks are even expected to start lowering them.

Inflation easing

The annual inflation rate, which reached a record level of 6.5% in the US in December 2022, dropped to 4% in November 2023.

The rate is at 3.9% in the UK after reaching 11.1% in 2022 and at 2.4% in the euro area, dropping from a record 10.7% in October 2022. Canada is also in a similar position on the inflation side. The rate slowed to 3.1% in

October after reaching over 8% in 2022, but there was a fluctuating decrease.

In Japan, the inflation rate increased by over 4% level in the summer period of 2023 but decreased to 2.8% in November. In China, the monthly inflation rate ranged at -0.5% in Nov. 2023 compared to the same month in the previous year. Inflation peaked at 2.8% in September 2022.

Max Gillman, a professor of economic history at the University of Missouri in the US, said the

US Fed, which began increasing its benchmark policy rate in March 2022, gradually raised it from 0.25% to a range between 5.25%-5.5%, a 22-year high, and kept it constant during last three meetings

current inflation rate in the US is very low.

"The inflation rate rarely exactly equals the 2% Fed target. Rather, the inflation rate has bounced around 2%, and a 3% number for six months leaves little doubt that the Fed successfully has met its target range," he noted.

In fact, the Fed should immediately begin lowering the interest rate on reserve balances (IORB rate) because the real rate after inflation is above 2%.

"This is a very high real rate, only seen during strong growth periods," he told Anadolu Agency.

"Such a high real rate, and such a sudden increase in rates as occurred in 2023, endangers large sectors of the economy, es-

pecially commercial real estate."

2024 to be bright

Gillman added that all of the European central banks have followed the US interest rate policy at a lag, so they also will start lowering rates as soon as the Fed does so, "which I hope is very very soon."

"Global inflation was from increased COVID-19 spending financed by printing money and raising the 'inflation tax' rather than other taxes.

"This happens when the Treasury borrows and the central bank then buys the Treasury debt. Thereby, one part of the government gives fresh money to the Treasury to finance spending and inflation goes up," he added.

This is common during crises, and now that the crisis has passed, he believes that excessive spending and money printing should be curtailed, which will reduce inflation.

He added that "2024 will be bright if the US Fed begins lowering interest rates immediately, but not if they keep them at the current level."

"World growth will pick up. There is definitely light as long as we can avoid any financial collapse in the commercial real estate sector by lowering interest rates now."

Anadolu Agency



China's forex reserves rise to \$3.2tn

Beijing, China – China's forex reserves totalled \$3.238tn as of the end of December 2023, rising by \$66.2bn, or 2.1% compared to the end of November, according to data released on Sunday by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE).

In a statement, the SAFE said that, affected by factors such as the monetary policies of the world's major economies as well as expectations, the US dollar index saw a decline in December while global financial asset prices generally increased.

It attributed the increase in the scale of the country's foreign exchange reserves to the combined effects of currency translation and changes in asset prices and other factors.

Xinhua

Euro area inflation rises less than expected in December

Brussels, Belgium – Annual inflation in the Eurozone rose again in December after seven consecutive months of declines, albeit at a slower rate than anticipated.

According to the latest flash estimates released by Eurostat, the harmonised consumer price index (HICP) in the Euro area recorded a year-on-year increase of 2.9% in December. This figure is higher than November's 2.4%, and marginally lower than the forecasted 3%.

On a month-to-month basis, the inflation rate exhibited an uptick of 0.2%, signaling an increase from November's levels, and advancing from the prior 0.6% monthly drop.

The prices of food, alcohol,



and tobacco increased the most in December, up by 6.1% year-on-year, which is a little less than November's 6.9% annual rate. Services costs held steady at 4.0% year-on-year. Prices for goods other than energy dropped to 2.5% from 2.9%, and

energy prices fell by 6.7%, which is a lower drop than last month's 11.5% fall.

Core inflation, excluding volatile components such as energy and food, was recorded at 3.4% year-on-year, a slight dip from November's 3.6%, but in line with market expectations.

The Eurostat also unveiled the producer price index (PPI) inflation data for November 2023, which revealed a monthly contraction of 0.3%, a decrease from October's 0.3% rise, and below the expected 0.1% drop. Notably, the PPI was 8.8% lower compared with December 2022 levels, slightly below the expected 8.7% contraction.

Agencies

India to set up 'Bharat Park' in UAE

Mumbai, India – India plans to set up 'Bharat Park' in UAE where Indian goods showroom and warehouses will come up. This will be to facilitate other countries of the world to buy Indian goods from 'Bharat Park' as the payment system is secured in UAE, stated Union Minister of Textiles & Commerce Piyush Goyal.

Goyal was speaking as chief guest during Export Awards function of The Synthetic & Rayon Textiles Export Promotion Council (SRTEPC) on 4th January, 2024 held at Mumbai. He further stated the future belonged to Man Made Fibre Textiles (MMF).

According to a press release, Goyal informed while speaking on FTA (free trade agreement) with Japan, Australia, UAE, South



Piyush Goyal

Korea etc. that the utilisation of FTA benefits are very poor in India is a matter of concern. Piyush Goyal announced that BIS will spend Rs400mn to set up 21 testing laboratories at various

places in India.

Bhadresh Dodhia, Chairman - SRTEPC stated that man-made fibre textiles export in 2022-23 touched \$ 5.8bn as against \$6.8bn in 2021-22, registering a

negative growth of 15.3%. Export of technical textiles touched \$2.5bn in 2022-23 as compared to \$2.8bn 2021-22, registering a negative growth of 11.9%.

India's exports of man-made fibre textiles during April to October 2023 have touched \$3.1bn as compared to \$3.4bn during the same period last year, registering a negative growth of 9.4%. Likewise export of technical textiles touched \$1.51bn during April to October 2023 as compared to \$1.5bn during the same period last year, registering a positive growth of 0.5%.

Bhadresh Dodhia further stated, "We are confident that export of man-made fibre textiles will cross \$6bn in 2023-24 and export of technical textile will cross above \$3bn."

China sanctions 5 US defense companies

Beijing, China – China has sanctioned five US defense industry companies in response to a similar move by Washington, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson said Sunday.

The move came after the US' call to sell arms to Taiwan and Washington sanctioned Chinese businesses and individuals for different reasons.

Beijing described the arms sales by Washington to Taiwan as a "blatant violation of the one-China principle," and criticized "the illegal unilateral sanctions the US has imposed on Chinese companies and individuals under false pretexts," claiming that they "seriously harm China's sovereignty and security interests."

US sanctions also "undermine the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and violate the legitimate and lawful rights and interests of" sanctioned-Chinese actors, said the statement.

"In response to these gravely wrong actions taken by the US and in accordance with China's Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law,



Beijing described the arms sales by Washington to Taiwan as a blatant violation of the one-China principle

China has decided to sanction five US defense industry companies, namely BAE Systems Land and Armament, Alliant Techsystems Operation, AeroVironment, ViaSat and Data Link

Solutions," read the statement.

"The countermeasures consist of freezing the properties of those companies in China, including their movable and immovable property, and

prohibiting organizations and individuals in China from transactions and cooperation with them," it added.

China, which considers Taiwan a breakaway province, does not recognize the median line or the air defense zone. Taipei, however, has insisted on its independence since 1949.

Anadolu Agency

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ahli islamic signs MoU with AAOIFI at annual conference

As part of its ongoing efforts to support the Islamic banking industry, Ahli Islamic, recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Accounting and Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI).

The primary goal is to reinforce collaboration in capacity building within ahli Islamic and foster the growth of the Islamic finance sector in the Sultanate of Oman. The signing ceremony occurred concurrently with the AAOIFI-IsDB 18th Annual Is-

lamic Banking and Finance Conference, a press release said.

The signing occurred on the second day of the conference, graced by Sheikh Ebrahim bin Khalifa al Khalifa, chairman of AAOIFI's Board of Trustees, alongside members of ahli Islamic's Shari'a Supervisory Board. Yousuf Al Rawahi, DGM - head of Ahli Islamic, signed the MoU, solidifying the commitment to advancing Islamic banking in Oman.

This unique MoU aims to synergise the expertise of Ahli Is-

lamic and AAOIFI, by way of collaboration that involves a series of technical and professional activities intended to fortify the development of Islamic banking and subsequently, the economy.

Dr Mohammed Taher al Ibrahim, chairman of Shari'a Supervisory Board at Ahli Islamic, said, "The Islamic finance industry greatly values the role of AAOIFI in developing and progressing the standards of global Islamic finance. It acknowledges the contributions made towards the professional development of

Islamic finance. This MoU reflects ahli Islamic's commitment to collaborate with AAOIFI within their respective domains for the mutual benefit of both institutions and their stakeholders."

Yousuf al Rawahi, AGM - head of Ahli Islamic, said, "We are delighted to enter this noteworthy partnership with AAOIFI. The advancement of professional capabilities and the expansion of Islamic banking in Oman are crucial in our current landscape."

Chery Tiggo 8 Series boasts advanced systems

Chery's autonomous driving technology boasts over a decade of profound accumulation. From 2010 to 2013, Chery engaged in R&D of active safety technology, successfully implementing vehicle detection, FCW (forward collision warning), lane detection, and LDW (lane departure warning), among other technologies.

In 2014, Chery began constructing an intelligent driving platform and completed the development of the first generation of intelligent vehicles. By 2016, Chery's second generation of intelligent vehicles had achieved autonomous driving based on map and positioning systems. In 2017, Chery achieved the development of the third generation of autonomous driving vehicles, with functionalities encompassing autonomous driving in high-speed road conditions and fixed areas within urban zones.

Currently, Chery has independently mastered intelligent processing technologies such as lane detection, millimeter-wave radar data processing, vehicle detection, local path planning, vehicle low-level control, and map data processing, achieving technological breakthroughs in the field of intelligent driving.

At the 'Chery Tech Day 2023', Chery unveiled two new development routes in the field of intelligent driving. The first is the Chery Pilot, directly aimed at mass-produced vehicles.

Chery has already implemented the Chery Pilot 2.0 system, capable of achieving L2 level ADAS capabilities. On the other hand, the Chery Pilot 3.0



system can achieve L2 + level high-speed NOA (Navigation on AutoPilot) and is expected to enter mass production in the second quarter of 2024.

The Chery Pilot 4.0 system will realise L2++ level urban NOA capabilities and is expected to enter mass production in the first quarter of 2025. The second route is the L4 level solution developed around Robotaxi, named 'Drive'. The Drive 1.0 version was launched in the third quarter of this year, with multi-scenario operations expected to be realised by the fourth quarter of 2024.

With continuous innovation in technological prowess, Chery empowers users with highly intelligent driving experiences. Currently, Chery products have garnered affection in over 80 countries and regions worldwide, with a global user base exceeding 12.7 million.

The Tiggo 8 series, as one of Chery's globally best-selling models, has accumulated over 800,000 users. Leveraging the Chery Intelligent Driving Platform, the Tiggo 8 series come standard with L2level ADAS. This not only alleviates the oper-

ational burden on drivers but also effectively mitigates road safety risks, providing users with all-weather and all-scenario intelligent assistance.

The Tiggo 8 series are equipped with an ACC (adaptive cruise control), enabling the vehicle to automatically follow the preceding vehicle to start and stop, maintaining a safe driving distance with the preceding vehicle. This system also includes TJA (traffic jam assist) for low-speed scenarios and ICA (integrated cruise assist) for high-speed scenarios.

In the realm of intelligent monitoring, the Tiggo 8 series features a RCTA (reverse cross traffic assist) and a BSD (blind spot detection). During reversing maneuvers, RCTA aids the driver in monitoring the rear area for potential obstacles, while BSD employs radar sensors to monitor the blind spots behind the vehicle. Even in challenging conditions such as rainy or foggy weather, as well as low-light situations at night, these two functionalities provide timely warnings for enhanced safety protection.

HUAWEI launches GoPaint creativity

Huawei officially kicked off the Huawei GoPaint Worldwide Creating Activity. From January 5 to February 29, participants can showcase their digital art skills in an online activity that embodies Huawei's commitment to sparking creativity.

Huawei GoPaint Worldwide Creating Activity is a platform for creatives or anyone who loves to create to express themselves, inspire all nature of creativity, and empower more people in artistic creation, a press release said.

With Huawei tablets, designed to deliver delightful creating features, the activity aims to stimulate global consumers to express the 'Creation of Beauty' concept. The Huawei GoPaint Worldwide Creating Activity extends an invitation to those passionate about artistic creation, continually inspiring and energising the creative spirit within.

Huawei not only provides a creative platform for artists and enthusiasts to express themselves but also elevates the creative experience with the latest Huawei MatePad Pro 13.2". This device features a flexible OLED screen, an ultrathin design at just 5.5mm, and a lightweight frame weighing only 580g.

Paired with the Huawei M-Pencil (3rd generation), which offers 10,000+ pressure sensing levels, it enables mastery over a variety of artistic styles.

Bank Muscat hosts special event for Muscat customers

Bank Muscat hosted a special event for customers employed in the public and private sectors in Muscat Governorate with the aim to consider their feedback and suggestions on the various banking products and services.

The event was attended by Abdulnasir N al Raisi, general manager - Personal Banking, in addition to other senior officials, a press release said.

Saleh Mohammed al Maaini, deputy general manager - Capital Regions, Bank Muscat, said, "Throughout the bank's long history, we have been keenly and continuously keeping pace with the latest developments in the banking and financial sector. We are proud of the many achievements so far and we look forward to achieving many more successes in the future.

"These events are important as they allow us to know more about customers' feedback regarding the services and facilities offered, which are encouraging factors for development. I would



like to take this opportunity to thank our valued customers on their continuous trust with the services and products provided by the bank."

Radhiya Hassan al Lawati, head of Sales, Bank Muscat, said,

"For the past years, Bank Muscat has been focusing on continuously enhancing banking services and facilities for the benefit of its customers across the Sultanate of Oman. We are continuously working to provide the

most innovative banking solutions. The world is witnessing rapid changes brought about by the technological developments and digital transformations which have influenced the present in many aspects including

the lifestyle.

"Bank Muscat is working hard to keep base with the rapid technologies and continuously update customers and keep them well-informed. We are pleased to once again enhance our part-

nership with our valued customers and offer them the best benefits and financing services. we will continue organizing similar events to work together towards achieving our common goals."

Sharakah joins Al Rahma Association to champion sustainability

Sharakah, Oman's leading SME development company, has initiated a partnership with Al Rahma Association, a charitable organisation, by contributing its surplus marketing materials.

This eco-conscious gesture includes the donation of a variety of items such as A4 bags, A4, A3, and DL envelopes, notepads, and sunshades. This collaboration is a reflection of Sharakah's commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility, a press release said.

As part of its strategic evolution, Sharakah has recently undergone a significant brand refresh to better align with its modern vision. The brand uplift which is more than a visual



makeover represents Sharakah's dedication to sustainable practices and its support of Oman's long-term environmental objectives. The new brand uplift also signals Sharakah's expansion into emergent sectors like green energy, ICV, and ICT, emphasizing digital innovation across its product offerings.

Al Rahma Association has welcomed this initiative, eager to repurpose Sharakah's previous branding materials in support of a more sustainable future. A spokesperson for Al Rahma Association said, "Our partnership with Sharakah reflects our shared vision for a sustainable future, turning aspirations into actions."

Ali Ahmed Muqaibal, CEO of Sharakah, said, "This partnership with Al Rahma Association marks a milestone in our journey towards environmental stewardship, allowing us to give back to the community in a sustainable manner. By uniting with Al Rahma, we are recycling materials, and we are cultivating a culture of sustainability that resonates with our values and our new brand ethos."

In its brand uplift exercise, Sharakah has consciously adopted a new colour scheme to embody its ethos of growth and sustainability. The choice of Banana Palm Green as the primary colour underscores the company's emphasis on progress.

WAR ON GAZA

2 more journalists killed in bombing

Ankara, Türkiye - Two more Palestinian journalists were killed in Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, bringing the death toll of journalists since October 7 to 109, the Palestinian media office said.

In a statement, the office identified the two victims as Hamza Wael al Dahdouh, the son of Al Jazeera Gaza bureau chief Wael al Dahdouh, and Mustafa Thuraya.

They lost their lives in an Israeli bombing on their car in the city of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip.

The media office denounced 'in the strongest terms this heinous crime' committed by the 'Israeli occupation army against journalists'.

Israel aims to 'intimidate journalists in a failed attempt to obscure the truth and prevent media coverage', the office added. The media office called 'on all press unions, human rights and legal bodies to condemn this crime and denounce its repeated commission by the occupation'.

It also called for pressuring 'the occupation to stop the genocidal war against our de-



The latest attack takes the death toll of journalists to 109 since October 7

Palestinian media office called on all press unions, human rights and legal bodies to condemn this crime and denounce its repeated commission by the occupation

fenseless people in the Gaza Strip'.

Since Hamas' cross-border attack on October 7, Israel has continued relentless attacks on the Gaza Strip, killing at least 22,722 Palestinians and injuring 58,166, according to local health authorities.

Israeli authorities claimed that the Hamas attacks have killed around 1,200 Israelis.

The Israeli onslaught has left Gaza in ruins, with 60% of the enclave's infrastructure damaged or destroyed and nearly 2mn residents displaced.

Anadolu News Agency



Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi (right) during his meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in Amman

Jordanian foreign minister renews calls for halt to war

Amman, Jordan - Jordan's top diplomat on Sunday reiterated his demand for an immediate halt to the ongoing Israeli war on the Gaza Strip.

Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi's call came during his meeting in the capital Amman with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, on the third stop of a tour he began in Türkiye, according to the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates.

During their extensive talks on the situation in Gaza and the worsening humanitarian catastrophe there, Safadi stressed "the need to immediately stop the aggression, protect civilians, and ensure adequate and sustainable access of humanitarian and medical aid to all areas of Gaza." They also discussed "the need to stop the illegal Israeli measures in West Bank and Jerusalem," as well as other bilateral and regional issues.

On Saturday, ahead of Blinken's visit, the ministry said Safadi would 'reaffirm the firm Jordanian position in rejecting the displacement of Palestinians inside or outside their land ... and rejecting any future approach to dealing with Gaza from a security standpoint and outside the context of a complete and comprehensive plan based on the unity of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem'. Anadolu News Agency

Situation remains dire: Blinken

Istanbul, Türkiye - Too many people in Gaza face major hurdles just to fulfill their basic daily needs, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, decrying the 'dire' situation in the besieged and blockaded Gaza Strip.

"The situation for men, women and children in Gaza remains dire. Far too many Palestinians have been killed, especially children," Blinken said in remarks posted on X on Sunday amid his current Mideast tour.

"Far too many remain incredibly challenged in terms of their access to food, to water, to medicine, to the essentials of life."

On his tour, Blinken said in a statement that he came to discuss the situation in Gaza with regional partners - including Türkiye - adding "These are not necessarily easy conversations. There are different perspectives, different needs, different requirements."

"But it is vital that we engage in this diplomacy now, both for the sake of the future for Gaza



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

Blinken is now on a regional tour covering Türkiye, Greece, Jordan, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates for talks on Gaza's humanitarian crisis, peace talks, and hostage issue

itself, and more broadly, the sake of the future for Israelis and Palestinians and for the region as a whole," he added.

Saying this is his fourth visit to the region since October 7, when the current Gaza conflict began, he stressed that they

have been focused on preventing the spread of the conflict since day one.

Highlighting that they will discuss with their partners during his visit what can be done to prevent the conflict from spreading, Blinken said they will address the

protection of civilians, delivering more humanitarian aid, and releasing the detainees remaining from Hamas' October 7 surprise attack.

To have Palestinian-led governance

Emphasising their focus on steps towards a sustainable, peaceful, and secure future for everyone in the region, Blinken stressed, "That starts with the work that's going to be necessary in Gaza itself to rebuild, to have security, to have Palestinian-led governance."

Blinken last week embarked on a regional tour starting with Türkiye and then moving on to Greece, Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

His focus on the bleak humanitarian situation in Gaza seemed to highlight what some analysts see as a growing rift between traditional allies the US and Israel, with Washington urging Tel Aviv to pull back its operation in Gaza to reduce the weighty human cost of some 23,000 lives taken so far.

Anadolu News Agency

Israeli apartheid far more brutal than anything we saw: Ex-politician

Andrew Feinstein explains why South Africa is bringing Israel to International Court of Justice

London, UK - A former colleague of South African human rights icons Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu expressed strong support for his country's decision to take Israel to the International Court of Justice, condemning the months-long siege and blockade of Gaza as nothing short of a genocide against Palestinians.

Andrew Feinstein, a onetime key figure in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) who now lives in Britain, emphasised

his unique perspective as a Jewish son of a Holocaust survivor.

"My mother survived the war in occupied Vienna itself. She lost dozens of members of her family, mainly in the death camp of Auschwitz, where I've lectured on genocide prevention," he explained.

"I am here today to talk about why it is that South Africa have taken Israel to the International Court of Justice, because I think it's particularly symbolic because South Africa knows what apartheid it is."

Feinstein pointed to a legal document from South Africa presenting evidence of Israeli actions in Gaza as genocidal in both conduct and intent.

"So, I think it's incredibly important that South Africa has brought this case to the International Court of Justice describing what is happening in Gaza as a genocide of the Palestinian



Andrew Feinstein, a onetime key figure in the African National Congress

people," he said.

"And it's absolutely clear from the South African document, which is an extraordinary legal document, that this is a genocide, both in terms of the conduct of the Israeli operation in Gaza, and because of the intent that has been voiced by Israeli politicians to remove all

Palestinians from Gaza and for Israel to effectively take over Gaza completely," said Feinstein.

Far more brutal

While acknowledging differences between the situations in South Africa and Israel, Feinstein underscored the shared el-

ements of racial discrimination, the creation of separate territories, and the use of brutal force against oppressed populations.

Feinstein began by highlighting the discrimination faced by the Palestinian population in Israel, drawing a parallel with the decades of mistreatment of black Africans in South Africa.

He argued that even Palestinian citizens of Israel are relegated to lesser rights than even their Jewish counterparts - a stark violation of principles of equality under the law based on race, ethnicity, or religion.

On the apartheid-era strategy of creating 'little homelands', or Bantustans, in South Africa, he compared it to Israel's insertion of settlements and separation of territories in Gaza, the West Bank, Hebron, and Ramallah.

Feinstein said the deliberate division hinders the possibility

of a two-state solution, echoing oppressive tactics seen in the apartheid system.

"And then most importantly, both Israel and South Africa have used brutal military force to oppress those populations that they see as somehow inferior to themselves, which is a system of racism. So, by all of those similarities, Israel is an apartheid system, according to the Rome statute of international law," he said.

"My former boss, Nelson Mandela, and my friend and political mentor Archbishop Desmond Tutu, they knew better than anyone I've ever met what an apartheid state is. And they were very critical of apartheid because apartheid Israel was a very close ally of apartheid South Africa - they helped each other become nuclear powers, to develop nuclear weapons," said Feinstein.

Israel has never acknowledged its status as a nuclear power, while South Africa officially abandoned its nuclear arms development program in 1989.

While recognising the significant similarities in the two situations, Feinstein did underscore one crucial difference.

Unlike South Africa, which heavily relied on the black African community for its economy and workforce, Israel is less dependent on Palestinians for its economic stability, he said.

"And that is one of the reasons why Israel has killed tens of thousands of innocent Palestinian civilians. They don't want them, they don't need them. And that has made Israeli apartheid far more brutal than anything we saw or experienced in South Africa," he said.

Anadolu News Agency

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina wins 4th term

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Bangladesh held its 12th general elections on Sunday with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina winning a fourth consecutive term.

Voting in the south Asian country - boycotted by the main opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) - ended at 4pm and the counting of votes started soon after.

Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina has been re-elected, with her party winning more than 50% in an election marred with violence and boycott from the main opposition BNP, media reported, adding that the full results are expected to be out by Monday.

The voters outside polling booths said that most people are not with the BNP, but with the progress that the country has witnessed in the last 15 years.

Notably, around 170mn people in Bangladesh are voting to elect 299 lawmakers during the 12th national election amid a boycott by the main opposition BNP.

"We are very happy, it is a festive mood, people are coming out to vote. It's nice. People are very very excited to cast their vote. They are voting because they believe this government has done a lot of development which will continue if the party comes back to power. We think they will win and continue with the development," voter Rober Simon Gomez told ANI.

The voters said that people



Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina casts her vote for the general elections 2024, in Dhaka on Sunday (ANI)

across the country are coming out to vote because they want this government to continue and also refuted any impact of the protests carried out by BNP.

"No, there will be no impact of

BNP protests because people are not with the BNP, they are with the Bangladesh government, Awami League and other parties taking part in the election...the country has developed in the last

15 years. Asaduzzaman Khan is a very good person. He is a very successful Home Minister. Many votes will be cast in his name," another voter, Nirmal Rogerio said.

Gilbert Gomez said, "As a responsible citizen, I have cast my vote in a free and fair way. The environment is very enjoyable. We are from a Christian community and living very peacefully.

We have established people's democratic rights...I want to make sure that democracy should continue in this country and without democracy, you can't make any development

SHEIKH HASINA

We want to live together and want the country to develop efficiently."

Ahead of the polls, the locals in Bangladesh said that they are looking forward to the polls as they want to exercise their democratic rights. They also refuted any impact of the protests called by BNP on the people and said that they are not following the 'democratic process'.

"In our country, there are 46 registered parties from the election commission. BNP is just one party. Only one party cannot define our country's political system. I will go to the vote centre to cast my vote because I want to elect my representative," a local resident said.

Earlier in the day, Sheikh Hasina emphasised the importance of democracy for the development of the country as the Asian nation goes to the polls for the 2024 general elections

today.

"Our country is sovereign and independent...We have a big population. We have established people's democratic rights...I want to make sure that democracy should continue in this country and without democracy, you can't make any development. As we are a long-term democratic system from 2009 to 2023, that is why Bangladesh made this much of an achievement," she said.

She also extended her wishes to India and said that Bangladesh is lucky to have a trusted friend like India. She also highlighted India's support during the Liberation War in 1971.

In her message to India, Sheikh Hasina said, "We are very lucky...India is our trusted friend. During our Liberation War, they supported us...After 1975, when we lost our whole family...they gave us shelter. So our best wishes to the people of India."

International election expert teams from the European Union are present in Dhaka, and foreign observers from various countries, including a Commonwealth team, are monitoring the polls.

Voting was 'very quiet and peaceful', the CEO of Central Election Commission of Palestine Hisam M Y Kuhail made the remarks during a media briefing in Dhaka, Al Jazeera reported.

"Voting process in all the centres that we visited were very quiet and peaceful," Kuhail said.

Agencies

Maldives ministers suspended over Modi jibe

Malé, Maldives - The Maldivian government on Sunday reportedly suspended ministers for their social media posts against India and its Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the stand of the Government of India in relation to some posts on social media that are insulting to neighbouring India," the Maldives government said in a statement.

The controversy erupted after three ministers attacked Modi after his photos visiting the pristine white sand beaches of Lakshadweep went viral.

Their comments sparked a massive firestorm with several Indians even claiming to have cancelled their scheduled trip to the island nation known for its pristine beaches.

"Those who made such posts on social media while in government positions have now been suspended from their jobs," the statement said without revealing the names of those who have been suspended.

Sharing photos of his visit to the virgin beaches of Lakshadweep, Modi sought to draw global attention to the untapped tourism potential of the



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi relaxes on one of the pristine beaches in Lakshadweep on Thursday (ANI)

archipelago.

India's Lakshadweep can be a potential challenge to the Maldives as an alternative tourist destination.

Local media outlet Adhathu in Malé reported that deputy youth ministers Mariyam Shiuna, Malsha Shareef, and Mahzoom Majid were suspended over social media posts, making mocking references to the Indian Prime Minister.

Former Maldivian vice president Ahmed Adeeb said the

derogatory remarks against Modi are 'not acceptable on any level' and such unsavoury posts should not have been shared on social media.

"It is a very sad incident which should not have happened. When you are in an elected position, you should not engage as an activist. One has to be more responsible and also these degraded remarks towards the global leader Prime Minister Modi are not acceptable. We build our tourism on the basis of

tolerance, harmony, friendship and hospitality. This is not acceptable on any level..." the former Maldives vice president said on the disparaging posts.

Earlier during the day, the Maldivian government sought to distance itself from Shiuna's derogatory remarks against the Indian Prime Minister, saying her opinion does not reflect the government's views.

"These opinions are personal and do not represent the views of the Government of Maldives,"

read an official release by the Maldivian Foreign Ministry on Sunday.

The government added that it believes that the freedom of expression should be exercised in a 'democratic and responsible manner, and in ways that do not spread hatred, negativity, and hinder close relationships between the Maldives and its international partners'.

"Moreover, the relevant authorities of the government will not hesitate to take action against those who make such derogatory remarks," the government release had earlier stated.

Her post even featured images of the Indian Prime Minister from his visit to Lakshadweep.

Posting images from his visit to the Union Territory on January 2, Modi also shared an 'exhilarating experience' of him trying his hand at snorkelling.

In a series of posts on X, Prime Minister Modi shared pictures of the white beaches and the pristine blue skies and the ocean, and tagged them with a message that read, "For those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list."

Agencies



Visitors to Japanese Sakura Garden drawn by unique experience

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Sakura Garden, in the Little Asia entertainment zone organised as part of Jeddah Event Calendar 2023, is impressive, dazzling visitors with the peaceful and poetic garden that abounds in cherries in blossom.

The Japanese Sakura Garden also hosts shops with popular Japanese toys and goods, and a section dedicated to famous Arab restaurants that serve Japanese food in a fusion of tastes. The garden witnesses a large turnout as people come to enjoy the view and the many recreational and commercial activities.

The cherry blossom, also known as a Japanese cherry or Sakura, holds a prominent position in Japanese culture. It symbolizes beauty and the ephemeral nature of life.

When cherry trees blossom, the Japanese gather for an outdoor party beneath the sakura to enjoy the beautiful scenery.

The Little Asia zone, with its services, leisure and entertainment venues, has 12 areas that represent eight Asian countries: Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and The Philippines.

SPA

Year of the Camel: Honouring the heritage, resilience of Arabic culture

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - The timeless bond between Arabs and camels weaves a tale of companionship and reliance in the vast desert landscape.

Bedouins, the desert dwellers, found consolation and great help in these majestic creatures as they traversed the arid terrain in search of sustenance. With their humps and resilient backs, camels bore the weight of countless journeys, their significance immortalised in the grand gestures of gifting them to noble leaders.

Chairman of the Saudi Society for Camel Studies Dr Mohammed al Otaibi sheds light on the profound connection be-

tween Arabs and camels, tracing its roots back to ancient times.

The earliest mention of Arabs in history, he said, was linked to camels.

Among the notable camels of history, Otaibi highlighted the renowned she-camel Al-Qaswa, ridden by the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him. This camel, considered the second most famous in history after the she-camel of the Prophet Saleh, etched its mark in the collective memory of Arabs and Muslims.

The sacred texts also mention the significance of camels. The Quran makes multiple references to these magnificent crea-



tures, emphasising their role as a sign of Allah's munificence. Various Hadiths shed further light on the revered status of camels in

Arab society.

The Arabs' deep-seated attachment to camels is palpable. In ancient times, Arabs used the

words wealth and camels interchangeably in their vernacular. Dr Hind al Mutairi, a faculty member at King Saud University, explains that camels, often referred to as the 'ships of the desert', symbolise the continuity of movement, work and survival in the barren and harsh environment.

These resilient creatures serve as a lifeline, protecting their owners from the perils of the unforgiving desert. The Arabs, therefore, developed an intimate bond with camels, carefully observing their well-being, strength, and unique characteristics.

According to Mutairi, the Arabs bestowed a myriad names on camels, capturing their di-

verse characteristics. Hundreds of names were assigned to describe adult camels, herds, females, males, offspring, and camels distinguished by weight, blindness, milk production, or swiftness. Even camels carrying warriors or plagued by thirst were granted distinct names.

This rich lexicon of camel-related terms enriched the Arabic language and found expression in ancient poetry. In fact, Arabic boasts a staggering 10,046 words related to camels, as documented in the book *Camels in the Ancient Near East and the Arabian Peninsula*.

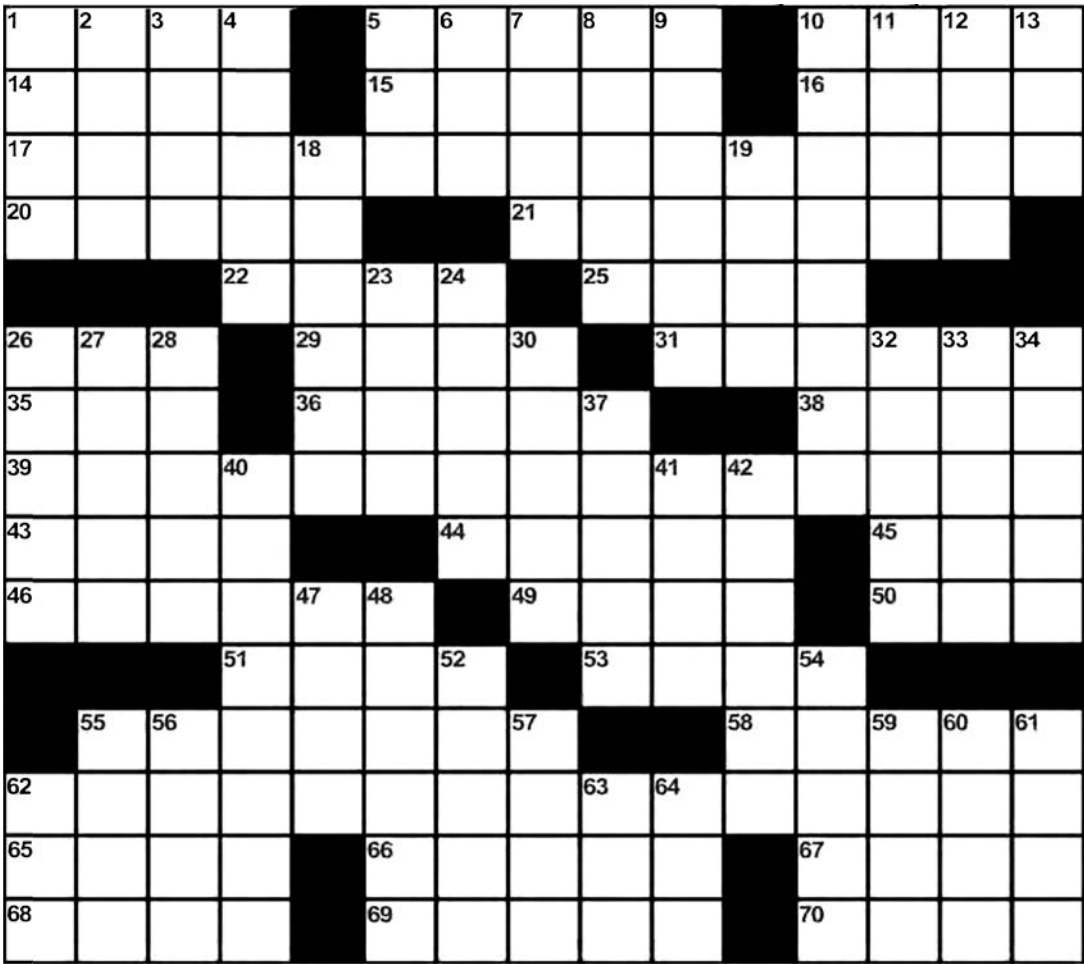
Arabic poetry has long celebrated the she-camel, held in

high regard by the Bedouin tribes. Mutairi remarks on the intimate bond between Arabs and she-camels, a bond so profound that conversations flow as if they were cherished confidants.

Highlighting their multifaceted contributions, Otaibi emphasises the numerous benefits of camels. These remarkable creatures provide sustenance through their meat and milk, their wool is utilised to make tents, and they have the ability to carry weary travellers across vast distances. Camels hold a place of honour as gifts presented to kings and distinguished leaders, symbolising reverence and respect.

SPA

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Problems for directors
 - 5) At a quick rate, poetically
 - 10) Some precipitation
 - 14) Eye layer
 - 15) '70s White House name
 - 16) Shoppers' bag
 - 17) Easily achieved goals
 - 20) Dark
 - 21) Aspen features
 - 22) Whacks
 - 25) Insult but good
 - 26) After-hours school gp.
 - 29) Common welcomers
 - 31) Last name for an unbalanced egghead?
 - 35)_ Gabriel
 - 36) Very angry
 - 38) Buffalo's canal
 - 39) It may be needed to be an NFL player
 - 43) Cause of some shivers
 - 44) Begin an Internet session
 - 45) 3-D hospital procedure
 - 46) Pungent condiment
 - 49) Duck's domain
 - 50) Stereotypically stubborn

- animal
 - 51) Minnow variety
 - 53) Bygone despot
 - 55) Some kind of nut
 - 58) Pigeon's perch
 - 62) Weaponry that's neither large nor small
 - 65) Black cat, to some
 - 66) Chose not to dine out
 - 67)_vera
 - 68) British title
 - 69) Year-end tunes
 - 70) Some evergreens
- DOWN**
- 1) Streaming service
 - 2) Shakespeare's river
 - 3) Cry like a baby
 - 4) Colonial title in India
 - 5) _Arbor
 - 6) "Animal Farm" critter
 - 7) Line on a graph
 - 8) Hits on the head
 - 9) Decorate with gold leaf
 - 10) Played a banjo, in a way
 - 11) It may be proper in a sentence
 - 12) Mayberry's self-jailer
 - 13) Moist
 - 18) Type of energy
 - 19) German wife
 - 23) "Legal" prefix
 - 24) Drag one's feet
 - 26) "Don't give me that!" old-style
 - 27) Evergreen-forested landscape
 - 28) Black_ (cattle breed)
 - 30) Posture problem
 - 32) Donna's intro?
 - 33) Stadium features
 - 34) Abominable creatures
 - 37) Cereal grain killer
 - 40) It's designed to get your attention
 - 41) Charged particles
 - 42) Ultimate object
 - 4 7) Hindu Mr.
 - 48) "The_ Cometh"
 - 52) A Muse
 - 54) Pass on in a race, as a baton
 - 55) Disaster relief grp.
 - 56) Footnote word
 - 57) Leaves home?
 - 59) Take-out order?
 - 60) Shoot up

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

When you're put into an environment that involves delicate egos today, trust your own judgment. Be sure of what you do. You can handle this tricky situation without any missteps, believe it or not. When you have conviction in your ideas, that faith gives you a strength that no one else can match. If you think something is a bad idea, say so. Just make sure you're diplomatic about it, especially if it's your supervisor's idea. You are free to criticize now, so take advantage of this.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

When you greet the world with a smile, you inspire confidence and trust in what you're doing. If you want to win people over, you need to stop playing hard to get and start being more open to questions. Make it clear that you have nothing to hide and that you are more than happy to be working with other people. Just because you got off on the wrong foot doesn't mean that things can't get better. You simply have to show that you have good intentions.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Today, you should start removing your emotions from conversations you have with the people who have some power over your life. They need to see you as someone who follows their intellect more than someone who goes with their gut. So while your devotion to your job or your current project is passionate, that shouldn't be the first thing you talk about. Stick to numbers and facts. Later on, once you two have developed a stronger relationship, you can get more personal.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

If you want to lend a friend some money, that's your choice, but make sure that you don't get caught up in giving them any kind of long-term support. You could end up supporting their negative behavior without meaning to. But if you do give them some money, you must let them decide how they'll use it. If you give it, you give it, and there should be no strings attached. Telling someone how to use it will only come off as arrogant.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Don't be too rigid about things today, especially social arrangements. You might have a specific idea about what you want to do for fun, but not everyone is going to agree with you, and they won't be flexible about it. You're going to have to be flexible. It's a familiar pattern with you and this person, and one that might be starting to get on your nerves. Do it again this one last time. Then make a mental note that if this happens again, you two need to have a long talk.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

No matter whether it's a friendship or romance, you deserve a relationship that is based on mutual respect. Is that what you have? Take a long, hard, honest look at your relationships today. If you don't feel like you are getting what you need, it's okay for you to be more demanding. After all, others are demanding from time to time, and you usually respond very favorably. Doesn't it stand to reason that they will be responsive to your needs as well?

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You have every right to use all of your skills, not just your intelligence, when working toward a goal. Today is the day to pull out your secret weapon: your charm! Flash that smile and tell people just how wonderful you think they are. Folks enjoy being recognized for their unique contributions. You know how to boost someone's ego appropriately without flirtation or manipulation.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Follow the most logical path of reasoning today, and don't let anyone make you believe something that seems too good to be true, no matter how much you might want to believe them. Your heart's desire can be tough to counter when you want things to be a certain way (and they can't be). But your brain has to be the one in charge right now. Facing reality now is a lot better than being disappointed later. Stop wasting your time trying to come up with answers that just don't make sense.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Making a new discovery about someone you recently met will brighten your day. You're surprised by them in a way you didn't see coming, and suddenly you want them to play a different role in your life than you had planned. Whenever the road you're traveling on takes a sudden detour like this it can be disconcerting, but for you today it will be exhilarating. This is a new perspective that you have been waiting for. You will have a new chance at reaching an old goal.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Impulse buying might feed your desires for a minute or two, but the drain it creates on your wallet will be a pain you'll feel for a long, long time. You cannot opt for temporary joy when you could be looking at an even bigger debt. Start thinking more long term and pay attention to saving more money now. There could be some unexpected bills and a few interesting investment opportunities coming up, and you need to have the money it takes to handle them.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Goals that are too easy to attain aren't very fulfilling. So today, you need to aim a little bit higher and choose a challenge that is tough. Few things are as rewarding to your ego and as educational as a hard-won victory, so take the more difficult route, and don't be too rigid about what you are willing to do. Open up your mind and tell the Universe that you are up for anything! Look for something that puts you outside of your comfort zone and intimidates you just a bit.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If you've been living on a steady diet of coffee and stress for the past few days, you have to get things back on track today. If you can't stomach the idea of going cold turkey and hitting the decaf right away, at least cut back and get some more rest. You need to take control over your schedule again and make some more free time for yourself. There is no reason a deadline can't be changed. All you have to do is ask and you can get a little bit more breathing room.

02. Oil from oil wells was first used for what?

- A. Evaporate brine to produce salt
- B. Fuelling railway engines
- C. Lubricating weaving machines
- D. Lighting

03.Which of these is the name for a textbook of magic spells?

- A. Omnibus
- B. Almanac
- C. Lexicon
- D. Grimoire

Answers: 1.B 2.A 3.D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

N	G	O	I
I	R	I	U
O	S	O	T
D	N	W	S

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

KOHLI, ROHIT RETURN

Sanju Samson also back in India’s T20I squad for Afghanistan series

Mumbai, India - Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli have returned to India’s T20I squad after an absence of more than a year from the format for the three-match series against Afghanistan, India’s last T20I series before the T20 World Cup in June.

Rohit has been named captain of the squad while those who led the side in his absence, Hardik Pandya and Suryakumar Yadav, are injured and unavailable for selection.

Rohit and Kohli have not played T20Is since India’s semi-final defeat to England in the T20 World Cup in November 2022, choosing to prioritise Test cricket and ODIs in the lead-up to the World Test Championship final and the ODI World Cup in 2023.

Their selection now, which comes after India’s chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar flew to South Africa during the New Year’s Test in Cape Town, means that both players are back in India’s plans for the upcoming T20 World Cup in the West Indies and the USA.

India have mostly been led by Hardik in T20Is since the 2022 T20 World Cup, and Suryakumar stood in as captain after Hardik injured his ankle during the 2023 ODI World Cup. Suryakumar led India in the five-match T20I series at home against Australia and the three T20Is in South Africa in December but has also been ruled out for a couple of months because of an ankle injury he picked up in



Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli

South Africa.

Both Hardik and Suryakumar are expected to return for the IPL in March.

Ruturaj Gaikwad hasn’t been picked as he continues nurse a finger injury that he picked up in South Africa last month.

There is no place for KL Rahul in the 15-member squad, while Ishan Kishan has opted out, citing the need for a break to help him refocus on his game. Kishan also missed the two-Test series in South Africa for the same reason.

Wicketkeeper Jitesh Sharma, who was part of the T20I series against both the Australia and South Africa recently, retained his spot and Sanju Samson, who hasn’t been in India’s T20I plans since touring Ireland with a second-string squad in August last year, comes in as his back-up. Samson struck his maiden international century during the ODI

leg of the South Africa tour last month.

Mumbai allrounder Shivam Dube also gets another crack in T20Is following an impressive IPL 2023 where he was Chennai Super Kings’ spin-hitter in the middle overs.

Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj have been rested keeping in mind their workloads ahead of the upcoming five-Test series at home against England. Also missing are Shreyas Iyer and Ravindra Jadeja, who was vice-captain during the South Africa T20Is that India drew 1-1.

India’s T20I squad
Rohit Sharma (capt), Shubman Gill, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Tilak Varma, Rinku Singh, Jitesh Sharma (wk), Sanju Samson (wk), Shivam Dube, Washington Sundar, Axar Patel, Ravi Bishnoi, Kuldeep Yadav, Arshdeep Singh, Avesh Khan, Mukesh Kumar

Injured Nadal withdraws from Australian Open

Barcelona, Spain - Rafael Nadal, who made his comeback this week in Brisbane, has withdrawn from the Australian Open. The Spaniard announced the news on social media.

“Hi all, during my last match in Brisbane I had a small problem on a muscle that as you know made me worried. Once I got to Melbourne I have had the chance to make an MRI and I have micro tear on a muscle, not in the same part where I had the injury and that’s good news,” Nadal wrote. “Right now I am not ready to compete at the maximum level of exigence in 5 sets matches. Therefore I am flying back to Spain to see my doctor, get some treatment and rest.

“I have worked very hard during the year for this comeback and as I always mentioned my goal is to be at my best level in 3 months.

“Within the sad news for me



Rafael Nadal

for not being able to play in front of the amazing Melbourne crowds, this is not very bad news and we all remain positive with the evolution for the season.

“I really wanted to play here in Australia and I have had the chance to play a few matches that made me very happy and

positive. Thanks all for the support and see you soon! Rafa”

Nadal’s latest injury casts fresh doubts about the former world number one’s ability to compete at the elite level again after he previously said that he expects to finish his glittering but injury-plagued career in 2024.

Germany stun Poland to win United Cup

Sydney, Australia - Germany completed a memorable comeback in the early hours of Monday morning to stun Poland 2-1 in Sydney for the United Cup trophy.

After Alexander Zverev saved two championship points against Hubert Hurkacz, Zverev returned to Ken Rosewall Arena alongside Laura Siegemund to defeat Hurkacz and WTA No. 1 Iga Swiatek 6-4, 5-7, 10-4 for all the glory at 12:45 a.m.

Germany battled from behind throughout the competition. The country finished second in Group D and scraped into the quarter-finals based on percentage of games won. Siegemund and Zverev won deciding mixed doubles matches on Friday, Saturday and Sunday to ultimately lift the trophy.

“It’s been absolutely amazing. It’s been a pleasure and it’s been absolutely so much fun for everybody to be part of this



Germany players celebrate with the trophy

team, especially for me,” Zverev told his teammates during the trophy ceremony. “I really thank you guys for being part of this. I really couldn’t be happier be sharing this trophy with anybody than you guys.”

Rybakina, Dimitrov champion
Elena Rybakina handed Aryna Sabalenka a harsh reality check on Sunday ahead of her Australian Open title defence with a crushing 6-0 6-3 victory in the final of the Brisbane International.

The men’s final that followed was a much tighter contest with former world number three Grigor Dimitrov claiming his first ATP title in more than six years with a 7-6(5) 6-4 victory over Holger Rune.

Meanwhile, Coco Gauff battled past Elina Svitolina 6-7(4) 6-3 6-3 in the Auckland Classic final to retain her title.

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OMAN BEAT UAE IN FRIENDLY

Abdullah Fawaz scores the winner in Abu Dhabi

Doha - Abdullah Fawaz was the hero for Oman with an early goal as they carved out a 1-0 win over 1996 AFC Asian Cup runners-up United Arab Emirates in an international friendly played in Abu Dhabi on Saturday.

The UAE backline had shown initial jitters and in the fifth minute, Salaah Said al Yahyaei carved open their defence with a delightful cutback from the by-line for Fawaz to nonchalantly meet it with a left-footer that ar-rowed into the roof of the net.

Oman, in Group E, start their campaign on January 16 with a match against Saudi Arabia before taking on Thailand and Kyrgyzstan.

Meanwhile, Graham Arnold's Australia earned a hard-fought 2-0 win over Bahrain with a goal in each half through Amine Bennaddi (35th) and Mitchell Duke (61st).

Korea Republic got a morale booster ahead of their assault on the Asian Cup title after they se-



Oman's Abdullah Fawaz celebrates after scoring against UAE in their friendly match in Abu Dhabi

cured a 1-0 win over Iraq. The solitary goal came five minutes before half-time, Seol Young-woo supplied Lee Jaesung for Jurgen Klinsmann's side to secure the win.

Lee Kang-in was sent off after picking up his second yellow card late in the game but it did not change the outcome of the result. Earlier on Friday, Islamic Republic of Iran produced a solid performance to defeat Burkina Faso 2-1 on Friday, their final

friendly on home soil ahead of the Asian Cup.

Mohamed Konate gave Burkina Faso the lead after 12 minutes but Porto forward Mehdi Taremi equalised for Team Melli before the half-time break.

Omid Ehbrazimi got the winner for Iran in the 70th minute as the three-time AFC Asian Cup

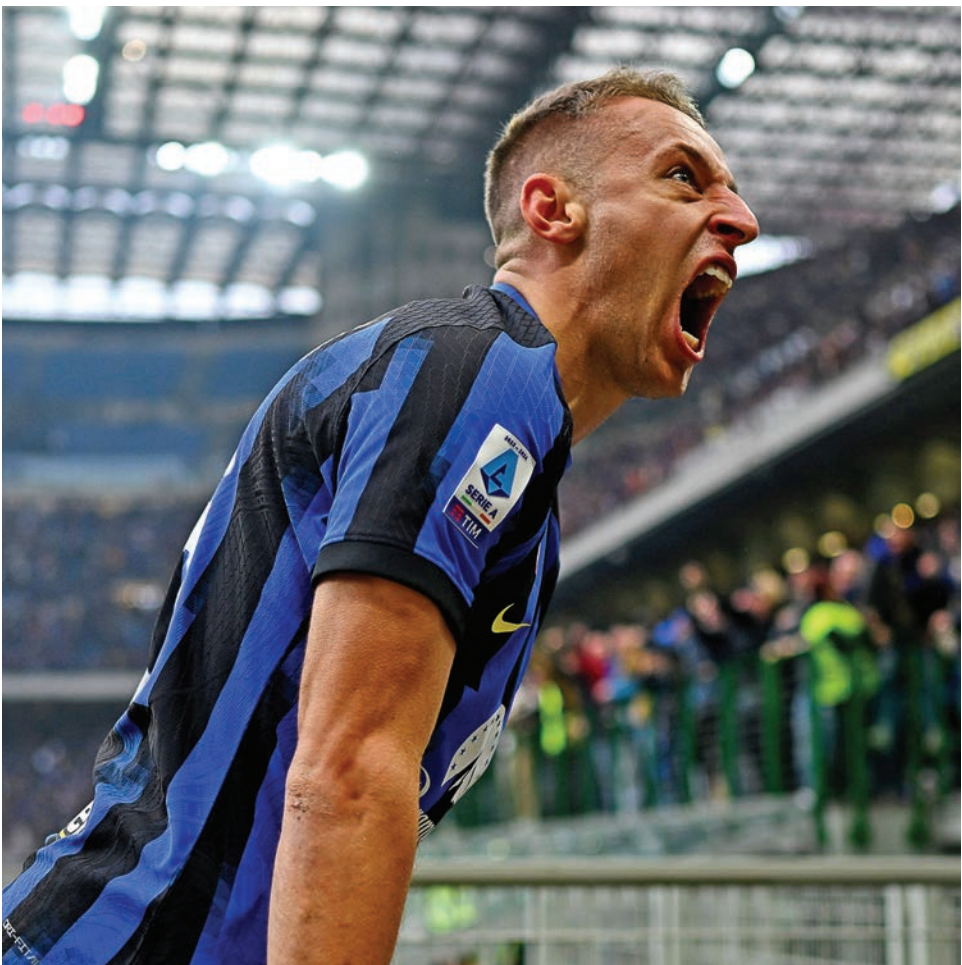
Oman, in Group E, start their campaign against Saudi Arabia on January 16 before taking on Thailand and Kyrgyzstan

winners showed they will be a force to be reckoned with in the upcoming tournament.

Jordan secured a 2-1 win over hosts Qatar in their friendly match, coming from behind after they found themselves trailing to Akram Afif's 16th minute goal.

Yazan Alnaimat sparked the comeback in the second half with the equaliser before Ali Olwan scored the second on the hour mark.

Syria and Kyrgyz Republic played out a 1-1 draw, Ibrahim Hesar's 71st minute strike cancelling out Ayzar Akmatov's 48th minute opener for Kyrgyz Republic.



Inter Milan's Davide Frattesi celebrates after scoring against Verona

Dramatic Frattesi goal secures win for Inter against Verona

Milan, Italy - Inter Milan snatched a thrilling 2-1 victory over Hellas Verona in a dramatic Serie A clash on Saturday, thanks to a last-gasp winner from substitute Davide Frattesi. The victory extends Inter's lead at the top of the table to five points and secures them the Winter Champions title.

Lautaro Martinez put Inter ahead early with a composed finish in the 13th minute, but Thomas Henry, who had just entered the game a minute earlier, equalized for Verona in the 74th minute. After Marko Arnautovic missed two golden chances for Inter, it looked like the game would end in a draw.

However, drama unfolded in

added time. First, Verona defender Darko Lazovic received a red card, leaving them down to ten men. Then, with seconds remaining, Alessandro Bastoni's volley rattled the crossbar, leading to a scramble in the box. Frattesi, alert and opportunistic, pounced on the loose ball and slammed it into the net in the 93rd minute, sending the San Siro into ecstasy.

Verona had one final chance to snatch a point when Inter conceded a penalty after the restart. However, Henry's scuffed spot-kick hit the post, allowing Inter to hold on for a dramatic victory.

"We did what we had prepared, maybe not always very well, but we take these three

points with the awareness that we have Juventus behind us and that we have to continue to win games," said Inter's Lautaro Martinez, who extended his Serie A lead with his 16th goal in 17 games.

Inter manager Simone Inzaghi acknowledged the lucky element of the win but emphasized the need for improvement: "I watched it, and we should have been better there too. On the rebound, it should not be Folorunsho but us. We were lucky... he wasn't supposed to arrive but some Inter players after Henry's kick."

Inter's victory solidifies their grip on the top spot, while Verona's loss plunges them into the relegation zone.

Real, Atletico enter Spanish Cup last 16

Aranda De Duero, Spain - Spanish giants Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid coasted into the Copa del Rey last 16 on Saturday, but the biggest headlines belonged to Real Betis, dethroned by a plucky Alaves side.

Real cruised past Arandina 3-1 on Saturday, while Atletico Madrid progressed after a 3-1 win away to third-tier Lugo courtesy of a second-half double from Memphis Depay and Angel Correa's early goal.

Fourth-division hosts Arandina did not shrink from the challenge of facing the defending champions, who failed to capitalise on first-half opportunities and found it hard to get past goalkeeper Adrian Alvarez.

Real opened the scoring in the 54th minute through Joselu from the penalty spot after a foul on Brahim Diaz, who extended the visitors' lead a minute later.

Carlo Ancelotti's side have struggled with injuries but put in some solid performances, including the debut of Arda Guler, who played for the first time after recovering from several injuries



Real Madrid's Joselu (C) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Arandina on Saturday

following his summer signing. A stoppage-time strike from Brazilian forward Rodrygo sealed the win for Real, before Arandina pulled one back through an own goal by Nacho.

Atletico seemed to be in for a smooth game as well, taking the lead away at Lugo after two minutes when Angel Correa easily slotted home from Javi Galan's left-wing pass.

Lugo then mounted a resilient display as Leandro Antonetti seized on their opponents' sloppy defending to equalise in the 39th minute.

Dutch international Depay, however, restored Atletico's lead in the 66th minute from Koke's through ball before sealing the win with his second of the night just eight minutes later.

LaLiga's lowly Alaves stunned Real Betis 1-0 at a rainy Mendizorroza Stadium courtesy of Carlos Benavidez's goal in the 57th minute to knock out the visitors, who were the cup champions in 2022.

It was Betis' first cup defeat in regular time since 2019.

Girona progressed with a 2-0 win over Elche thanks to a first-half goal from Daley Blind from a corner kick by Portu, who then assisted Yan Couto to extend the lead in the second half.

'Sunderland win could be launch pad for Newcastle'

Sunderland, England - A dominant 3-0 victory over rivals Sunderland in the FA Cup could be the catalyst for Newcastle United's resurgence, manager Eddie Howe believes.

Newcastle found their spark at the Stadium of Light, with an own goal from Daniel Ballard and a brace from Alexander Isak sealing the win.

Howe acknowledged the potential the derby win holds for the future.

When asked if Newcastle could use the win as a launch pad, Howe said: "Well, hopefully. That's how we have to look at it."

Villa edge past Middlesbrough

Middlesbrough, England - Matty Cash's dramatic winner in the 87th minute sent Aston Villa into the FA Cup fourth round for the first time in eight years, breaking Middlesbrough's hearts and rewriting the narrative of a seemingly destined replay.

With the tie poised 0-0 and tension thickening in the Riverside Stadium, Cash unleashed a powerful shot from just outside the box.

The effort took a wicked deflection off Boro's Emmanuel Latte Lath, leaving goalkeeper Thomas Glover helpless as it nestled into the net.

"A goal is a goal, so I am buzzing with it," the defender told the BBC. "I have worked on it in training outside the box to finish, we have worked on having three around the edge and my instinct was to shoot."

Villa, who have won the FA



Aston Villa's goal scorer Matty Cash celebrates after the match

Cup seven times but not since 1957, had not reached the fourth round since 2016.

"The manager had made it clear in the hotel that we had not done well in this competition," Cash said.

"The manager is so good at that and whatever competition we are in we go out and do our

best to get the result," he added.

"In Europe we are doing well and the league and tonight as well."

Villa manager Unai Emery must be relieved to avoid a replay after his team played eight games in a hectic December schedule. They are in the thick of the Premier League title race in second place, three points behind leaders Liverpool.

The visitors had numerous chances at the Riverside Stadium, including early in the second half when Jhon Duran rose to meet a corner but glanced his header off the far post and Nicolo Zaniolo sent a long-range shot just wide.

Emery pushed for the winner in the final 20 minutes by sending on Zaniolo, Douglas Luiz, Ollie Watkins and Moussa Diaby, who have scored 28 goals between them this season.



Culebra, Puerto Rico

Sumba, Indonesia

For those looking for a beach destination that prioritises community consciousness and sustainability, the Indonesian island of Sumba delivers.

With its remote villages, untouched forests, ancient rituals and world-class surf breaks, Sumba is the perfect antidote to the crowds of Bali, which is just an hour's flight away. It might not be internationally famous yet, but that doesn't mean it's small. Sumba is more than 4,000 square miles in size (more than 10,000sqkm) – twice the size of Bali.

It was the Nihi Sumba resort that brought this island into luxury seekers' sights when it first opened in 2012. More than a decade on, Sumba has welcomed several new luxury eco-resorts. These include The Sanubari, a series of beachfront villas that opened in 2022, and Cap Karoso, located on the island's southwest.

Turkey's Black Sea coast



Far less known than the Mediterranean yacht-magnet resorts of Turkey's Turquoise Coast, the Black Sea region, also known as Karadeniz, offers a very different side of the country. Less toured and with a cooler, damper climate that produces verdant scenery and delicious black tea, the region has historic towns and villages as well as beaches and adrenaline-producing activities.

In summer, it's a refreshing escape from Turkey's more sweltering regions. Visitors can explore ancient streets that still echo to the clang of blacksmith hammers in Safranbolu, soak up beach life in Amasra, and climb to where one of the world's oldest monasteries clings to a cliff at Sumela.

Tartu, Estonia

Tartu is a 2024 European capital of culture. Located in southern Estonia, it has been named a European Capital of Culture for 2024 when varied tourists are expected to visit. One of this university city's most celebrated sights is its statue of two students locked in a passionate embrace, but here in the 'City of Good Thoughts', the love-in is more high-minded sentiments.

Tartu is renowned as Estonia's intellectual centre, home to its oldest university as well as the must-visit Estonian National Museum and the impressive Science Centre AHHA, the largest science museum in the Baltics.

The Old Town is the perfect place to base yourself, but just north of the city centre on the banks of the Emajogi River, Supilinn (Soup Town) is also worth a visit. This historic neighbourhood filled with pretty, wooden houses was formerly a slum but is now becoming one of the city's most desirable addresses.

Tainan, Taiwan



Celebrating its 400th anniversary in 2024, Tainan has become a Taiwan hotspot on the international stage. This southern city has surpassed the capital, Taipei, to boast the highest overall hotel occupancy rate in Taiwan in the past two years.

What makes it so special? Tainan is considered the street food capital of Taiwan and is loved for its beef soups and oys-

ter omelets, otherworldly natural landscapes (check out Tsao Shan Moon World), scenic sunsets over salt farms, colourful old temples and cool new museums.

It was also listed among Booking.com's top 10 sustainable tourism destinations in 2023.

Northwest Michigan

Refreshing, unsalty Lake Michigan lures boatloads of tourists in summer, but the shoreline, quaint towns and rolling countryside of Northwest Michigan have plenty to offer year-round.

On Grand Traverse Bay, Traverse City makes a great home base for exploring wineries on the Old Mission and Leelanau peninsulas or picking cherries or apples in season. Then fall's foliage is ripe for peeping, followed by winter's inviting blankets of snow.

From Traverse City, the scenic M-22 highway winds up the Leelanau Peninsula and hooks back down through Leland, home to a historic fishing village and a collection of interesting shops and galleries.

Glen Arbor is another town worth perusing on the way to Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, where off M-109 an all-sand, 3.5-mile hike over massive dunes to the Great Lake and back preps hardy hikers for a delicious dinner.

Culebra, Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is large and makes for a great island escape. But what if you want an escape from your great island escape? That's where little Culebra comes in. It's about 32km off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico and world away from San Juan's noisy, rum-soaked nightlife.

The emphasis here is on outdoor activities and unwinding. Be sure to check out Flamenco Beach, curving for about a mile around a sheltered bay. It has little in the way of waves, making it a superb spot for snorkeling and swimming. And a graffitied tank — a US military relic — offers a striking photo op.

Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada

Not to be confused with St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland, Saint John is located in New Brunswick — also on Canada's east coast. This charming little city is an excellent base from which to enjoy the nearby Bay of Fundy, famed for having the world's highest tides.

The city itself is filled with historic architecture, including the Saint John City Market, a National Historic Site of Canada. Built from 1874 to 1876, it is filled with shops and food venues. A five-minute walk away is the Saint John Arts Centre. Set in the city's historic Carnegie Building, it's the only



former Carnegie Library in eastern Canada.

In terms of accommodation, there are seaside cottages, hotels, motels, campgrounds, historic inns and B&Bs. Food here is as excellent as you'd expect it to be in a maritime city in Canada, with a broad range of outlets, from cheap eats to fine dining.

South Korea

Thankfully, travel to the country is easier than ever before. The government is waiving its K-ETA requirement — the electronic travel visa for South Korea — for travellers from 22 countries till the end of 2024 as part of its 'Visit Korea Year' campaign.

This is a country that truly has it all. After exploring futuristic cities such as Seoul and Busan, the cultural and historic side of old Korea awaits at Andong, dubbed the 'Spirit of South Korea', or the seven cemeteries of the ancient Gaya Tumuli, newly inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2023.

Chile

Stretching about 2,700 miles from top to toe, long and slim Chile offers a little something for everyone. In the north, spectacular landscapes simulate Mars on Earth in the Atacama Desert, where the 51-room Our Habitas Atacama emphasises sustainability. The new hotel is a good fit for the 'world's leading green destination', a title Chile just picked up at the World Travel Awards for the second year in a row.

The natural world puts its best foot forward all over the country - thousands of miles of Pacific coastline to the west, the towering Andes in the east, and lakes, volcanoes and wild Patagonia in the south.

World-class skiing in July and August — a welcome break from the sweltering Northern Hemisphere — is two hours or less from the capital, Santiago. And the new high-altitude Par-

que Nacional Glaciares near the city protects land in the country's most populous and historically little-protected area.

Albania



Sandwiched on the Adriatic coast between Greece and Montenegro, it's astonishing that Albania wasn't more popular as a beach destination before. But its wallet-friendly prices have seen tourism boom here over the past few years — so much so that in 2023, record numbers of Italians flocked across the Adriatic for their bargain summer breaks.

The year 2024 sees the opening of a new airport at Vlorë, on the coast, which will make those beach trips easier. But there's far more to Albania than its coast. The country has a rich culture, including Christian and Muslim history, with historical centres in Berat and Gjirokaster, as well as jaw-dropping mountain landscapes (Theth, a small village within Shkoder County, is the most popular).

In 2023, Albania got Europe's first wild river national park, around the 270km-km Vjosa River — or to go really off the beaten track, book a self-drive tour with Drive Albania.

Abrolhos Islands, Western Australia

Every year there's another installment in the soap opera surrounding the Great Barrier Reef — will it be de-listed by UNESCO? Has the coral regrowth gone well this season?

For tourists who'd rather not wade into the situation, there's another way to experience some of Australia's gorgeous underwater bounty. About 60km off the coast of Western Australia, the lesser-known Abrolhos Islands are home to some of the most beautiful scenery of the country's Coral Coast, above and below the water.

Humpback whales pass through in the southern hemisphere's winter, and lucky travellers may catch a glimpse of Australian sea lions. There are no hotels on the islands, so intrepid visitors can either stay overnight in the town of Geraldton or splash out for a liveaboard boat, which provides opportunities to watch brilliant sunsets over the Indian Ocean and scuba dive in the early hours when the fish are at their most active.

Macedonia, Greece



Athens and the islands get more crowded every year, but in northern Greece, the region of Macedonia is relatively free from overtourism. Yet it has everything visitors flock elsewhere in Greece to see - archaeological sites, history-rich towns and beaches galore.

This was the land of Alexander the Great. His father, Philip II of Macedon, is buried at Vergina, where his tomb has been turned into a world-class subterranean museum displaying the finds. Nearby, there are Byzantine remains in the hilltop city Veria, and superb wineries such as Kir-Yianni in the rolling hills around Naousa.

Thessaloniki — the region's capital and Greece's second city — is a gastro hub as well as a mishmash of architectural and archaeological eras. Near the city are the sandy beaches of Halkidiki, toward the border with Thrace are archaeological spots like ancient Philippi, and the city of Kavala, whose Ottoman past shows in every building.

(Source: CNN.com)