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► NEWS BRIEF

OMAN EXTENDS OIL PRODUCTION CUT TO 2024

Muscat - Oman will extend its voluntary cut of 40,000 barrels of oil per day until the end of December 2024, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals announced on Sunday.

The decision, it said, was 'a precautionary measure, in coordination with the countries participating in the OPEC Plus agreement, which had previously announced voluntary cuts in April'. It further said that this voluntary cut will be from the required production level, as agreed upon in the 35th ministerial meeting of OPEC Plus.

The OPEC Plus alliance of 23 oil-producing countries reached an agreement on Sunday to extend output cuts into 2024.

04



Galfar wins PDO contract worth over RO280mn

RO10mn initiative to boost economy by AI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's economy is going to get a shot in the arm with a national initiative choosing artificial intelligence to empower various sectors.

In a collaborative effort, the Ministry of Economy (MoE) and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) have unveiled the RO10mn 'National Initiative to Empower the National Economy Enhanced by Artificial Intelligence' for the year 2024.

The initiative, launched on Sunday, aims to stimulate investment and foster the integration of artificial intelligence applications and technologies in development projects within the economic diversification sectors outlined in the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-25).

H E Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, reaffirmed the government's commitment to this national initiative. In support of this endeavour, H E Saqri cited economic models that predict a staggering addition of approximately US\$13tn to global economic activities by 2030, solely attributed to the integration of artificial intelligence.

The Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-25) has recog-



In line with the plan, the contribution of the digital economy to the GDP is expected to increase to around 10% by 2040

H E DR SAID AL SAQRI

nised the pivotal role of information and communication technology in driving economic growth, he added. "In line with the plan, the contribution of the digital economy to the gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to increase to around 10% by 2040, through several strategic initiatives and projects."

The primary objective of the

national initiative is to facilitate the adoption of artificial intelligence applications and technologies by government institutions, and empower them to embark on development projects that harness the potential of AI.

Additionally, it seeks to bolster investment opportunities rooted in technology and innovation, thereby optimising the efficiency

of development spending and advancing the delivery of smart government services while ensuring their exceptional quality.

A statement released by the MoE revealed that a substantial budget of RO10mn has been allocated for this initiative, earmarked for projects set to be implemented until 2024.

The initial phase will primarily target government institutions, agencies, and governorates.

To ensure the success of the initiative, a dedicated team comprising experts from the MoE and the MTCIT will evaluate the proposed initiatives and projects put forth by government agencies, paving the way for their seamless implementation.

ROP allows taxis, driving school cars to get tinted glasses

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a significant move, Lt Gen Hassan Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, has issued a decision (No 124/2023) effecting amendments to the executive regulations of the Traffic Law.

As per this decision, taxis and vehicles for learning driving will now be permitted to use tinted films on their window screens.

An official from the Royal Oman Police (ROP) informed *Muscat Daily* that the previous decision had prohibited the use of tinted glasses on taxis and vehicles used for driving instruction, while allowing private and government vehicles to enjoy this privilege.

The updated rule now allows 'equal treatment' across all vehicles.

The official further emphasised that according to the law, tinting of window screens should not exceed 30% opacity. Motorists who fail to comply with this regulation will be subject to a fine of RO10.

The ROP also cautioned against the use of additional lamps, reflective lights, and curtains that may impede visibility or compromise road safety.

The issuance of the new decision has generated positive reac-



tions among citizens.

Nasser al Hosni, a driving instructor, expressed his support for the ruling, particularly highlighting its benefits for women learning to drive.

He noted that tinted glasses would provide learners with the desired privacy and create a level playing field in terms of window tinting among all vehicles.

Sultan al Rawahi, a taxi driver, termed the decision 'excellent', stating, "we have faced significant challenges while driving, particularly during scorching summer months, especially around noon. This decision will greatly help us in combating the intense heat."

Rawahi also finds this decision benefiting women learners with enhanced comfort during driving lessons in hot weather conditions.

The decision was officially issued on May 30, and came into effect one day after its publication in the Official Gazette.

Said brothers win German endurance race

Our Correspondent
Muscat

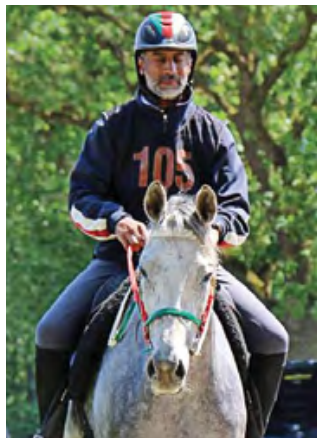
Omani riders H H Sayyid Loay bin Ghalib al Said and H H Sayyid Ali bin Ghalib al Said have emerged as champions in the highly competitive German Buch Endurance Race.

This prestigious event, organised by the International Equestrian Federation, serves as a qualifying race for the FEI 2024 World Endurance Championship in Monpazier, France, in September.

The victory achieved by the two riders marks a significant milestone in their journey towards the World Cup finals.

While H H Sayyid Loay has only one race remaining to secure a spot in the finals, H H Sayyid Ali faces three qualifying races.

Looking ahead, both riders are set to venture into the much-anticipated 160km Monpazier race



H H Sayyid Loay al Said

in France. This event holds immense importance for the riders, particularly for H H Sayyid Loay, who aims to win it and secure direct qualification for the World Cup.

In the prominent 140km race, H H Sayyid Loay showcased remarkable prowess by securing the first place. Outshining a field of 70 participating knights from

Europe across various distances, his exceptional performance earned him well-deserved recognition. Moreover, his brother also demonstrated his skill and determination by clinching victory in the challenging 140km race spanning two days.

Reflecting on their triumph, H H Sayyid Loay expressed satisfaction, stating, "We have successfully overcome a significant stage on our path to the World Cup... yet another milestone lies ahead before reaching the finals."

"We are fully committed to representing the Sultanate of Oman with pride among the participating nations, as Omani riders have long been having a familiar presence in such esteemed international events."



Dying man gives three patients new lease of life



Successful organ transplants provide hope for patients with chronic organ failure

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's health sector has achieved a remarkable feat when doctors at the Royal Hospital performed three operations extracting organs from a brain-dead donor to grant three patients a new lease of life.

"The Royal Hospital has successfully carried out three organ transplants from a brain-dead donor, offering treatment opportunities for three patients suffering from chronic organ failures," the Ministry of Health (MoH) said in a statement.

One of the procedures involved an adult patient who had been battling chronic liver failure without having a suitable donor from the family. The liver transplant procedure was executed by a specialised Omani surgical team, under the supervision of the liver transplantation team at King Fahd Specialist Hospital in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

The other two operations involved kidney transplants for two children, aged nine and ten, who had been on dialysis for several

years. Dr Salah Mohammed al Jabri, head of the Liver Transplantation Committee at the Royal Hospital and a consultant in liver surgery and transplantation, explained that these procedures are part of the national organ transplantation programme.

The liver transplant operation lasted approximately eight hours and achieved resounding success, he added.

"The main challenges in such operations involve swiftly identifying suitable patients and assembling the necessary medical staff within a tight timeframe of less than 24 hours."

To date, the Ministry of Health has performed 24 liver transplants and 325 kidney transplants. However, the number of patients awaiting kidney transplants and currently undergoing dialysis exceeds 2,300.

Encouragingly, around 8,000 individuals have registered for organ donation through the 'Shifa' app. The Oman Transplantation Society launched a campaign to register 100,000 organ donors on 'Shifa' within one year of its inauguration.

The ministry is actively working on enacting legislation pertaining to organ transplantation while simultaneously preparing, training, and qualifying healthcare professionals in this field.

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TOURISTS - LICENSED TO DRIVE



The Directorate General of Traffic at Royal Oman Police recently issued a statement stating that foreign visitors and tourists, who hold valid international driving licences or foreign licences issued by their country, are allowed to drive in the sultanate.

As per the decision, international

licence or foreign licence holders can drive in Oman for three months from the date of entry. While many believe this will help boost tourism, there are others who think it may lead to an increase in road accidents.

Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers said on the decision and how it will affect the tourism sector and the economy -

Ruskeen S
Sales manager

It is a great move by the ROP, helpful for visitors and the establishment. Visitors can select their destinations according to their plan and liking. Now it is up to the ROP to clarify what kind of vehicles they can use.

Syed Mohtesan Maqsood
Private sector employee

It will boost the rent-a-car business. The Ministry of Tourism needs to develop tourist places to attract more visitors and offer more affordable hotels and restaurants. Also, tourists need to follow traffic rules to avoid any trouble or fines, and ROP needs to ensure tourists' safety.

Surendra Nath Sharma
Private sector employee

For any tourist travelling in Oman, the biggest challenge is transport. Taxis in Oman still don't match international standards. This decision allowing tourists to drive with their country's driving licence will have a positive impact on the economy. It has several advantages, including the comfort of self-driving to see the beauty of Oman. Self-driving allows privacy and tourists can enjoy more. Rent-a-car companies, which are bleeding due to lack of tourists, will be able to sustain business. Also, most hotels are operating at 50 per cent capacity. Following this decision, there will be more

guests. Overall it's a very positive decision to boost tourism in Oman.

Chiranjeevi Raju
HVAC engineer

It is a very good decision; people can explore more and spend quality time. Foodies can travel and eat their favourite foods around Muscat.

Sameer Ali
Private sector employee

The decision may benefit the economy but I am not sure how safe it would be. Many countries have driving standards, which may be sub-standard compared to other countries. This will impact safety on Omani roads where most drivers are well trained and get their driving licence after vigorous training.

Sanarab Kazi
Housewife

It is a good decision, but before being allowed to drive in our country, tourists must take a test conducted by ROP. The road rules and regulations must also be explained to them. But all these steps must be done quickly within an hour.

Mohammed Nadeem
Investor

It is indeed a great decision as it will give more confidence and attract more tourists. After all, we also expect the

same when we go for tours in other countries.

Syed Imran Ali
IT manager

It's definitely a boon for tourists; they can access all the destinations at any point of time rather than being dependent on others for transport. But some criteria should be set for tourists to drive in the sultanate.

Fahir Ismail
Private sector employee

A very good move by ROP. Left side or right side driving doesn't matter for those who know driving and our mind easily adjusts to the rules. I have experienced it myself. The only thing is, you will mix up the indicators and wipers for a while. Those who are experienced in driving in conditions similar to Oman will find this facility highly beneficial. Those who find it difficult can always catch a cab. It's not compulsory that they should drive.

Girishkumar Nayee
Operations manager

For tourists who come here without left-side experience and roundabout road conditions, driving will be risky. It's a good approach but road and driving conditions vary. In Oman, many drivers don't get a driving licence easily. So how can tourists come and start driving? Someone with an Omani driving licence needs to sit next to them as a guide.



With the ensuing khareef season in Dhofar, what are the services and events you want for a perfect holiday and to attract the largest number of visitors?

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.co.om You can also log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue.

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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Muscat Municipality continues its fight against waste burning

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In its campaign against burning of waste, Muscat Municipality has once again urged people to refrain from disposing trash in violation of set regulations.

As part of its 'Be Vigilant' campaign, Muscat Municipality highlighted the health hazards and environmental pollution caused by waste burning.

'This detrimental phenomenon not only poses risks to individuals' well-being but also leaves a negative impression on passersby and road users,' the civic body stated.

Muscat Municipality, in collaboration with other authorities, is continuing 'relentless efforts' to monitor waste accumulation sites, with special attention given to farms and wadis.

'It is strictly prohibited to dispose, abandon, or burn any waste in public areas or any other location not designated for waste disposal. The consequences of burning waste extend beyond immediate effects. In the long run, it affects agricultural crops and soil fertility,' it warned.

To address this pressing issue, Muscat Municipality has taken



significant strides in waste management, demonstrating its commitment to safe disposal of waste. It consistently focuses on raising environmental awareness and educating individuals about sustainability and the environmental concerns associated with burning waste.

Underlining the detrimental impacts on public health, the municipality is seeking viable solutions to rectify bad waste management practices, particularly in relation to waste burning.

Harms of burning waste

Air pollution and the spread of smoke caused by burning of waste from agricultural and construction sources have a severe impact on the respiratory system. It is all the more dangerous for individuals with respiratory conditions.

Inhaling polluted air leads to eye and nasal irritation. Moreover, areas with high agricultural density pose a higher risk to children, pregnant women, and the

elderly.

Muscat Municipality, represented by the Directorate General of Health Affairs and its various service directorates, is actively implementing measures to reduce the burning of solid waste. They include raising community awareness about the danger of burning waste and providing guidance on proper disposal methods.

The municipality maintains rigorous surveillance of waste accumulation sites through continuous monitoring campaigns conducted by inspectors in the morning and evening. These efforts have resulted in a noticeable decline in waste burning incidents.

To facilitate proper waste disposal, the municipality designated specific locations near farms for waste transportation, encouraging cooperation from farm owners.

'While challenges exist due to some farm workers, overall progress is promising. Additional measures are necessary to prevent smoke from spreading to adjacent residential areas and ensure the well-being of the community,' Muscat Municipality added.



Women leaders gather to discuss their empowerment

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Social Development organised a gathering on Sunday, focused on empowering women leaders.

Titled 'Empowering Omani Women as Leaders', the event took place at the National Autism Center building and was held under the patronage of Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development.

A total of 82 women leaders from various sectors, including government, private enterprises, and civil society institutions, actively participated in the meeting. Their collective presence underscored the significance

and relevance of promoting women's leadership within the sultanate.

During the meeting, Maani bint Abdullah bin Hamad al Buisaidi, Director General of Family Growth Department at the Ministry of Social Development, commended the achievements of Omani women in driving the nation's economy forward.

She highlighted that under the renewed Omani renaissance, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has demonstrated a clear commitment to the inclusion and empowerment of Omani women across various fields.

The gathering included a visually engaging presentation on women's contributions, followed

by three insightful papers: 'National Efforts and Achievements in Empowering Women', 'Investing in Self and Individual Responsibility', and 'Successful Experiences of Young Women'.

The primary objectives of the meeting were to empower women in decision-making positions by shedding light on national initiatives and accomplishments in the realm of women's empowerment.

Furthermore, the event aimed to raise awareness about the exceptional abilities and capabilities of women in leadership roles, while fostering an environment conducive to sharing successful experiences among participants.



Masirah first Healthy Island in Eastern Mediterranean: WHO

Masirah Island was awarded a certificate of International Recognition from the World Health Organization (WHO) as the First Healthy Island in the Eastern Mediterranean Region on Sunday.

The WHO handed over the certificate to the Ministry of Health (MoH) in a ceremony held under the patronage of H E Dr Hilal Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, and in the presence of H E Dr Fatma Mohammed al

Ajmi, Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs at the MoH, along with Dr Yahya Bader al Mawaali, Governor of South Sharqiyah.

Abdul Hamid Ali al Abri,

Deputy Wali of Masirah and Head of Executive Office of Masirah Healthy Island, pointed out that the Sultanate of Oman is unique to have the first healthy island regionally and globally.

Despite the challenges represented in the island's area, population, spacing communities, and WHO's evaluation standards; it was a strong motivation to achieve the goal and accomplish the project, Abri added.

OMAN FUTURE FUND

Stimulating economy, supporting startups

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Future Fund, established last week through a Royal Directive with a capital of RO2bn, is one of the most significant decisions that is set to invigorate the economy and provide vital support to startup companies, according to top officials.

Expressing appreciation for the Royal Directive, H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, stated that the ministry has initiated the preparation of a comprehensive matrix to evaluate eligible projects for financing under the fund.

"This fund aligns with Oman Vision 2040, aiming to build a diversified and sustainable economy. It represents an effective tool for financing tourism projects, overcoming challenges faced by investors in the sector, and accelerating project implementation. Moreover, it empowers the ministry and creates job opportunities for young individuals," H E Mahrouqi added.

Highlighting its significance, H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, emphasised that the fund will enhance economic activity and encourage private sector engagement. "It will foster partnerships and provide financing for viable investment projects in sectors crucial for economic diversification."

Additionally, the fund will create favourable investment conditions in light of global competition among countries.

Faisal al Rawas, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the fund will play a major role in raising productivity and driving economic growth. He believes it will improve infrastructure, develop commercial and investment businesses, and increase job opportunities while improving living standards.

Rawas is confident that it will attract higher proportions of foreign investments, promote international trade, and attract more resources, ultimately enhancing productivity and profitability within the private sector. "Exempting small and medium enterprises from certain fees will further boost market competitiveness, improve the business environment, and foster growth for emerging and innovative companies."

Economic analyst Khalfan al Touqi describes the Oman Future Fund as a groundbreaking initiative. "It introduces a new idea to Oman, serving startup companies and supporting their rapid growth. Additionally, the fund plays a pivotal role in attracting foreign investments and instilling confidence and security in Oman's investment market."



The fund will enhance economic activity and encourage private sector engagement. It will foster partnerships and provide financing for viable investment projects for economic diversification

H E QAIS MOHAMMED AL YOUSEF



Ministry releases preliminary list of candidates for Majlis A'Shura polls

Our Correspondent
Muscat

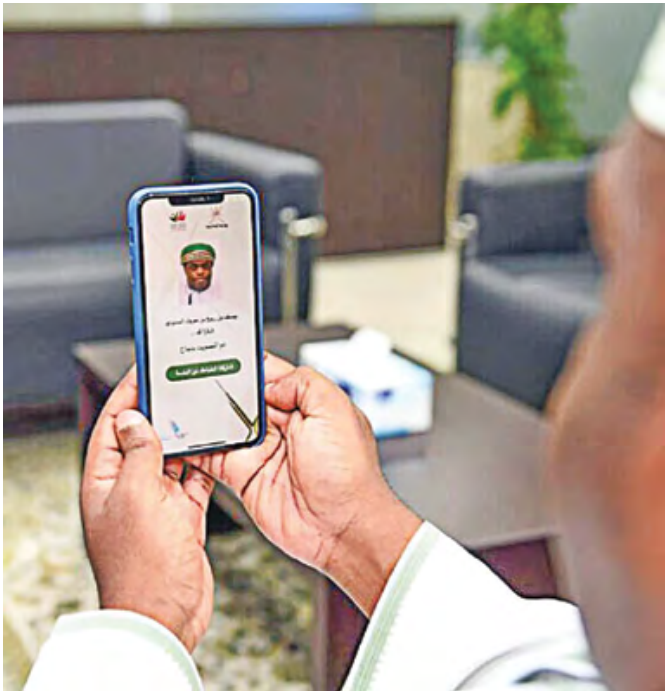
The Ministry of Interior on Sunday released the preliminary list of 883 candidates - including 33 women - who have submitted applications for the tenth term of Majlis A'Shura election.

"The applications will be scrutinised within ten days from the last day of their submission," informed Talib bin Ali al Amri, head of the media team for elections at the Ministry of Interior.

He explained that it is permissible to object to the names in the preliminary list of candidates by submitting an application through the election website within five days from the date of its announcement.

According to Amri, Dhofar governorate topped the list with 255 candidates, including two women; followed by Dakhiliyah with 111 candidates.

"Campaign for the election will begin on the day the final list of candidates is released and it will come to an end one day before the election, in accordance with the election law and the procedures and controls of electoral campaigning," Amri said.



designed in accordance with the security standards to ensure complete confidentiality in the election process. It makes casting of votes an easy and convenient process.

Intakhib runs on smartphones having the NFC feature and Internet connection, and a voter must have his or her name registered in the electoral roll.

The Ministry of Interior has also introduced a new electronic public service called 'My Page' as part of the Intikhab app and Majlis A'Shura's election website - <https://shura2023.elections.om/>

The service has been launched to support candidates participating in the upcoming elections to promote their manifesto and conduct election campaigns on this platform.

The 'My Page' service will allow candidates to post their personal information and share photos and videos in compliance with approved electoral campaign regulations.

This feature allows voters to access the list of candidates, stay updated on their activities, interact with them, and comment on their content.



MHT inks two pacts to bolster leather, cotton craft industries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Sunday signed two agreements with the Industrial Innovation Academy for innovation in the leather and cotton industry.

The ministry is collaborating with the academy to revitalise and safeguard the country's treasured leather and cotton industries, aligning them with the Oman Vision 2040 to eventually bolster the nation's economy.

Under the terms of these agreements, an array of extensive craft development studies will be conducted to ensure the sustainability of these time-honoured art forms.

The comprehensive study will shed light on investment prospects within the leather and cotton industries, spanning various craft and industrial domains. This endeavour seeks to promote local value addition and provide a platform for innovative projects that empower the youth. MHT emphasises that by effectively utilising these industries, both directly and indirectly, their potential can be fully realised.

The agreements were signed by H E Ibrahim bin Said al Kharusi, Undersecretary for Heritage in MHT, and Dr Ayman bin Abdullah al Fudaili, CEO of the Industrial Innovation Academy.

This strategic partnership sets the stage for unlocking new possibilities, seamlessly blending tradition with innovation and propelling the leather and cotton industries to greater heights.

By implementing best practices and harnessing the economic potential of Oman's rich cultural heritage, MHT aims to create ample opportunities for employment in the sector of small and medium enterprises, and foster growth within this.

Registration of expat work contracts mandatory

Muscat - The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has made registration of expat workers' contracts mandatory from July 1 this year.

"The ministry hereby notifies all concerned parties that starting from the July 1, it is mandatory to register employment contracts of non-Omani workforce employed in both profit and non-profit establishments," MoL said in a statement.

With less than 30 days remaining until the deadline, the ministry alerted employers to immediately activate their personal identification cards with electronic authentication so as to proceed with the electronic registration of their employees' contracts.

tory to register employment contracts of non-Omani workforce employed in both profit and non-profit establishments,' MoL said in a statement.

With less than 30 days remaining until the deadline, the

ministry alerted employers to immediately activate their personal identification cards with electronic authentication so as to proceed with the electronic registration of their employees' contracts.



Tropical depression in Arabian Sea likely in 5 days

Muscat - The latest weather charts and analyses of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Center indicate the possibility of a depression forming in the southeast of the Arabian Sea over the next five days.

A statement issued by CAA said, 'There are chances of a low pressure area (tropical turbulence) forming in the southeast of the Arabian Sea during the next 48 hours, with the possibility of its development into a tropical depression during the next five days without any effect on the sultanate.'

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on/ Before 10:00 am Wednesday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
2157/2022/MOH/ NIZH-3- Recall - 2	Maintenance Of Elevators In Nizwa Hospital	18/JUN/2023	28/JUN/2023	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set

- Tenders should be submitted on line on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.
- For any Clarification, you may contact via Telephone: 24402200 , Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

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Sri Lanka	758.03

*Rates as on June 04

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

UAE's ADNOC Logistics surges 50% in share float

Abu Dhabi, UAE – Shares in UAE state oil company ADNOC's logistics unit soared 50% after their market debut in a \$769mn initial public offering on Thursday.

ADNOC Logistics and Services, formed in 2016, was heavily oversubscribed even after the offering was expanded from 1.1bn to more than 1.4bn shares, equivalent to 19% of the business.

The shares closed at AED3.13, close to their highest point of the day, after launching at AED2.01, the top of their range.

The listing is the second biggest in the Middle East and North Africa this year after ADNOC floated its gas unit in a \$2.5bn IPO in March.

Abdulkareem al Masabi, CEO of ADNOC L&S, welcomed the "landmark IPO", saying in a statement that the firm "will provide investors with exciting growth opportunities, as we decarbonise our operations".

The shares closed at AED3.13, close to their highest point of the day, after launching at AED2.01, the top of their range.

Galfar wins massive PDO contract worth over RO280mn



Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman's leading construction and contracting firm, Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company, has been awarded a massive contract worth RO280mn by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

Galfar shares surged nearly 8% on Sunday at the Muscat Stock Exchange following the announcement of the new contract award by the company.

"We are pleased to inform our esteemed shareholders that PDO has awarded Galfar the Off-Plot Delivery Contract Qarn Alam via a letter of award that was formally accepted by both parties on May 25, 2023, and approval from PDO to disclose was confirmed on Sunday," Galfar said in a disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

The company estimates the value of this call-off contract to be approximately RO280mn for

an execution period of seven years. The contract also includes an additional three-year extension option worth RO120mn.

"If the extension option of three years is approved and implemented, the potential associated additional contract value is estimated to be RO120mn," Galfar said.

"We take this opportunity to express our appreciation to PDO for the confidence vested in Galfar through this award," the company added.

According to Galfar's first-quarter 2023 financial report, for the period ended March 2023, the company continues to maintain a significant project pipeline of RO481mn supported by new project awards worth RO9.1mn.

"The company expects to maintain a solid project pipeline in excess of RO500mn in the future, with a significant number of tenders under evaluation across a diverse array of sectors and clients. We reasonably expect to

be successful in a number of those, which will ensure stability and sustainability of our strong market position," the company said in the report.

Galfar further said it continues to explore avenues to strengthen the company's financial position in a challenging and highly competitive economic environment.

"As part of the company's turnaround strategy, ongoing measures to control manpower and overhead expenses and improve project execution efficiencies are poised to reduce overall cash outflow and improve the operating financial results in 2023," Galfar said.

As a flagship for Oman's contracting and engineering business, Galfar said it is looking forward to building on its strength, supporting the government and local market endeavours for economic growth, and pursuing significant development and infrastructure projects across various sectors.



OIFC board accepts Dhofar International merger offer

Our Correspondent Muscat

The board of directors of Oman Investment & Finance Company (OIFC) has approved the final merger offer from Dhofar International Development & Investment Holding Company (DIDIC).

DIDIC submitted its final offer for the merger to the OIFC board last week.

"We would like to announce that following careful consideration, the board of directors of OIFC has approved the proposed merger terms and conditions in its meeting held on Thursday," OIFC said in a disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange on Sunday.

According to the merger offer, the value of OIFC has been determined at RO25.2mn, the company noted. It added that the swap ratio offered to the shareholders of OIFC is 0.3488 shares of the merged entity (DIDIC) for every owned share of OIFC. Accordingly, 86,809,825 shares in the merged entity will be allocated to the OIFC shareholders.

OIFC said, "The board of directors of the company believes that the merger is in the interest of OIFC shareholders and has therefore approved the calling of an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) of the shareholders of OIFC."

The EGM will consider the merger and present the OIFC shareholders with an explanatory statement including the terms and conditions of the merger, and other supporting documents, with the board's recommendation to vote in favour of the merger.

In addition to the approval of the shareholders of the two companies, the merger remains subject to the approvals of the competent authorities.

OIFC said there will be no immediate changes as a result of the disclosure. Both companies will remain independent and continue to operate their business as usual until the merger is completed.

In a separate disclosure, DIDIC confirmed that it has received acceptance from the board of directors of OIFC for the

merger offer between DIDIC and OIFC.

The EGMs of the two companies' shareholders will be held to obtain the final decision on the proposed merger.

According to OIFC, a separate announcement will be made in relation to the date, time, and agenda of the EGM in due course and in accordance with applicable laws.

DIDIC is one of the largest investment holding companies in Oman. Its main activities include investment in businesses, marketable securities, and the promotion of new projects. The company holds investments in subsidiary and associate companies.

On the other hand, OIFC is Oman's leading organisation in billing and collection of utilities, providing a centralised collection point for customers to pay for their electricity, water, and telecom utilities. It is also involved in the collection of Public Authority for Social Insurance subscriptions and investments in the banking, finance, and electricity contracting sectors.

OPEC+ weighs fresh output cuts to boost oil price

Vienna, Austria – A meeting of major oil producers was underway on Sunday to consider slashing output further in a bid to prop up prices, amid tensions between Riyadh and Moscow.

The 13-member Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) led by Saudi Arabia is consulting with 10 other oil majors, including Russia, to review the grouping's future output policy.

The in-person OPEC+ meeting opened at the group's headquarters in Vienna in the early afternoon on Sunday, about three hours later than scheduled, a source close to the talks told AFP.

Analysts had largely expected OPEC+ producers to maintain their current policy, but signs emerged this weekend that the 23 countries may make deeper cuts.

An output cut of one million barrels per day (bpd) was one of the options being discussed, according to the source close to the talks.

In April, several OPEC+ members agreed to voluntarily cut production by more than one million barrels per day (bpd) -- a surprise move that briefly buttressed prices but failed to bring about lasting recovery.

Oil producers are grappling with falling prices and high market volatility amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has upended economies worldwide.

Most delegations remained tight-lipped as they arrived at the headquarters on Sunday.

Analysts are divided over whether heavyweights Riyadh



and Moscow will keep the group on course with its current output policy, or further curtail production.

All options remain "on the table", Iran's OPEC governor Amir Hossein Zamaninia told AFP on Saturday.

Oil prices have plummeted about 10% since the April cuts were announced, with Brent crude falling close to US\$70 a barrel, a level it has not traded below since December 2021.

Traders worry that demand will slump, with concerns about the health of the global economy as the United States battles inflation and higher interest rates while China's post-Covid rebound stutters.

On arriving in Vienna on Saturday, UAE energy minister Suhail Mohamed al Mazrouei said he expected the outcome of Sunday's meeting to "balance the market and ensure we are ready for any challenges in the future".

Amid fears of economic slowdown, "the probability of a new production cut being announced has considerably increased", UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo told AFP, adding that he still believed OPEC+ would decide to maintain the current reduced output.

However, Yousef Alshammari of CMarkits said he expected Saudi Arabia "to push for a cut of at least half a million bpd".

'United front'

It remains to be seen whether Riyadh will manage to convince Moscow to further curtail output, as Russia is dependent on oil revenues with its war in Ukraine dragging on and Western sanctions hitting its economy.

Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak "sees no need for OPEC+ to change course" because it would hardly benefit from higher prices, Commerzbank commodity analysts said in a research note.

Since Western sanctions hit Moscow over Ukraine, Russia has been shipping oil to India and China as the Asian giants soak up the cheap crude.

Novak did not comment as he entered the OPEC building on Sunday.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, "does need higher prices to balance its budget", Commerzbank analysts said, adding that the kingdom's break-even price is currently "at a good 80 dollars per barrel".

Despite the tensions, both of the top OPEC+ producers "will no doubt be keen to keep the cartel together, as it has more power thanks to the united front it is showing", they said.

In March 2020 the alliance was pushed to the brink of collapse when Moscow refused to cut oil production even as the Covid pandemic sent prices into freefall.

AFP

Oman Cables Industry employees become shareholders in company

Muscat – Oman Cables Industry Company (OCI), the leading manufacturer of energy cables and innovative service provider in Oman, announced the success of its inclusive share ownership plan. Unveiled in 2022, this initiative has now become a reality at OCI.

The company takes great pride in witnessing its dedicated desk and non-desk workers embrace their new roles as shareholders of Prysmian Group, solidifying their stake in the company's future, OCI said in a press release.

OCI, in partnership with Prysmian Group, its strategic partner, rolled out the share-based variable remuneration and profit-sharing plan. This includes granting employees Prysmian Group shares based on achieving specific local and regional targets, approved by the board of directors. This initiative, part of OCI's 'Empowerment, Innovation and Excellence' vision, aims to enhance employee engagement, foster a sense of belonging and encourage exceptional performance, while aligning with Prysmian Group's framework for future success and sustainable developments.

Cinzia Farisè, CEO of Oman Cables Industry, said, "We are delighted with the success of our employee-centered profit-sharing plan. This significant achievement highlights our commitment to recognising and rewarding the



dedication of our workforce and fostering an inclusive and diverse corporate culture. OCI is dedicated to discovering innovative ways to value and reward its employees, while simultaneously fostering their active participation in the success of our organisation."

In line with Prysmian Group's Social Ambition 2030, which aims to have 50 per cent of employees as shareholders, OCI has introduced a stock ownership plan that allows eligible employ-

ees to convert a portion or all their bonuses into company shares. This strategy incentivises participation, strengthens engagement, and reinforces the group's performance. Enrolled OCI employees received a percentage of their monetary entitlement, equivalent to a predetermined share value calculated annually and on an individual basis, based on their bonus amounts.

Cinzia Farisè expressed confidence in the positive impact of the company's new policies. She stated, "We firmly believe that these new policies will not only benefit our employees by promoting a healthier work-life balance, but also contribute to a more engaged and productive workforce. As part of our social ambition, we are committed to continuously evolving our practices to create a positive and supportive work environment for all our employees."

On Thursday, Kaabi said Qatar expected to sign more deals with European countries in the coming months.

"We are going to sign European deals after the summer," he told reporters, adding the agreements with "several European destinations... are very close to being finalised". Qatari gas is among the cheapest to produce and has fuelled an economic boom in the tiny Gulf emirate that has become one of the world's wealthiest countries.

AFP

Qatar signs 15-year gas deal with Bangladesh

Doha, Qatar – QatarEnergy signed a 15-year deal to supply liquefied natural gas to Bangladesh's state-owned gas company Petrobangla.

The state-owned hydrocarbon giant will supply 1.5mn tonnes annually starting in January 2026, the Qatari firm said at the signing ceremony in Doha.

"It can reach up to 1.8mn tonnes annually under the contractual arrangement, said Qatari Energy Minister Saad Sherida al-Kaabi, who is also head of QatarEnergy.

He said the gas could come from the North Field project which holds the world's biggest natural gas reserves and extends beneath the Gulf into Iranian territory. QatarEnergy currently supplies Bangladesh with more than 3.5mn tonnes of LNG per annum, Kaabi said.

"We are proud to be the largest LNG supplier to Bangladesh and Petrobangla," he told a press conference.

"These supply arrangements reinforce our unwavering dedication to safeguarding the energy

security of valued customers".

Qatar is one of the world's top LNG producers alongside the United States, Australia and Russia.

Asian countries led by China, Japan and South Korea have been the main market for Qatari gas, but demand has also risen in European countries since Russia's war on Ukraine threw supplies into doubt.

In November, Qatar announced its first major deal to deliver liquefied natural gas to Germany.

Biden signs debt ceiling bill into law, averting US default

Washington, US – US President Joe Biden signed into law a debt ceiling bill passed by Congress after weeks of wrangling, moving to avert a catastrophic, self-induced default in the world's biggest economy.

The Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 authorises the government to extend the so-called debt ceiling to renew borrowing, keeping the bills paid. The Treasury had warned that if the debt ceiling was blocked beyond Monday, the country would default on its \$31tn debt.

A default would have likely triggered market panic, huge job losses and a recession, with global implications.

In a statement Saturday, the White House thanked the Republican and Democratic leaders in Congress "for their partnership."

In a rare Oval Office address late Friday, Biden said that the debt ceiling bill saved the country from "economic collapse."

Speaking from behind the historic Resolute Desk on live primetime television, Biden said



US President Joe Biden

the deal resolving the standoff between Democrats and Republicans was a compromise where "no one got everything they wanted."

However, "we averted an economic crisis," he said.

Oval Office addresses have always been reserved by presidents for moments of unique national danger or importance.

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

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

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

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

Reaching out to opponents

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

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

This triggered a test of political strength that threatened to end in chaos before the two sides agreed this week on raising the debt ceiling while freezing some budgetary spending in re-

turn -- yet stopping well short of Republican demands for cuts.

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

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

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

"I want to commend Speaker McCarthy. You know, he and I, we and our teams, were able to get along, get things done," Biden said.

AFP



Visitors tour the US Capitol in Washington, DC on June 2 (AFP)

Fitch holds US rating on negative watch despite debt ceiling deal

Washington, US – Ratings agency Fitch said that it is keeping the United States' "AAA" credit rating on negative watch, despite a bipartisan agreement on the debt limit to avert a catastrophic default.

The decision came a day after US senators voted to suspend the federal debt limit, capping weeks of fraught negotiations to eliminate the threat of a disastrous credit default just four days ahead of a deadline set by the Treasury.

Hammered out between Democratic President Joe Biden and Republican leaders, the measure passed the Senate with a comfortable majority a day after sailing through the House of Representatives.

While the resolution of the debt ceiling impasse means the US government will be able to meet its obligations, Fitch Ratings said it maintains a "Rating Watch Negative" on the United States.

This comes "as we consider the full implications of the most recent brinkmanship episode and the outlook for medium-term fiscal and debt trajectories," Fitch added in a statement.

The agency acknowledged positive considerations this time, such as reaching a deal despite "heated political partisanship" while reducing fiscal deficits modestly over the next two years.

But repeated political standoffs over the debt limit and last-minute suspensions as the

Treasury comes close to not meeting all its obligations "lowers confidence in governance on fiscal and debt matters," Fitch said.

"In fact, there has been a steady deterioration in governance over the last 15 years, with increased political polarization and partisanship," the statement added.

Economists have warned that the country could run out of funds to pay its bills by Monday, leaving almost no room for delays in enacting the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

With its passage through the Senate, the bill now heads for Biden's desk to be signed into law.

On Friday, Fitch said that it intends to resolve the negative watch in the third quarter of 2023.

"The coherence and credibility of policymaking, as well as the expected medium-term fiscal and debt trajectories will be key factors in our assessment," Fitch said.

The lifting of the so-called debt ceiling -- a limit on government borrowing to pay for bills already incurred -- is often routine.

But raising the borrowing limit, currently at \$31.4 trillion, has been a contentious issue for several years, with congressional Republicans pushing for spending curbs and a smaller budget deficit in exchange for an increase.

AFP

ECB to hike rates 'but not as rapidly': Lagarde

Frankfurt, Germany – Eurozone inflation is still "too high" and the European Central Bank will keep hiking interest rates but at a more gradual pace, president Christine Lagarde said.

"We are getting a bit closer to our cruising altitude, not there yet, and that means that we need to continue climbing, but not as rapidly," Lagarde told a banking conference in Hanover, Germany on Thursday.

Eurozone inflation fell sharply to 6.1% in May, new data showed Thursday, on the back of cooling energy prices.

But the figure remains well above the ECB's two-percent target.

"Inflation is still too high," Lagarde said.

Like other central banks around the world, the ECB em-



ECB president Christine Lagarde

barked on an aggressive rate hiking cycle last year to bring down prices.

Moving "at our fastest pace ever", Lagarde said, the ECB has

lifted interest rates by 3.75 percentage points since last July.

"The real question is: how much higher do we need to go?" she said.

"The plane needs to climb high enough to reach its destination -- but not so high as to exceed it."

While energy prices had come down recently, after surging in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, higher wage demands were now becoming an important driver of inflation, Lagarde said.

Workers across Europe, boosted by a tight labour market, have been calling for salary increases to help compensate for the rising cost of living.

That was "especially visible" in Europe's biggest economy Germany, Lagarde said, where unions have clinched significant pay increases in recent months.

"There is no clear evidence that underlying inflation has peaked," Lagarde warned, refer-

ring to a measure of inflation that strips out volatile food and energy prices.

Similar concerns were raised by ECB governing council members at their meeting last month, according to the minutes released on Thursday.

"Some of the latest wage increases, notably in the public sector, were widely seen as worrisome," the account of the meeting read.

Negotiated wages, including one-off payments, "had grown by more than five percent year on year in January and February", policymakers noted, adding to "upside risks to inflation".

The ECB will unveil its next monetary policy decisions on June 15, with observers pencilling in a rate hike of 25 basis points.

AFP

Crisis-hit British business lobby insists on right to survive

London, UK – The new head of Britain's leading business lobby group on Sunday urged members to back her in a crunch vote this week as it confronts an existential crisis over alleged sexual misconduct.

The Confederation of British Industry has been mired in scandal since the claims were made public this year, with reports last week claiming the CBI could collapse without major cuts.

More than a dozen women say they were sexually harassed at the CBI and two others alleged they had been raped. Police have launched an investigation.

The allegations have triggered an exodus of companies from the CBI, and new director general Rain Newton-Smith said they had been "absolutely devastating".

But speaking on BBC television, she added: "I hope we are emerging from what has been a really deep and painful crisis for us as an or-

ganisation.

"I came back as a female leader to lead the organisation because I really believe in the people we have."

At an extraordinary general meeting on Tuesday, remaining members will vote on a resolution to put their confidence in reforms by Newton-Smith of the CBI's "governance, culture, and purpose".

Asked if she believed the organisation had a right to survive Tuesday's vote, she said: "I absolutely do because I've seen just how effective we are when we have a collective voice of business."

Newton-Smith took over from Tony Danker, who was forced out in April over a separate misconduct allegation.

Danker, arguing he was made a "fall guy", is consulting lawyers and may sue the CBI at an employment tribunal, the Sunday Times newspaper reported.

AFP

France avoids S&P credit downgrade

Paris, France – France managed to avoid a fresh credit downgrade from a leading rating agency on Friday, despite mounting concern over the country's surging national debt.

Leading ratings agency Fitch in April lowered its rating on France's debt, which is approaching three trillion euros (\$3.2tn).

It pointed to the country's hung parliament and public protests as risks to plans by President Emmanuel Macron to cut government spending.

But influential rival S&P Global on Friday maintained its "AA" rating when it updated its advice, dispelling fears France could face another downgrade over its chronic overspending that last saw a government run a budget surplus in the 1970s.

The agency said the decision to maintain the rating level was "mainly due the government's revised budgetary consolidation strategy", as well as recently implemented labour market and pension reforms.

"I take note of Standard & Poor's decision to leave France's debt rating unchanged", French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said in an interview with Le Journal du dimanche weekly.

"It's a positive signal. Our public finance strategy is clear.



French President Emmanuel Macron (second left) listens to civil security officers as he visits the Nîmes-Garons firefighters air base in Garons, southern France, on June 2 (AFP)

It is ambitious. And it is credible."

Macron pushed through a pension reform this year in the face of the biggest demonstrations in a generation, although the proposed savings will be lower than first expected because of concessions made to trade unions and opponents.

S&P warned that the outlook still remained "negative", saying that "tighter financial conditions and still-high core inflation" would restrain France's economic activity this year and next.

It also flagged concerns over the lack of a parliamentary majority, making it harder to imple-

ment policies. Macron came to power in 2017 promising to balance France's books and his first prime minister, Edouard Philippe, memorably told parliament that the country was "dancing on a volcano that is rumbling ever louder".

But unbudgeted tax cuts during Macron's first term following the so-called "Yellow Vest" anti-government revolt and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 have led to a sharp deterioration in the public finances since.

The country's debt currently stands at around 111% of gross national product (GDP), from just shy of 100% before Covid-19 when Macron put in place

one of Europe's most generous social safety nets.

The government has brought the annual public deficit down from a whopping 9.0% of GDP in 2020 to a forecast 4.9% this year.

Its projections show it falling to below 3.0% by 2027 when Macron will leave office.

But ratings agencies and investors are increasingly concerned about the credibility of the 45-year-old centrist leader whose successful prior career in investment banking once saw him dubbed the "Mozart of finance".

On top of multi-billion-euro subsidies packages and price

controls last year aimed at easing a cost-of-living crisis sparked by the war in Ukraine, Macron has since promised further tax cuts of two billion euros for the middle classes.

Increased defence spending -- set to rise 400bn euros over the next seven years -- is a further drag on the public purse.

The public finances "were already in a degraded state before the Covid-19 pandemic, but to our eyes they now call for urgent measures", the head of the national auditing office, Pierre Moscovici, said in March.

"Reforming the public finances... has to be a national priority," he argued.

The French central bank has issued similar warnings in milder language.

France has the highest level of public spending relative to the size of its economy of all countries monitored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a Paris-based economic institute.

Fitch lowered its rating by one notch on April 28 to "AA-".

Macron said the agency "was making a profound mistake in its political analysis" in comments to the l'Opinion magazine afterwards.

AFP

MHD official distributor of iconic Stellantis brands

Mohsin Haider Darwish (MHD) the foremost automotive distributor in the Sultanate, has announced its collaboration with Stellantis, the world's fourth-largest car maker. This exciting partnership will see MHD add several iconic brands from the Stellantis lineup to its esteemed portfolio.

MHD Automobiles will now proudly serve as the official distributor for Jeep, RAM, Dodge, and Alfa Romeo. These automotive brands have already garnered immense popularity and admiration among discerning car owners in Oman, a press release said.

This strategic partnership marks a significant milestone for MHD, solidifying its standing as a leading automotive distributor in the country. The addition of Jeep, RAM, Dodge, and Alfa Romeo to MHD's existing portfolio that includes - MG, Jaguar, Land Rover, INEOS, Hongqi and McLaren - represents a powerful synergy of renowned automotive brands.

By joining forces with Stellantis, MHD is poised to deliver unparalleled quality and unmatched customer experiences to automotive enthusiasts throughout Oman.

The decision to forge a partnership with Stellantis was strategic on multiple levels, as Stellantis recently unveiled its Dare Forward 2030 strategy for



the Middle East and Africa (MEA) region.

This ambitious strategy is centered on spearheading the energy transition in the region, with the aim of electrifying 100% of the Stellantis product portfolio by 2025. MHD shares a strong

commitment to green energy and sustainability, making this association with Stellantis all the more compelling.

Samir Cherfan, Chief Operating Officer at Stellantis Middle East & Africa, said, "At Stellantis, we are proud to partner with a

company with such strong foundations and a reputation for excellence. Mohsin Haider Darwish's extensive network, local market knowledge, and deep understanding of the automotive industry in Oman is the perfect complement to our iconic

brands, cutting-edge vehicles and commitment to innovation. We look forward to a mutually beneficial partnership characterised by collaboration, dedication, and an unwavering focus on our valued customers in Oman." Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO

- MHD Automobiles, added, "We are thrilled to partner with Stellantis and be the sole distributor of these iconic brands. "This collaboration solidifies our position as a leading automotive distributor in Oman, and we are excited to deliver unparalleled experiences to our future customers."

"By joining forces, we are confident that we will achieve new levels of success and contribute to the growth of the automotive industry in the country."



ISG holds investiture ceremony

Indian School Al Ghubra (ISG) held its investiture ceremony for the academic year 2023-2024 a fortnight ago marking the induction of its newly elected members of the Prefectorial Body.

The chief guest for the occasion was Cinzi Farise, CEO, Oman Cables Industry. The event commenced with the school anthem and a welcome speech by Papri Ghosh, principal.

The oath of office was then administered to the student leaders by the principal, as they received their badges from Farise and Ahmed Rayees, president of the School Management Committee.

Head girl Aditi Guru and head boy Daksh Saraf were the first to be invested. Vice head girl Ashna Claire Rathish, vice head boy Devansh Saraf, president

of the Student Council Shaivi Kumar, vice president Bhavesh Shabu Nair, speaker of the Student Council Alloy Joseph Rickfin, president of Round Square International Services Yogesh Karthikeyan were also inducted. Also, Jahnavi Vinod and Richik Mandal took charge as the sports captains for Girls and Boys respectively.

ODP signs pact to provide big data analysis for OQ group

Oman Data Park ODP, the sultanate's first managed cloud services and cyber security provider, signed an agreement to provide high-speed big data analysis services in the oil and gas field to OQ Group, the global integrated energy company in the Sultanate of Oman, as part of the activities of the 32 edition of COMEX, at the Oman International Convention and Exhibition Center.

The agreement was signed by Ashraf bin Hamad al Mamari, chief executive People, Technology & Culture, at OQ, and Eng Maqbool bin Salem al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park, a press release said.

In accordance with this agreement, Oman Data Park provides a cloud environment



that enables the analysing of the big data in high-speed, that paves the way to the transfer-

ring and hosting of OQ data in a highly efficient and secure manner to the Oman Data Park

data center within the borders of the Sultanate of Oman to ensure safe analysis of big data, based on Oman Data Park's distinguished capabilities in handling big data.

In the same context, Oman Data Park will provide a cloud digital workspace that automatically adapts to the needs of OQ for its employees and contractors, quickly expand scopes of work for software testing and development, provide WorkSpaces the helps the company to eliminate the complexity in managing hardware inventory, OS versions and patches, and Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI), which contributes to enhancing simplify the company's desktop delivery strategy.

42 Abu Dhabi hosts second chess tournament on campus

42 Abu Dhabi, the UAE capital's innovative and disruptive coding school that provides a unique peer-to-peer, gamified learning methodology, hosted the second edition of its most-awaited chess tournament in collaboration with Abu Dhabi Chess Club & Mind games.

The tournament was held in 42 Abu Dhabi's campus on June 1, in the presence of world-renowned chess champions, a press release said.

The tournament served as an interactive learning opportunity for 42 Abu Dhabi students to witness first-hand some of the most advanced strategies used in professional chess. During the tournament, 42 Abu Dhabi students competed with internationally recognised champions where they applied their critical thinking skills to create innovative strategies that took the game to even greater heights.



The tournament attracted the UAE's top chess players including Sultan al Zaabi, a former Arab chess champion who has held the title of International Master and has won the UAE President's Cup; Latifah al Darmaki, a medalist in the Arab Chess Olympiad and the UAE President Cup, and Sultan al Darmaki, former winner

of the UAE President Cup in the Junior category and winner of multiple medals in the UAE National Chess Championships.

By taking part in this chess tournament, 42 Abu Dhabi students engaged with seasoned professionals in a non-classroom setting and learned from their experiences. The tournament

paved the way for students to elevate their strategic thinking and problem-solving skills. These skills are a major part of the school's learning model, which focuses on promoting students' creativity and collaboration to prepare them to be key contributors in real-world projects.

JAC S3 and JS4 designed with latest technology

The automotive industry in Oman has seen tremendous growth recently, thanks to the introduction of new models by various acclaimed car makers. Two of the most popular models in this market are the JAC S3 and the JAC JS4, both of which have been designed with the latest technology to offer a well-rounded driving experience, a press release said.

The JAC S3 is a sporty hatchback that comes with an impressive range of features and specs. It has a 1.6ltr four-cylinder engine that offers 118hp and 150Nm of torque. It also has an impressive fuel capacity of 45ltr and can move with a top speed of 180km/hr. On the exterior, the S3 features stylish 5 spoke alloy wheels, daytime running lamps, and chrome accents on the grille and door handles for a visually appealing look.

The JAC JS4 is a popular SUV that is known for its bold and ag-



gressive styling. It is equipped with a powerful 1.5ltr four-cylinder Turbo engine that delivers up to 147hp and 210Nm of torque. It comes with amazing features which includes 360 camera, rear radars, electronic stability control (ESC) and much more. On the outside, the JS4 has a striking design with 5 spoke alloy wheels, a muscular front grille, and chrome accents on the door handles and roof rails.

Both vehicles come equipped

with a range of modern safety and convenience features. The S3 has multiple airbags, ABS brakes with EBD, cruise control, parking sensors, and an 8-inch touchscreen infotainment system with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay. Similarly, the JS4 comes with multiple airbags, Electronic Stability Control, hill-start assist, and a 10.25-inch touchscreen infotainment system with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

OHI Leo Burnett shine at Transform MEA 2023

OHI Leo Burnett, Oman's leading advertising and communications agency, announced its remarkable success at the Transform MEA 2023 Brand Awards where it secured a total of six prestigious accolades for its outstanding achievements in branding across various disciplines.

The agency's exceptional work was recognised with one gold, one silver, three bronze, and one highly commended trophy, underscoring its position as a true industry leader in Oman and the Middle East and Africa region, a press release said.

The gold award was presented to OHI Leo Burnett in recognition of its exceptional rebranding efforts following a merger/acquisition for Watania Takaful, a UAE-based prominent insurance company. OHI Leo Burnett was chosen as a partner for Watania Takaful among other Dubai-based branding agencies due to its deep understanding of the banking, finance, and insurance sectors and financial advisory



Ammar Al Saleh



Srikanth Viswanathan

marketing communications. The agency's innovative and strategic approach to the rebranding process impressed the judges, earning them the highest honour in this category.



Ammar Maqbool al Saleh, vice chairman of OHI Group, said, "We are immensely proud of the recognition we have received at the Transform MEA 2023 Brand Awards. Securing six awards, in-

cluding the gold for our exceptional work with Watania Takaful, demonstrates our unwavering commitment to delivering outstanding branding solutions to our clients.

It reinforces our competitive standing in the region and further strengthens our ability to provide exceptional services to our esteemed clients in Oman. Being chosen over Dubai-based agen-

cies demonstrates the trust and confidence our clients place in our expertise." OHI Leo Burnett's success at the Transform MEA 2023 Brand Awards was a testament to the

agency's strong emphasis on a well-defined process and innovative creative delivery. Srikanth Viswanathan, associate general manager of Planning and Strategy at OHI Leo Burnett, said, "Our success at the awards is a reflection of the meticulous planning and strategic thinking that goes into every project we undertake. Our team's pursuit of delivering relevant, creative and impactful branding solutions, has set us apart in the industry."

The Transform MEA Brand Awards are highly regarded within the branding and marketing community, recognising outstanding work and achievements in brand development and strategy across the Middle East and Africa.

The awards celebrate organisations that demonstrate exceptional creativity, innovation, and effectiveness in building strong brands. OHI Leo Burnett has consistently been recognized at this awards platform over the last decade.

Heath minister meets OWA members

To actively engage women in promoting and strengthening sustainable healthcare across the community, H E Dr Hilal Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health met with a number of Omani Women's Association (OWA) members as well as representatives of other public sectors, in Masirah.

Dr Fatima Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health for Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs at the Association headquarters was also present, a press release said.

The health minister highlighted the crucial role of civil society institutions, primarily the Omani Women's Associations, stressing their contribution to



promoting community awareness and health culture towards maintaining the health and well-being of families.

He urged the association to contribute towards raising the level of awareness on most critical risks to woman's health, es-

pecially in light of the received reports and statistics that require working together out of the social and national responsibility.

Electricity supply companies start regular operations

In response to the government directives, issued in December 2021 to restructure the electricity sector, and in-line with the group initiatives to enhance efficiency, Nama Holding announces the commencement of operations of the Electricity Distribution and Supply Companies.

Nama Group joined hands with a number of entities such as the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and the Authority for Public Services Regulation to guarantee the project completion based on a strategic plan-

ning, a press release said.

Nama Group successfully managed to merge and restructure the distribution and supply companies (Muscat Electricity Distribution Company, Mazoon Electricity Company, Majan Electricity Company and Tanweer) into two main companies - Nama Electricity Distribution and Nama Supply.

This step comes in a bid to manage the provision of electricity services to all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman except for Dhofar Governorate, operated by Nama Dhofar Services.



Azzan al Saleh

Bank Nizwa appoints new assistant general manager

Bank Nizwa recently announced the appointment of Azzan al Saleh as the new assistant general manager of the bank's Small and Medium Enterprises division.

As a highly qualified individual in the field, Saleh is set to inject fresh ideas into the department and lead high-impact campaigns that will offer added value to SMEs in Oman, a press release said.

Khaled al Kayed, CEO at Bank Nizwa, said, "Bank Nizwa recognises that SMEs play a vital role in shaping a country's economy and have immense potential to generate employment opportunities, spearhead sustainable ventures, and contribute to the overall social welfare of the community. SMEs are also quick to adapt to the changing requirements of the market."

"Fast-paced innovation is, therefore, key to aligning with the needs of SMEs and servicing their varied demands. Bank Nizwa's SME division has been at the forefront of extending the necessary support to SMEs by addressing their unique needs through customised Shari'ah-compliant financial solutions. As we continue to enhance our portfolio whilst advocating the benefits of Islamic banking, we are certain that Saleh's years of expertise, strong industry knowledge and inherent zeal will help us achieve new milestones in the sector."



Ahli Islamic bank launches cash back offer for refuelling

Ahli Islamic, in its unwavering commitment to providing exceptional benefits to its valued customers, has partnered with Oman Oil Marketing Company (Oman Oil) to introduce an exclusive cash back reward programme for its credit card holders.

The promotion entitles all credit card holders to receive a generous 20% cash back when refuelling at any of the Oman Oil fuel stations. This exciting offer start on June 1 and will last for a period of five days every month for three months, a press release said.

Customers can benefit from this offer up to a maximum cap of RO10 per customer. The cash back amount will be credited to the customer's account within 30 days following the conclusion of the campaign.

Noora Sultan, AGM - head of

Retail Banking at Ahli Islamic said, "At Ahli Islamic, we are dedicated to providing our customers with products and services that not only meet their expectations but also adhere to the principles of Shariah-compliance. Through this cash back promotion, we aim to add value to our ever-growing customer base. We understand the significance of satisfying our customers' overall needs, and we remain committed to nurturing strong relationships with them."

She further added, "Ahli Islamic credit card holders enjoy a range of services and benefits. In line with our commitment to Oman Vision 2040 objectives, we strive to continue our digital transformation journey. This promotion aligns with our goal of providing customer-centric, innovative, and secure banking solutions to customers."

LuLu's Adeeb Ahamed appointed to FICCI ME Council

Adeeb Ahamed, managing director of LuLu Financial Holdings, has been appointed as the Chair of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) Middle East Council.

Adeeb is a multifaceted entrepreneur with business interests in financial services and hospitality. His company LuLu Financial Holdings has a presence in 10 countries across the Middle east, Indian sub-continent and Asia-Pacific regions, with investments in India including the NBFC LuLu Finserv and cross-border payments



Adeeb Ahamed

company LuLu Forex spread across 40 cities, apart from luxury hospitality assets, a press release said.

Adeeb has been engaged with industry bodies in India for several years and is a known face for his steadfast support in furthering the relationship between GCC countries and India.

His expertise in various domains and vehement support for the startup ecosystem are well documented among the business community.

In his new role, Adeeb participated in the 6th meeting of the FICCI Middle East Council held

in New Delhi on Wednesday. During the meeting, council members, including Shailesh Pathak, secretary general of FICCI, Goutam Ghosh, senior director and regional head, Africa, Middle East, South Asia, and Deepti Pant, joint director and head, Africa, Middle East, and South Asia, discussed the growing investment opportunities for businesses in both regions.

They also touched upon key initiatives planned for the upcoming year and identified country-wise ambassadors from the business community.

Korean boy band B.I.G. coming to Muscat

B.I.G (Boys in Groove), a renowned Korean boy band will hold a concert on June 9, at Madinat Al Irfan Theatre, OCEC (Oman Convention and Exhibition Center).

B.I.G has been captivating fans worldwide since its debut in 2014 and is gaining increasingly wider popularity and reputation in the Arab world, attracting a large number of fans and audiences. The boy band has already performed in such Arab countries as Tunisia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

The group was also invited to perform for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia at the Korean Presidential House in 2019 to welcome the visit of the Crown Prince to Korea. The group will continue their regional tour after its forthcoming performance in Muscat, Oman, by performing in



Kuwait on June 12.

The upcoming concert is a joint effort organised and co-sponsored by the Korean Em-

bassy to the Sultanate, the OCEC, and the Korea-Arab Society. The Korea-Arab Society, established in 2008, aims to

promote cultural and people-to-people exchanges while upholding mutual cultural ties and heritage between Korea and 22 Arab countries.

The Korea-Arab Society has enjoyed strong and generous support by the governments and stakeholders of Korea and Arab partners including Oman.

The concert will showcase the beauty of contemporary music exchanges between Korea and Arab countries by incorporating a blend of Korean and Arabic titles including popular songs such as 'La Bezzaf' and 'LM3ALLEM.' The concert will also serve as a rich platform for talented musicians from Arab countries, featuring performances by Mustafa Waad, from Iraq, and Anas Marzi, from Morocco.

(For tickets visit: ocec.om and muscat.platinumlist.net)

IN BRIEF

Four children drown in Canada while fishing
Montreal, Canada - Four children died after being swept away by the tide while fishing on a riverbank in Canada's Quebec province, police said on Saturday.
“According to preliminary information, a group of eleven people were fishing for capelin on foot along the shore when they were caught by the tide,” the Surete Du Quebec provincial police force told AFP.
The mishap unfolded along the St. Lawrence River near Portneuf-sur-Ner, a municipality northeast of Quebec City. Six of the people were rescued, while five others were missing overnight when authorities were called Friday into Saturday.
A few hours later, four minors over the age of 10 were found unconscious and taken to hospital, where ‘their deaths were confirmed by a doctor’, the police said.

Australia plans marine park the size of Spain
Sydney, Australia - Australia plans to create a marine park almost the size of Spain around remote islands off its southeast coast, the government announced on Sunday. Under the proposals, the existing Macquarie Island Marine Park will be tripled in size, bringing a total of 475,465sqkm (183,578 square miles) under protection.
That is an area roughly the size of Spain or Cameroon and much larger than Vietnam or Japan. The protections mean the area will be ‘completely closed to fishing, mining and other extractive activities’, according to Australia’s Minister of Environment Tanya Plibersek.
Existing fishery operations targeting the Patagonian toothfish will be allowed to continue.

14 killed in southwest China landslide
Beijing, China - Fourteen people were killed and five are missing following a landslide in southwestern China’s Sichuan province on Sunday, the local government said.
The landslide ‘took place high on a mountain’ at 6am (2200 GMT) at a state-owned forestry station in Jinkouhe, near the city of Leshan, the local government said in an online statement.
“As of 3:30pm, the remains of 14 victims have been recovered, while five people remain missing,” the statement said. Authorities sent over 180 people and more than a dozen pieces of rescue and recovery equipment to the site, according to the statement.
AFP

China warns ‘NATO-like’ alliances could lead to conflict in Asia-Pacific

Singapore, Singapore - China’s defence minister warned on Sunday against establishing NATO-like military alliances in the Asia-Pacific, saying they would plunge the region into a ‘whirlpool’ of conflict.
Li Shangfu’s comments came a day after US and Chinese military vessels sailed close to each other in the flashpoint Taiwan Strait, an incident that provoked anger from both sides.
“Attempts to push for NATO-like (alliances) in the Asia-Pacific is a way of kidnapping regional countries and exaggerating conflicts and confrontations,” Li told a security conference in Singapore also attended by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.
Li warned that these alliances would ‘plunge the Asia-Pacific into a whirlpool of disputes and conflicts’.
Li’s comments echoed long-held Chinese criticism of the United States’ efforts to shore up alliances in the region and counter China’s rise.
The United States is a member of AUKUS, which groups it with Australia and Britain.
Washington is also a member of the QUAD group, which includes Australia, India and Japan.
“Today’s Asia-Pacific needs open and inclusive cooperation, not buddyding up into small cliques,” Li said at the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit.
Li sought to paint the United States as the trigger of regional instability, and China as seeking



China’s Minister of National Defence Li Shangfu salutes the audience before delivering a speech during the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore on Sunday (AFP)

to ease tensions.
“It cannot be denied that if a fierce conflict or confrontation occurs between China and the United States, it would bring unbearable pain for the world,” he said.

Miscalculations
On Saturday, Austin called for top-level defence talks with Beijing to prevent miscalculations.
“The more that we talk, the more that we can avoid the misunderstandings and miscalculations that could lead to crisis or conflict,” Austin said.
Also on Saturday, the United States deployed a destroyer from its 7th Fleet along with a Canadian naval vessel through the Tai-

wan Strait.
China responded by sending one of its naval ships close to the US destroyer, the USS Chung-Hoon, according to the Pentagon.
The strait is one of the world’s most tense potential military flashpoints. China claims Taiwan as its territory - vowing to take it one day, by force if necessary - and has in recent years ramped up military and political pressure on the island.
Austin on Sunday described the incident as ‘extremely dangerous’, saying the Chinese vessel crossed ‘probably 150 feet (46 metres)’ in front of the Chung-Hoon. “I call upon the (Chinese) leadership to really do the right things to rein in that

kind of conduct, because I think accidents can happen that could cause things to spiral out of control,” Austin told reporters in Singapore.
Saturday’s Taiwan Strait encounter followed what the US military said was an ‘unnecessarily aggressive manoeuvre’ by one of Beijing’s fighter’s near a US surveillance plane in the South China Sea last week.
Li told the Singapore audience on Sunday that the onus was on the United States to pull its military presence away from areas near China.
“Our Chinese military aircraft and warships won’t ever go near the airspace and territorial waters of other countries to engage in

so-called navigational hegemony,” Li said.
“The best thing would be if all countries, and especially their warplanes and warships, refrained from wandering through other country’s territorial airspace and waters. What are you hanging around here for?”
Austin and Li shook hands and spoke briefly at the Singapore event’s opening dinner on Friday, but there was no substantive exchange.
The United States had invited Li to meet with Austin on the sidelines of the conference, but China declined.
A senior US defense official told journalists on Sunday that the US had also offered lower level meetings but that China didn’t respond.
A member of China’s delegation told AFP that the removal of US sanctions on Li was a precondition for talks.
However, there have been some signs of improved dialogue between the two nations.
CIA Director William Burns made a secret trip to China last month, a US official announced on Friday.
Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink will also travel to China on Sunday for a rare visit.
In his speech in Singapore on Saturday, Lloyd outlined Washington’s extensive partnerships in the region.
AFP

Kim’s sister slams UN Security Council

Seoul, South Korea - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s powerful sister Kim Yo Jong slammed the UN Security Council for holding a ‘most unfair’ meeting over Pyongyang’s recent spy satellite launch, state media reported on Sunday.
North Korea’s new Chollima-1 rocket lost thrust and crashed into the sea with its satellite payload on Wednesday, Pyongyang said in a rare same-day announcement, adding that another test will be conducted as soon as possible.
The United States, South Korea and Japan slammed the launch, saying it violated UN resolutions barring the nuclear-armed country from any tests using ballistic missile technology.
The UN’s under-secretary-general for political and peacebuilding affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, took the Security Council to task on Friday for a ‘lack of unity and action’ on North Korea’s tests.
Kim Yo Jong said the UN meeting was another reminder the council was acting as a ‘political appendage’ to ‘gangster-like’ Washington.
AFP

Three Chinese astronauts return safely to Earth

Beijing, China - Three Chinese astronauts working at the country’s space station have returned safely to Earth, state media reported on Sunday, hailing the mission as a ‘complete success’.
The return capsule of the *Shenzhou-15* spaceship touched down at a landing site in northern China’s Inner Mongolia region, according to state news agency Xinhua.
Astronauts Fei Junlong, Deng Qingming and Zhang Lu emerged from the capsule in ‘good physical condition’, Xinhua reported. “The mission... was a complete success,” it said.
Footage showed medical officials in white jumpsuits and face masks swaddling the astronauts in blue blankets and carrying them away from the arid landing site, where the copper-coloured



Astronaut Zhang Lu waves as he leaves the capsule of the *Shenzhou-15* spaceship after landing in China’s Inner Mongolia on Sunday (AFP)

capsule lay flanked by red flags.
The trio had spent six months at the Tiangong space station, conducting spacewalks and a variety of scientific experiments.
China last week sent three more astronauts - including its first civilian in orbit - to the space

station as part of the successor *Shenzhou-16* mission. The world’s second-largest economy has pumped billions of dollars into its military-run space programme in an effort to catch up with the United States and Russia.
AFP

CELEBRATING VESAK DAY



Buddhist monks attend a parade to celebrate the Vesak Day at Borobudur temple in Magelang on Sunday (AFP)

Nepali guide rescues Malaysian climber from Everest death zone

Kathmandu, Nepal - A Nepali guide abandoned his client’s Everest summit bid to rescue a Malaysian climber in a deadly mountaineering season that has seen at least twelve deaths.
Gelje Sherpa was guiding a Chinese client to the 8,849-metre (29,032-feet) peak and planned to assist him to paraglide down.
Instead, only a few hundred metres from the summit, they came across a lone man clinging to a rope and shivering in the area known as the ‘death zone’.
The area above 8,000 metres has earned its name because of its thin air, freezing temperatures and low oxygen levels that heighten the risk of altitude sickness. It is also notorious for its difficult terrain.
“When I found him in that state, my heart did not let me leave him there,” Sherpa told AFP. Many other climbers had

walked past the man that day, but he declined to criticise them.
“It is a place where you have to think of your survival first,” he said. Sherpa told his client - who will have paid at least US\$45,000 to attempt Everest, including a permit fee of US\$11,000 - to return without a summit.
“When I decided to go down, my client did not agree at first. Of course, he was there after spending a lot of money, it must have been his dream for years and he had to find time to come here to climb.
“He got angry and said he wanted to go to the summit.
“I had to scold him and tell him that he has to descend because he was my responsibility and I couldn’t send him to the summit on his own. He got upset.”
He explained that he wanted to take the sick man down the



Nepali guide Gelje Sherpa speaks during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu on Friday (AFP)

mountain.
“Then he realised that by ‘rescue’ I meant that I wanted to save him. He understood and then he apologised later.”

‘You saved my life’
Sherpa, 30, fitted the ailing climber with his supplemental oxygen supply, improving some

of his symptoms, but he was still unable to walk.
The rocky uneven terrain meant that Sherpa, who is about 1.6 metres tall (five feet and three inches) and weighs 55kg, had to carry the Malaysian in some sections. “It is a very difficult task to carry someone and bring them down from there. But some sec-

tions are very rocky, I couldn’t drag him,” said Sherpa.

Gelje Sherpa abandoned his client’s Everest summit bid to rescue the climber in a deadly mountaineering season
“If I did that, he could have broken his bones, he was already not doing well.”
Sherpa hauled the man down nearly 700 metres for almost six hours to Camp 4 by himself.
“I’ve been a part of many search and rescue missions, but this was very challenging,” he said. Joined by another guide, the

pair wrapped the climber in sleeping mats and secured him with ropes, dragging him on snowy slopes and carrying him on their backs when necessary.
Finally, they arrived at Camp 3 at 7,162 metres (23,500 feet) and a helicopter using a long line lifted the stricken climber down to the base camp.
Sherpa was not able to meet the Malaysian climber again but received a message thanking him. “He wrote me ‘You saved my life, you are god to me,’” Sherpa said.
Nepali guides, usually ethnic Sherpas from the valleys around Everest, are considered the backbone of the climbing industry and bear huge risks to carry equipment and food, fix ropes and repair ladders.
Sherpa’s video of the rescue two weeks ago has been liked on his Instagram more than 35,000 times and shared widely over so-

cial media, many applauding his selfless decision.
“As a guide you feel a sense of responsibility for others on the mountain and you have to make tough decisions,” said Ang Norbu Sherpa, president of Nepal National Mountain Guide Association. “What he has done is commendable.” Nepal issued a record 478 permits for Everest to foreign climbers this season and about 600 climbers and guides reached the top.
Twelve climbers have been confirmed dead, and five more are still missing.
Gelje Sherpa has reached the world’s highest point six times and did not regret his decision to turn back that day.
“People just focus on the summit, but everyone can do that,” he said. “To bring someone from higher than 8,000 metres is a lot more difficult than to summit.”
AFP

Kuwait to stage 7th election in just over 10 years on Tuesday

Kuwait City, Kuwait - Kuwait is staging its seventh general election in just over 10 years on Tuesday as the oil-rich Gulf state remains mired in a political impasse undermining hopes of economic reform.

Fearing that widespread scepticism will discourage many people from voting, the authorities have festooned the capital with posters in an attempt to encourage a better turnout.

The latest general election was called by the emir last month after he again dissolved parliament amid a persistent deadlock with the executive branch that has stalled reforms.

Kuwait adopted a parliamentary system in 1962, but repeated political crises over the past years have resulted in state paralysis.

The emirate suffers from constant stand-offs between elected lawmakers and cabinets installed by the reigning Al-Sabah family, which maintains a firm grip on political life.

"We have to wake up and face up to this great frustration," activist and university professor Sheikha al-Jassem told AFP of the political crisis.

One of the world's largest producers of crude oil, Kuwait is the only Gulf Arab state to have an elected parliament with powers to hold government to account.

On April 9, its seventh new government in three years was



Kuwaiti candidate and former MP Jenan Boushehri speaks alongside Anoud al-Enezi and Fahima al-Rashedi, during a panel discussion at the Women's Cultural Society in Kuwait City on May 29 (AFP)

announced after the previous cabinet resigned in January only three months after taking office.

Just over a week later, the ruling family dissolved parliament and called a new general election.

The emir, 85-year-old Nawaf al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, has stepped back from political life in favour of the crown prince, 82-year-old Meshal al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

'Incomplete' democracy

MPs and civil society in Kuwait regularly take the authorities to task, but the Al-Sababs keep a

tight hold on ministerial portfolios, reserving key posts for the family.

In March, the constitutional court nullified the results of legislative elections held last year - in which the opposition won the most seats - and ruled that the previous parliament elected in 2020 be reinstated instead.

That parliament was then dissolved by the emir on April 17.

The opposition is taking part in Tuesday's vote in which 207 candidates, including 13 women, are standing, the lowest number of candidates in a legislative election since 1996.

Jassem has herself stood for

election in the past, but will no longer do so under a current stalemate she attributes to the lack of voter lists and political parties being banned.

"Political life needs to be better organised," she said.

"Everyone acts too individually. Our commitment is superficial and our democracy incomplete."

Disputes between parliament and the executive branch often break out when MPs want to question ministers about allegations of corruption or poor management of the public purse.

Kuwaiti analyst Ayed al-Manaa told AFP the people have

We have to wake up and face up to this great frustration. Political life needs to be better organised. Everyone acts too individually. Our commitment is superficial and our democracy incomplete

SHEIKHA AL-JASSEM

a 'lack of confidence' in the political class.

'Kuwaitis are tired' by the situation, he said, adding that he feared the latest election would again result in a scenario in which the government resigns and parliament is dissolved.

The continuing political stand-off in Kuwait, and resulting lack of stability, has scared off investors, dashing hopes of reform in a wealthy country struggling to diversify in similar ways to its Gulf neighbours.

Regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are all hydrocarbon-based economies that have diversified in recent years to attract more investment from abroad.

AFP



Pedestrians walk past an uprooted traffic light on a street in Dakar on Saturday, following deadly violence in the Senegalese capital (AFP)

Senegal death toll rises to 15 as tensions persist

Dakar, Senegal - Tensions remained high in Senegal on Saturday after clashes brought the death toll to 15 since a court convicted opposition leader Ousmane Sonko.

Sonko's ongoing legal woes have prompted rare flare-ups of violence in Senegal, typically a bastion of stability in West Africa, and foreign allies have urged a return to calm.

Disturbances were reported on Saturday in the suburbs of the capital Dakar.

But several neighbourhoods that had experienced outbursts of violence on Thursday and Friday remained calm, said the minister of the interior, saying there had been 'a drop in intensity' of the demonstrations.

Antoine Diome said 'about 500 arrests' had been made since the start of the protest movement.

He added that the government suspected overseas involvement. "There is foreign influence and it is the country that is under attack," he said, declining to elaborate.

Sonko, a 48-year-old former tax inspector, was initially charged with rape but was on Thursday convicted on a lesser charge of morally 'corrupting' a young woman and sentenced to two years in prison.

He claims the charges against him were a bid by the government to torpedo his political career ahead of the presidential election next year.

His conviction may take him out of the running for the 2024 poll.

Clashes between Sonko's supporters and police broke out after the ruling, leading to 15 deaths over two days, according to government figures.

Shops and businesses were ransacked.

The army was deployed to the streets but scuffles erupted on Friday night in parts of the capital, Dakar, and in Ziguinchor. Diome accused protesters of trying to 'destabilise the country'.

"These are irresponsible people," he said. "They called for demonstrations. They called for public buildings to be burned. They called for the collapse of the state."

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

He is presumed to be at his Dakar home, where he has been blocked in by security forces since last weekend. He alleges he is being 'illegally held'.

AFP

Turkey's Erdogan unveils new cabinet

Ankara, Turkey - Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday unveiled a new cabinet lineup, naming a powerful spy chief as foreign minister and market friendly Mehmet Simsek as finance minister, hours after swearing in for a third term as president.

Erdogan took oath of office in parliament after winning a historic runoff election to extend his two-decade rule and promised to serve 'impartially'.

He also called for unity and the anger and resentment of the campaign to be set aside as he spoke during a lavish ceremony at his presidential palace in the capital Ankara attended by dozens of world leaders.

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

Erdogan won 52.18 per cent of



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (centre) unveils the country's new cabinet at Cankaya Palace in Ankara on Saturday (AFP)

Erdogan changed almost all his cabinet members except for his health and culture ministers

the vote while his secular rival Kemal Kilicdaroglu scored 47.82 per cent, official results show.

"As president, I swear upon my honour and integrity, before the great Turkish nation... to work with all my power to protect the

existence and independence of the state... and to fulfil my duty impartially," Erdogan said in parliament after a ceremony outside the building where he saluted soldiers under pouring rain.

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

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

Turkey's longest-serving

leader, who has survived mass protests, a corruption scandal and a failed coup attempt since he came to power in 2003, now faces significant immediate challenges in his third term, including the slowing economy and tensions with the West.

New cabinet

Erdogan changed almost all his cabinet members except for his health and culture ministers.

He named former deputy prime minister Mehmet Simsek, a reassuring figure with international stature, as treasury and finance minister.

Addressing the country's economic troubles will be Erdogan's first priority, with inflation running at 43.70 per cent, partly due to his unorthodox policy of cutting interest rates to stimulate growth.

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

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

AFP

US, Saudi urge Sudan parties to resume talks

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - The United States and Saudi Arabia on Sunday continued to push for renewed truce talks between Sudan's warring generals as fighting rages into its eighth week.

Representatives of Sudan's regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces remained in the Saudi coastal city of Jeddah despite the earlier collapse of ceasefire talks, the Saudi foreign ministry said.

A five-day extension of a US- and Saudi-brokered but oft-ignored truce formally ex-

pired on Saturday evening, with no signs of the conflict abating in Sudan and fears that the rival sides were poised for an escalation.

The Saudi and US mediators nonetheless called for 'the parties to agree to and effectively implement a new ceasefire, with the aim of building to a permanent cessation of hostilities', Riyadh said.

The last truce was agreed to allow desperately needed humanitarian aid and safe passages into areas of Sudan.

AFP

Uganda reports 54 peacekeepers killed in Somalia militant attack

Kampala, Uganda - Some 54 Ugandan peacekeepers died when militants besieged an African Union base in Somalia last week, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni said, in one of the worst recent attacks by Al-Shabaab militants in the war-torn country.

"We discovered the lifeless bodies of 54 fallen soldiers, including a commander," Museveni said in a Twitter post late on Saturday. The veteran leader was speaking during a meeting with members of his governing National Resistance Movement party, the presidency told AFP on Sunday.

The toll is one of the heaviest yet since pro-government forces backed by the AU force known



Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (AFP)

as ATMIS launched an offensive against Al-Shabaab last August.

It was also a rare admission of a major military death toll by African Union members.

Al-Shabaab, which has been

waging a deadly insurgency against Somalia's fragile central government for more than a decade, claimed responsibility for the May 26 attack, saying it had overrun the base and killed

137 soldiers.

Al-Shabaab is known to exaggerate claims of battlefield gains for propaganda purposes, and the governments of nations contributing troops to the AU force rarely confirm casualties.

The militants drove a car laden with explosives into the base in Bulo Marer, 120km (75 miles) southwest of the capital Mogadishu, leading to a gunfight, local residents and a Somali military commander told AFP.

Museveni had already said last week that 'some of the soldiers there did not perform as expected and panicked' as some 800 assailants attacked.

That forced a withdrawal to a nearby base some nine kilometres (6 miles) away, he said,

deploring 'a missed opportunity to annihilate' the Qaeda-linked insurgents. "The mistake was

We discovered the lifeless bodies of 54 fallen soldiers, including a commander

YOWERI MUSAVERI

made by two commanders, Maj. Oluka and Maj. Obbo, who ordered the soldiers to retreat," Museveni said on Saturday, adding that they would face charges in a court martial.

However, 'our soldiers

demonstrated remarkable resilience and reorganised themselves, resulting in the recapture of the base'.

ATMIS has so far not disclosed how many people died, but said it sent in helicopter gunships as reinforcement after the pre-dawn raid.

The United States also said it conducted an airstrike near the base a day after it was attacked.

US Africa Command said it 'destroyed weapons and equipment unlawfully taken by Al-Shabaab fighters', without specifying when or where the weapons were stolen.

'All-out war'

The attack highlights the endemic security problems in the

Horn of Africa country as it struggles to emerge from decades of conflict and natural disasters. Last year, Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud launched an 'all-out war' against Al-Shabaab, rallying Somalis to help flush out members of the militant group he described as 'bedbugs'.

In recent months, the army and militias known as 'macawisley' have retaken swathes of territory in the centre of the country in an operation backed by ATMIS and US airstrikes.

But despite the gains by the pro-government forces, the militants have continued to strike with lethal force against civilian and military targets.

AFP

Syrian top diplomat discusses aid on visit to key ally Iraq

Baghdad, Iraq - Syria's foreign minister on Sunday discussed humanitarian aid and combating the illegal drugs trade with key ally Iraq during a visit to Baghdad as Damascus emerges from years of diplomatic isolation.

The visit by Faisal Mekdad comes weeks after the Arab League agreed to end Syria's suspension from the 22-member bloc, bringing President Bashar al-Assad's regime back into the regional fold after years of civil war.

Iraq remained an ally of Damascus throughout the wider Arab boycott, never severing relations and maintaining close cooperation during Syria's civil war, particularly over the fight against the Islamic State group.

Baghdad was 'one of the initiators' of Syria's return to the Arab League, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said in a joint press conference with Mekdad.

The two also discussed the issue of Syrian refugees who fled the country after war erupted, many of whom now live in Iraq as well as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

"We received about 250,000 refugees," said Hussein, who added that the majority of them live in camps in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region.



Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein (right) and his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad hold a press conference in Baghdad on Sunday (AFP)

He said the next step would be getting humanitarian aid into Syria, which has been devastated by the war and by a February 6 earthquake that also hit Turkey and killed tens of thousands in

both countries. The quake triggered a flurry of aid efforts and diplomatic moves that help spur Syria's reintegration back into the wider Arab region.

Mekdad on Sunday thanked Iraq for its 'solidarity' after the quake, also hailing the 'progression' of bilateral relations.

"We will continue to cooperate to combat terrorism and eliminate the danger posed by drugs," he added in a reference to the illegal trade in the stimulant captagon.

Mekdad was also expected to meet Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani and President Abdul Latif Rashid, Iraqi

foreign ministry spokesman Ahmed al-Sahaf told the state news agency.

The Arab League voted on May 7 to readmit Syria after its suspension in 2011 over Assad's brutal repression of pro-democracy protests that later devolved into an all-out war.

At the time, Iraq had abstained from the vote that resulted in Damascus' suspension.

The two countries share a 600km (370-mile) porous desert border that has continued to see militant activity even years after the defeat of IS.

The militant group took over large swathes of both countries

in 2014, declaring its 'caliphate' before it was defeated in 2017 in Iraq and in 2019 in Syria.

Drug trafficking has also proliferated in past years, with the trade of the amphetamine-like drug captagon exploding in the region, much of it across the Syria-Iraq border.

Iraqi guards in March seized over three million captagon pills at the border with Syria.

In addition to security coordination, Baghdad and Damascus continue to coordinate on other key issues including water as both countries face dangerous shortages.

AFP

India: Signal system behind train crash

The railway minister said the deadliest train disaster was linked to the signal system

Balasure, India - The cause of India's deadliest train disaster in decades was linked to the signal system, the railway minister said on Sunday, as families scoured hospitals and morgues for missing relatives and deaths were expected to top 288.

Mounds of debris were piled high at the site of Friday night's crash near Balasure, in the eastern state of Odisha, as workers repairing the tracks cleared the smashed carriages and blood-stained wreckage where hundreds were also injured.

Hospitals have been overwhelmed by the number of casualties. "We have identified the cause of the accident and the people responsible for it," India's Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told news agency ANI. He said it was 'not appropriate' to give details before a final investigation report.

There was confusion about the exact sequence of events but reports cited railway officials saying a signalling error had sent the Coromandal Express running south from Kolkata to Chennai onto a side track.

It slammed into a freight train and the wreckage derailed an express running north from India's



A victim's family member weeps at a business park used as temporary mortuary to identify the dead recovered from the carriage wreckage of a three-train collision near Balasure, in India's eastern state of Odisha, on Sunday (AFP)

We have identified the cause of the accident and the people responsible for it. But it is not appropriate to give details before a final report

ASHWINI VAISHNAW

tech hub Bengaluru to Kolkata that was also passing the site.

Sudhanshu Sarangi, director general of Odisha Fire Services, said the death toll stood at 288 but was expected to rise further, potentially approaching 380.

Odisha's chief secretary Pradeep Jena confirmed that

about 900 injured people had been hospitalised.

'Someone should be punished'

Vaishnaw said the 'change that occurred during electronic interlocking, the accident happened due to that', referring to a technical

term for a complex signal system designed to stop trains colliding by arranging their movement on the tracks.

"Whoever did it, and how it happened, will be found out after proper investigation," he said.

Local media have quoted a preliminary investigation report, with the *Times of India* reporting on Sunday that 'human error in signalling may have caused the collision between three trains'.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the crash site and injured passengers in hospital on

Saturday and said 'no one responsible' would be spared.

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

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

A high school close to the crash site was turned into a makeshift morgue, but officials said many of the bodies were so disfigured that several distraught

families could only identify their loved ones by pieces of jewellery.

"There were bodies with only a torso, an entirely burnt face, disfigured skull and no other visible identity markers left," said Ranajit Nayak, the police officer in charge of releasing the bodies at the school.

In sweltering heat, unidentified bodies were being transferred to bigger centres and officials suggested some would only be identified by DNA testing.

Mohammad Abid, 35, said his 18-year-old son had somehow survived the crash without injuries but he was looking for his cousin, who had been travelling with him.

"I want to know how two trains were allowed on the same track... someone should be punished for this," Abid said.

Grief-stricken Vishwanath Sahni, 47, was searching for his 26-year-old son Manoj Kumar, who had been travelling to Chennai for work in the textile industry. He was waiting at a morgue after touring every hospital that he could. "I don't know if I'll find my son," he said.

Beside him waited his friend Mahender Yadav, 60, whose two sons travelling with Kumar were recovering in hospital.

"One of them has serious injuries but I know that they are in a hospital and doctors will do their best," Yadav said. "I just wanted to be with Sahni and hope that he finds his son."

Authorities said every hospital between the crash site and the state capital Bhubaneswar, around 200km (125 miles) away, had received victims.

AFP

Traffic in Suez Canal resumes

Ismailia, Egypt - Egypt deployed three tugboats on Sunday to tow away an oil tanker that had broken down and caused brief delays in the Suez Canal, authorities in charge of the vital waterway said.

Traffic in both directions returned to normal after a brief disruption when the Malta-flagged Seavigour experienced a 'machinery malfunction' while en route from Russia to China, the Suez Canal Authority said.

Three tugboats 'successfully towed and moored the ship' at a shipyard where the technical fault will be fixed before the tanker 'resumes its crossing', according to a statement.

Brief disruptions caused by ships breaking down or running aground are common in the waterway, through which about 10 per cent of global maritime trade passes.

Most are refloated within hours, allowing traffic to resume.

In March 2021 the giant container ship Ever Given caused a nearly week-long stoppage in Suez traffic after it became lodged diagonally in the waterway.

The disruption cost billions of dollars in shipping delays, with Egypt losing between US\$12mn and US\$15mn for every day of the closure.

AFP



Rescuers working on the rubble of a residential building damaged by a missile strike on the outskirts of Dnipro, on Saturday (AFP)

Two-year-old girl killed in Moscow strike in Dnipro

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukrainian rescuers outside the city of Dnipro on Sunday recovered the body of a two-year-old girl from the rubble left by a Russian strike on a residential area.

On the other side of the border, Russian authorities asked villagers living in a heavily shelled district on the Ukraine border to leave their homes after deadly strikes prompted thousands to flee.

The Russian attack that hit the Pidhorodnenska suburb of the central city of Dnipro on Saturday came as Moscow has this

week intensified aerial assaults on Ukraine.

'At night, a girl's body was retrieved from under the rubble of a house in the Pidhorodnenska community' outside Dnipro, Serhiy Lysak, governor of Dnipropetrovsk region, said on Sunday.

"She just turned two."

Officials said the strike killed the toddler, born in 2021, and wounded at least 22 others.

Five children were in hospital, including three boys who were in a critical condition, they added.

AFP

How chocolate could counter climate change

Hamburg, Germany - At a red-brick factory in the German port city of Hamburg, cocoa bean shells go in one end, and out the other comes an amazing black powder with the potential to counter climate change.

The substance, dubbed biochar, is produced by heating the cocoa husks in an oxygen-free room to 600 degrees Celsius (1,112 Fahrenheit).

The process locks in greenhouse gases and the final product can be used as a fertiliser, or as an ingredient in the production of 'green' concrete.

While the biochar industry is still in its infancy, the technology used by the industry offers a novel way to remove carbon from the Earth's atmosphere, experts say.

According to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), biochar could potentially be used to capture 2.6bn of the 40bn tonnes of CO2 currently produced by humanity each year.

But scaling up its use remains a challenge.



An employee of the company Circular Carbon shows shredded cocoa shells in Hamburg, on May 10 (AFP)

Amazonia

"We are reversing the carbon cycle," Peik Stenlund, CEO of Circular Carbon, told AFP at the biochar factory in Hamburg.

The plant, one of the largest in Europe, takes delivery of the used cocoa shells via a network of grey pipes from a neighbouring chocolate factory. The biochar traps the CO2 contained in the husks - in a process that could be used for any other plant.

If the cocoa shells were disposed of as normal, the carbon

inside the unused byproduct would be released into the atmosphere as it decomposed.

Instead, the carbon is sequestered in the biochar 'for centuries', according to David Houben, an environmental scientist at the UniLaSalle institute in France. One tonne of biochar - or bio coal - can stock 'the equivalent of 2.5 to three tonnes of CO2', Houben told AFP.

Biochar was already used by indigenous populations in the Americas as a fertiliser before

According to UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), biochar could potentially be used to capture 2.6bn of 40bn tonnes of CO2 currently produced by humanity each year

being rediscovered in the 20th century by scientists researching extremely fecund soils in the Amazon basin. The surprising substance's sponge-like structure boosts crops by increasing the absorption of water and nutrients by the soil.

In Hamburg, the factory is wrapped in the faint smell of chocolate and warmed by the heat given off by the installation's pipework.

The final product is poured into white sacks to be sold to

local farmers in granule form.

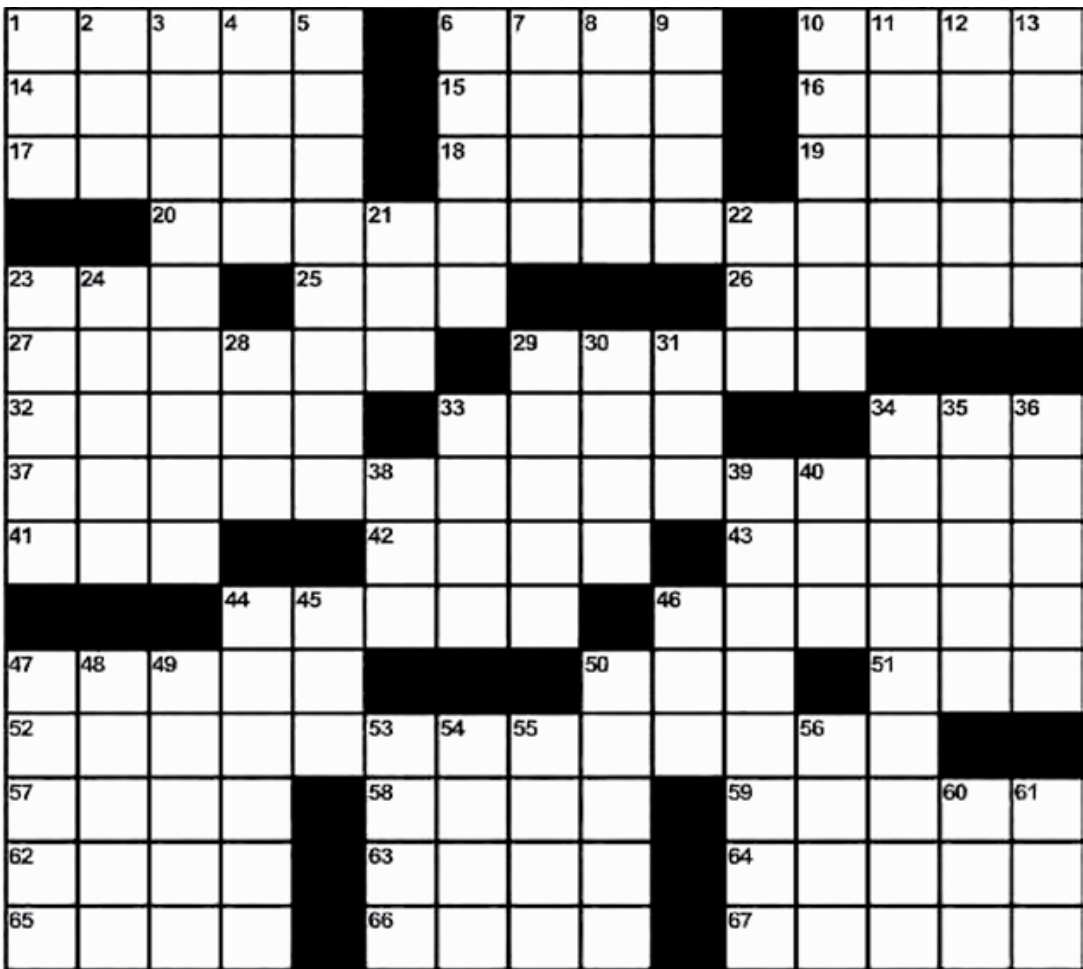
One of those farmers is Silvio Schmidt, 45, who grows potatoes near Bremen, west of Hamburg. Schmidt hopes the biochar will help 'give more nutrients and water' to his sandy soils.

The production process, called pyrolysis, also produces a certain volume of biogas, which is resold to the neighbouring factory. In all, 3,500 tonnes of biochar and 'up to 20 megawatt hours' of gas are produced by the plant each year from 10,000 tonnes of cocoa shells.

The production method nonetheless remains difficult to scale up to the level imagined by the IPCC. "To ensure the system stores more carbon than it produces, everything needs to be done locally, with little or no transport. Otherwise it makes no sense," Houben said. And not all types of soil are well adapted to biochar. The fertiliser is "more effective in tropical climates", while the raw materials for its production are not available everywhere, Houben said.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Bedrock dwellings
 - 6) Whole alternative
 - 10) Hairdo
 - 14) Separated
 - 15) Annul
 - 16) "I" of "The King and I"
 - 17) Falsely depict
 - 18) Holiday tune
 - 19) Indian bread
 - 20) Barely make ends meet
 - 23) Buff
 - 25) Back talk
 - 26) Shipping weights
 - 27) Call for
 - 29) Explain away (with "over")
 - 32) Despot's duration
 - 33) "East" anagram
 - 34) Certain Ivy Leaguer
 - 37) It allows a boss to become an owner
 - 41) Anger
 - 42) Gift on "The Bachelor"
 - 43) "Goodnight" girl of song
 - 44) Combine
 - 46) Heat source
 - 47) Take place as a result
 - 50) Highly prized item
 - 51) Aardvark's tidbit
 - 52) Accept an inferior substitute
 - 57) Asian tongue
 - 58) Aria, e.g.
 - 59) California border lake
 - 62) " Brockovich"
 - 63) Seemingly endless adventure
 - 64) "Each" companion
 - 65) New York's Giuliani
 - 66) Brio
 - 67) Take in again
- DOWN**
- 1) It may be called on account of rain
 - 2) King Kong, e.g.
 - 3) Certain greeting card
 - 4) "CHiPs" star Estrada
 - 5) Bracing for impact
 - 6) Early time
 - 7) Bow, essentially
 - 8) "I had no..."
 - 9) Gangster's gal
 - 10) Tent material
 - 11) Broadcasting
 - 12) Absurd
 - 13) Dracula's choppers
 - 21) Black gold
 - 22) "... alive!"
 - 23) Manhattan Project scientist Enrico
 - 24) Lend_ (listen up)
 - 28)_Khan
 - 29) Gaggle group
 - 30) Place for bowling balls
 - 31) Legendary Giant Mel
 - 33) Certain pollutant
 - 34) Some facial features
 - 35) Kind of closet
 - 36) Dead to the world
 - 38) "To_ is human ..."
 - 39) Carbon dioxide measurer
 - 40) Paranormal showman
 - 44) "... on the Bounty"
 - 45) Moray, e.g.
 - 46)_ canto
 - 4 7) Banana oil, e.g.
 - 48) Indian prime minister called " Pandit"
 - 49) Sedately dignified
 - 50) Pained sound
 - 53) To be, in old Rome
 - 54) Young stallion
 - 55) Legendary gymnast Ko-rbut
 - 56) Thing to do for a rainy day?
 - 60) Rock that's worth something
 - 61) Hurricane's center

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You'll enjoy a surge of power today, which could cause some problems with one of your relationships. This person thought they were the one in charge, and it's going to be a bit painful for them to face reality today. Handle this potentially tense situation by anticipating their objections. They're experiencing a bit of paranoia, and it's wisest for you not to play into it. So don't rush to defend yourself against what they're saying. They will come around eventually.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You have great insight into major events going on right now, and a lot of people would love to know what you know! Sitting in the catbird's seat gives you a great feeling, and you're finally coming to a place where you can truly value your position in life. Resist the temptation to lord your power over other people who are at disadvantage. You don't want to burn any bridges. Keep your cool and play this out more conservatively than you probably want to.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

One of your authority figures is going to be a little difficult to deal with today, but fortunately you won't be interacting too much with them. When you do, just smile while you listen to them talk -- and then go right back to what you were doing the way you were doing it. They'll be all bark and no bite right now because they're distracted by the people above them (who are giving them grief). Any stress they generate for you is just misplaced frustration.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. "Rawhide" was played to a bar full of hostile country music fans in which film?

A. The Good the Bad and the Ugly
B. Easy Rider
C. The Blues Brothers
D. The Gangs of New York

2.What was badly damaged when the ship "Shen Neng I" got into difficulties on 3 April 2010?

A. Canary Wharf, London
B. The beaches on the Côte d'Azur
C. The gannet colony at Cape Kidnappers, New Zealand
D. The Great Barrier Reef, Australia

3. Where are transoms found?

A. Only in the transmission system of a car or truck
B. In structures such as buildings and boats
C. In fungi
D. At the centre of an arch

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. B

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Experiment in your relationship today. Switch roles with the other person and mix it up a bit. If you're usually the one who drives the discussion or organizes all the plans, then ease up and let them do all the heavy lifting for the day. And if you're usually the one in the back seat, climb up front. See what it feels like to steer things for a while. You'll gain a new respect for how the other half lives, and you will help cement the foundation of your relationship even more.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Be encouraging and help others ride the wave of good energy that you're on right now! It's easy for you to create good times for your people because you're feeling exceptionally generous and warm toward the people you care about most. You know all their favorite activities, so why not plan something that you know they'll love? Even if you just have a friend over to watch their favorite movie at your place, they'll love being hosted in such a thoughtful way.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Surround yourself with people who are down-to-earth and grounded today. You know, the people who might not always know what the hottest new trends are. These people have the right kind of focus, and you could really benefit from it. They'll be able to help you become much more grounded yourself! Take a tip or two from a really mellow person and you'll start to learn how to stay cool, calm, and collected in the midst of the most stressful situations. You'll learn how to filter out the noise.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Take each hour as it comes today. Let the day unfold as it wants to, and try not to push things in any one direction. Resist the urge to fill up your free time with errands, socializing, or shopping trips. Being busy just to be busy is no way to exist right now. It might feel a little weird to have no plans for the day, but this experience will be good for you. If today is already booked, make a note to leave a free day in the near future. It's time for you to let the world happen.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Keeping in touch with your inner self is extremely important right now. You need to start listening more to that nagging voice in your head! It knows who you really are, and it will lead you to what you really need in life. Ignore what other people are telling you to do. They have good intentions, but they don't know the real deal. Stick to your own gut instincts. It may take time to get there, but soon you'll be standing on a firm foundation of self-awareness and self-confidence.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Everyday events and typical conversations will take on more significant meanings today. You're able to see the hidden meanings just under the surface, which will give a whole new perspective on what's happening on the surface of things. This insight could be extremely useful, especially if you use it in a work context to get one step ahead of your competition. Knowing things that other people don't know is one of the most valuable of all assets.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're starting to take on a role as supportive mentor to the rest of your crew. This might feel a little bit uncomfortable for you, but it's the right way for things to be evolving. Now more than ever you're better at connecting with others than anyone else. You can see the commonalities between people who don't always get along. Use that insight today and you can help people sort out some thorny issues. People are counting on you to be there for them, and you always are.

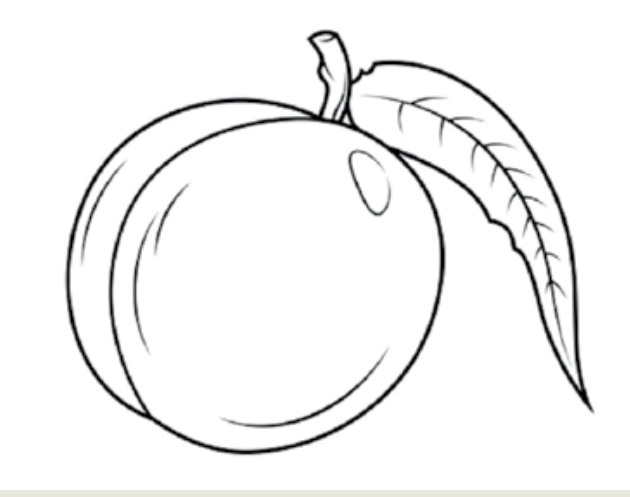
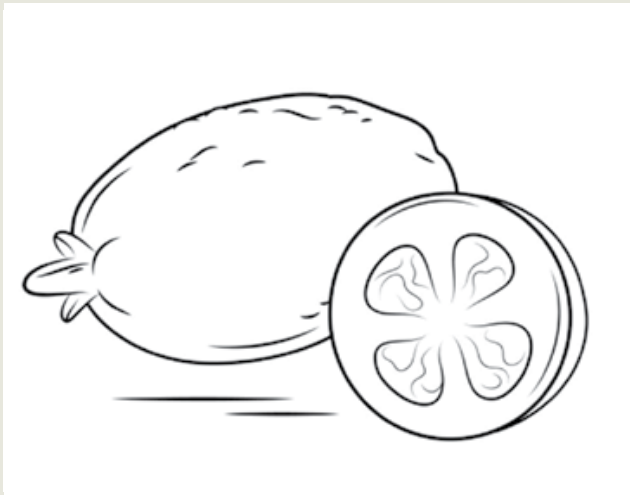
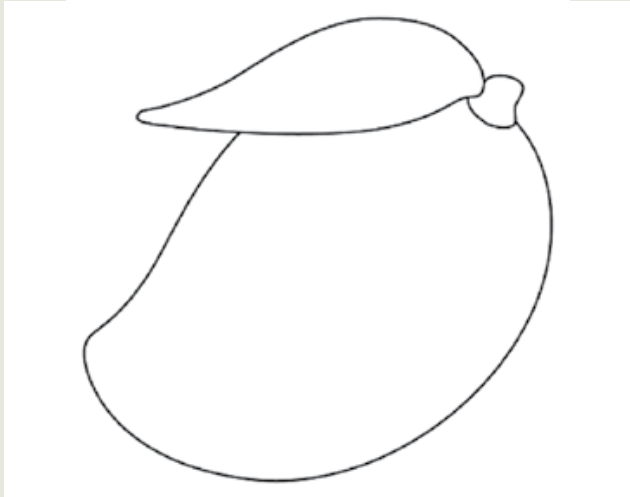
SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

A friend's curiosity might be driving you a little bit crazy today. They want to know things that you don't want to tell them! This prying act of theirs is fairly new, and since you're not really liking it, you need to nip it in the bud. Tell them that you love them, but they need to mind their own business. Mark your boundaries clearly and let them know that there are certain things you will share with them and certain things that you won't. It's nothing personal.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

One of your newer relationships has more twists and turns than a Hollywood thriller. At first, things with them were great, then suddenly they started getting stressful. How are you two going to get closer if you don't understand how they think? Put this crazy relationship movie on pause and take some time apart. Find out what life is like without them, and then get back in touch in a few weeks. You might just end up agreeing to disagree, which is a solid solution.

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

I	Y	W	S
S	H	S	S
E	T	T	E
H	R	O	B

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

SO LONG, FAREWELL

Real Madrid great Karim Benzema to leave club

Madrid, Spain - Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema has agreed a deal to leave the club, the Spanish giants said Sunday.

The 35-year-old forward has been heavily linked this week with a lucrative move to Saudi Arabia and Saudi state television channel Al Ekhbariya reported Sunday that he had signed with Jeddah-based Al Ittihad.

"Real Madrid and our captain Karim Benzema have agreed to put an end to his brilliant and unforgettable era as a player at our club," said Los Blancos in a statement.

"Madrid want to show their gratitude and all their love to someone who is one of our greatest legends."

The announcement comes after Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti had said Saturday there was "no doubt" about Benzema's future being at Madrid, noting the forward had one more year left on his contract.

And Benzema himself had said "not everything you read on the internet is reality" after reports emerged in the week about his potential departure to Saudi Arabia, where his former Real Madrid teammate Cristiano Ronaldo is playing for Al Nassr.

According to Al Ekhbariya, however, the president of Saudi champions Al Ittihad and his deputy were in Madrid "to officially sign" Benzema in a "record transfer with Real Madrid".

The TV channel said Benzema had agreed a two-year deal with the club, based on the Red Sea shores of the Gulf kingdom.

Leaving Lyon

The French forward joined Madrid in 2009 from Ligue 1 side Lyon. Benzema established himself as a key player alongside Ronaldo and Gareth Bale in the vaunted "BBC" attacking trident, before developing into the team's leader when the Portuguese striker left in 2018.

Benzema has lifted five Champions Leagues, four La Liga titles and three Copas del Rey with Real Madrid and is the current holder of the Ballon d'Or for the world's best player.

He is Real Madrid's second top scorer of all-time, with 353 goals for Madrid, behind only Ronaldo on 450.

Benzema's final appearance for the club could be later Sunday when Madrid host Athletic Bilbao in La Liga at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Madrid confirmed Saturday that Eden Hazard, Marco Asensio and Mariano Diaz are all leaving this summer too, leaving plenty of space for new acquisitions in attack.

Ancelotti avoided talking on Saturday about Madrid's alleged interest in England and Tottenham striker Harry Kane.

"I'm not going to talk about the future of the squad that is in



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema attends a team training session in Valdebebas, outskirts of Madrid on Friday (AFP)

place," said Ancelotti. "Kane is a great player, he is a Tottenham player, we have to respect the player and Tottenham."

Rise to glory

Benzema battled with Gonzalo Higuain for a regular starting spot in his early days at Madrid, and was once derided by then-coach Jose Mourinho for being a "cat" instead of the "hunting dog" he wanted.

While playing alongside Ronaldo, Benzema took the role of supplier and worked hard to provide for his team-mate.

The forward greatly increased his goal output after Ronaldo left, playing centrally, and scored 44 in 46 games last season, a per-

Real Madrid and our captain Karim Benzema have agreed to put an end to his brilliant and unforgettable era as a player at our club. Madrid want to show their gratitude and all their love to someone who is one of our greatest legends

REAL MADRID



formance that earned him the 2022 Ballon d'Or.

Benzema's most recent conquest was the Copa del Rey in May, with Real Madrid beating Osasuna to lift the Spanish cup for the first time since 2014.

Benzema may cherish last season's Champions League triumph the most of all his successes because he played a crucial role in winning it.

AFP



Eden Hazard

Hazard to leave Real Madrid after injury-blighted stay

Madrid, Spain - Eden Hazard will leave Real Madrid after four injury-ravaged seasons at the Spanish giants, the club announced on Saturday.

Hazard, 32, joined Real from Chelsea in 2019 for a fee of 115 million euros (\$123 million) and was presented to up to 50,000 supporters at the Santiago Bernabeu. The Belgium international was on top of his game, scoring twice in his final match with Chelsea to help the English club win the Europa League by beating Arsenal 4-1.

But almost immediately the player voted Premier League player of the season in the 2014-2015 campaign was hampered by injuries to his ankle in Spain.

He made just 54 league appearances, including six this season, and scored seven goals.

"Real Madrid Football Club and Eden Hazard have reached an agreement whereby the player will leave the club as of 30 June 2023,"

Real said in a statement.

"Real Madrid would like to express our affection to Eden Hazard and we wish him and his family the best of luck for the next stage of his career."

Forward Marco Asensio

Real Madrid would like to express our affection to Eden Hazard

REAL MADRID

said on Saturday he was also leaving Real Madrid at the end of his contract in June.

Asensio won La Liga and the Champions League three times each with Madrid, as well as the Copa del Rey this season for the first time, scoring 61 goals in 285 appearances.

The forward offered an explosive impact from the bench but never managed to establish himself as a key starter for Los Blancos.

AFP

Messi's final game for PSG ends in defeat

Paris, France - Lionel Messi was jeered by a section of Paris Saint-Germain supporters as he played his final game for the club in the Ligue 1 champions' 3-2 home defeat by Clermont on Saturday.

Messi's expected departure from the French giants after two seasons was officially confirmed by PSG in a statement shortly before Saturday's game.

"His contribution to Paris Saint-Germain and Ligue 1 cannot be underestimated and we wish Leo and his family all the best for the future," said PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi.

Yet Messi's name was jeered by some fans as the teams were announced at the Parc des Princes and the Argentinian World Cup winner was again whistled sporadically during the match.

There was little riding on the game itself after PSG wrapped up a record 11th French title last weekend, and Christophe Galtier's side contrived to throw away a two-goal lead.

Sergio Ramos, whose own de-



Paris Saint-Germain's Messi (C) in action against Clermont in the their Ligue 1 match in Paris on Saturday

parture from PSG was confirmed on Friday, marked his final appearance by heading in a Vitinha cross for the opener in the 16th minute.

Mbappe, looking to end a fifth consecutive season as Ligue 1's

top scorer, then scored a penalty to make it 2-0 with his 29th league goal this season, which he marked by holding up goalkeeper Sergio Rico's number 16 jersey. Spaniard Rico, PSG's back-up goalkeeper, is in a serious condi-

tion in hospital in Seville after being injured in a horse-riding accident last weekend.

"The most important thing was the tribute to Sergio," Mbappe told broadcaster Canal Plus.

"There are more important things than football, and on the pitch we were already champions. We could have lost 22-0 and that would not have changed anything for us.

"We had to pay tribute to Sergio. I think we have all been affected by what is an extremely serious situation. We have been worried about that all week and so we tried to pay tribute in the best possible way."

Mbappe's goals tally left him two ahead of Lyon's Alexandre Lacazette in the final standings.

Johan Gastien pounced on a Marco Verratti mistake to pull a goal back for Clermont, who then saw Grejohn Kyei miss a penalty.

The visitors then equalised in first-half stoppage time when Mehdi Zeffane netted from close range after Gianluigi Donnarumma spilled the ball.

Kyei got Clermont's winner in the second half when he turned in a cross with his knee.

A famous win for Clermont sees them finish the season in eighth place.

Big game player Gundogan takes Man City to brink of treble

London, United Kingdom - Ilkay Gundogan produced when it mattered most for Manchester City once more as the German's double downed Manchester United 2-1 in the FA Cup final on Saturday in what could be fitting parting gift.

Gundogan will be central to City's quest to complete the treble next weekend against Inter Milan in the Champions League final. But his future beyond this season remains in doubt with the 32-year-old's contract expiring at the end of the month.

After seven seasons in Manchester, Gundogan has reportedly been tempted by the change



Manchester City's Ilkay Gundogan celebrates after scoring against Manchester United in the English FA Cup final on Saturday (AFP)

of scene and lifestyle offered by Barcelona. But manager Pep Guardiola admitted he is still try-

ing to convince the man who was his first signing for City back in 2016 to prolong his stay.

"He knows what I think (of him). There is no doubt," said Guardiola. "We are neighbours, we live on the same floor for many years, he is a close friend of mine but hopefully we can finish in a good way. (City sporting director) Txiki (Begiristain) is working. "The season he has done is exceptional."

Gundogan's first stunning strike after just 12 seconds will live long in the memory and not just for becoming the fastest goal in FA Cup final history.

He then became the first player on record to score twice in a FA Cup final from outside the box as his volleyed winner caught

out David De Gea six minutes into the second-half.

A brace took his tally for the season to 11, but he has a knack of producing when the pressure is cranked up towards the business end of the season.

Six of Gundogan's goals this campaign have come in the last month as he also scored twice against Leeds and Everton to get Guardiola's men over the line in the Premier League title race.

"He can do everything," said Guardiola recently.

"He shows leadership every training session. Arriving on time, living the job 24 hours a day."

AFP

MASTERFUL IN MONTMELO

Verstappen extends title lead with Spanish win

Montmeló, Spain - Defending double world champion Max Verstappen extended his lead in this year's title race to 53 points on Sunday when he completed a hat-trick by driving his Red Bull to a masterful victory in the Spanish Grand Prix.

The 25-year-old Dutchman led from lights to flag to come home 24 seconds ahead of revitalised seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton and George Russell, in their much-improved Mercedes' cars. It was Verstappen's third consecutive win, his third in Spain, his fifth in seven races this season and the 40th of his career, achieved despite receiving three official warnings for exceeding track limits.

"It's such a big pleasure to drive a car like this," said Verstappen. "And it showed again today. We were on different tyre strategies out there today and mostly I was on the right one! And to win here is incredible."

Hamilton's second place provided him with his 11th podium finish in Spain, where he has won six times.

"Oh, man, what an awesome crowd and result," said Hamilton.

"And I didn't expect that so hats off to the team and our factory for pushing us so close to the 'Bulls. We are chasing them down -- and George did a great job too today."

Russell said he was surprised to finish third after starting 12th. "Kudos to the team for that," he said. "I had a great car today."

Verstappen's Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez battled through the field, after starting 11th, to finish fourth ahead of Ferrari's home hero Carlos Sainz, aged, requiring a pit-stop, but Hamilton escaped serious damage. The collision gifted Stroll third place, but this was not to be Aston Martin's day.

Russell also left the track on the opening lap, at the first chicane. He was not penalised, despite gaining five places from the start. Verstappen stamped his authority on proceedings and by lap 11 led Sainz by 5.3 seconds with Hamilton, thanks to a sweeping pass on Stroll on lap eight, in third.

It's such a big pleasure to drive a car like this. We were on different tyre strategies out there today and mostly I was on the right one! And to win here is incredible

MAX VERSTAPPEN

Lance Stroll and his Aston Martin team-mate two-time champion Fernando Alonso, who was unable to extend his streak of podiums on home ground.

The race began in hot conditions with an air temperature of 25 degrees and the track at 42, but gathering clouds threatened. The risk of rain was 40 percent.

Verstappen made a clean start and resisted Sainz into the first corner before, behind him, Hamilton swept round Norris, only for the McLaren to make contract under braking at Turn Two.

Norris's front wing was damaged, requiring a pit-stop, but Hamilton escaped serious damage. The collision gifted Stroll third place, but this was not to be Aston Martin's day.

By mid-distance, Verstappen led by 13.7 seconds ahead of Hamilton, who was six clear of Sainz and pulling away. Russell, fourth, passed the Spaniard under braking at Turn One on lap 35, confirming the 'silver arrows' outright speed in the sunshine.

Verstappen, who had complained of sliding on his worn hards, came in for his final stop on lap 53, taking softs to reach the finish. He was more than 16 seconds clear of Hamilton when he re-joined for his cruise to the flag.

AFP



Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen celebrates on the podium after winning the Spanish Formula One Grand Prix on Sunday (AFP)

Neuville wins Rally of Italy

Olbia, Italy - Belgium's Thierry Neuville, driving a Hyundai, jumped from fifth to second in the drivers' standings after winning the Rally of Italy in Sardinia on Sunday.

Neuville headed Esaekka Lappi of Finland in a 1-2 finish for Hyundai at round six of 13 of the World Rally Championship. It was the Belgian's 18th career success with co-driver Martijn Wydaeghe alongside. World champion Kalle Rovanpera, driving a Toyota, completed the podium.

"Obviously it was a challenging weekend," said Neuville, who now trails series leader Rovanpera by 25 points. "We came here with the belief that we could fight for victory but the first day was challenging and we lost a bit of time. Yesterday we found ourselves in the lead and we had to manage it until the end."

"It's the first victory for the team this year, it's a 1-2, and the first win for our team principal (Cyril Abiteboul) as well. Craig Breen is in our memories also - we wanted the win in Croatia for him, but we got it now."

The lead changed hands nine times during the rally until Neuville seized the initiative when Toyota rival Sebastian Ogier went off the road in Saturday's rain-hit penultimate test.

Next stop on the circuit is the Safari Rally of Kenya between June 22-25.

Australia's Hazlewood out of WTC final, Naser called up

Sydney, Australia - Australian pace spearhead Josh Hazlewood was ruled out on Sunday of this week's World Test Championship final against India with Michael Naser added to their squad.

Hazlewood has not played any red-ball cricket since injuring his Achilles in the Sydney Test against South Africa in January and only recently made his comeback in the Indian Premier League.

While he has been bowling at full speed in recent training sessions, he is still dealing with the injury and selectors opted not to risk him with a five-Test Ashes series against England to follow.

Naser has been in scintillating form playing county cricket for Glamorgan, although Scott Boland is favoured to replace Hazlewood and lead the attack alongside Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon.

"Josh was very, very close to



Michael Naser

being given the green light but we are cognisant that our upcoming schedule means this is not a one-off Test match of us," chair of selectors George Bailey said in a statement.

"Michael's county form has been strong and knowing that he was going to be close by allowed for him to keep playing and for us

to be able to call on him. He is a great strength to have as part of the fast bowling group.

"This will give Josh an ideal preparation leading into Edgbaston," he added. "With six Test matches in a little over seven weeks, we will need all of our fast bowling assets."

AFP

Sri Lanka square ODI series with 132 run win over Afghanistan

Hambantota, Sri Lanka - Quick bowler Dushmantha Chameera stormed back into the Sri Lankan team to power their 132-run win over Afghanistan at Hambantota on Sunday and square the three-match one-day international series.

Having amassed a target of 324, the Sri Lankan bowlers skittled out the tourists for 191 inside 43 overs for their biggest win in ODIs over Afghanistan.

Chameera, returning to the side after a seven-month layoff after ankle surgery, bowled a couple of hostile spells to finish with two for 18.

Sri Lanka will be buoyed by the return of their main strike bowler, as they head to Zimbabwe straight after the series to play World Cup qualifiers.

"We are very happy that Chameera is back: injury kept him out for a while but I am glad he is firing on all cylinders," skipper Dasun Shanaka said.



Sri Lanka's Wanindu Hasaranga (L), Dasun Shanaka (C) and Dhananjaya de Silva celebrate the wicket of Afghanistan's Fareed Malik

"Dimuth Karunaratne is back as well, and he adds more stability to the batting -- and obviously he's very experienced. These are good signs looking forward for the World Cup qualifiers."

There are no such problems for Afghanistan, who have already qualified for the World Cup later this year in India.

Chameera was well backed up by part-time off-spinner Dhananjaya de Silva, who finished with three wickets, including first-match hero Ibrahim Zardan.

Leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga polished up the tail claiming three for 42.

Zardan, who had top scored in the first ODI with 98, was again amongst the runs with 54.

But the scoreboard pressure got to him as he edged an attempted cut shot that was well taken by Kusal Mendis behind the stumps.

AFP

Djokovic eases into record 17th French Open quarter-final and 55th at Slams

Paris, France - Novak Djokovic reached his 55th Grand Slam quarter-final and record 17th at the French Open on Sunday with a straight-sets win over Juan Pablo Varillas.

Djokovic, chasing a third Roland Garros championship and record-setting 23rd men's Grand Slam title, eased past his 94th-ranked Peruvian opponent, 6-3, 6-2, 6-2. The 36-year-old Serb, champion in Paris in 2016 and 2021, will face 11th seed Karen Khachanov for a place in the semi-finals.

Djokovic holds a commanding 8-1 career lead over the Russian including their only previous

meeting at the French Open in 2020.

"I had never played my opponent before. I knew he was a clay court specialist and that I had to earn the victory. It was the best I played this week," said Djokovic after ensuring a 14th successive last-eight spot at the tournament.

On his record 17th quarter-final in Paris, he added: "I am very proud of this record. I have put a lot of effort into my game and I am very motivated to continue."

Earlier, Khachanov reached the quarter-finals for the second time with a four sets win over Lorenzo Sonego of Italy.

Khachanov came through 1-6,



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates his victory against Peru's Juan Pablo Varillas on Sunday

I knew he was a clay court specialist and that I had to earn the victory

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

6-4, 7-6 (9/7), 6-1 to reach his third straight quarter-final at the Slams.

Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, the 2021 French Open runner-up, became the first woman through to the quarter-finals Sunday after rallying from a set down to beat Belgian 28th seed Elise Mertens 3-6, 7-6 (7/3), 6-3.

Kato, Sutjiadi disqualified

Miyu Kato and Aldila Sutjiadi were disqualified from the French Open on Sunday after a ballgirl was accidentally hit by a harmless looking lob in an incident which also called into question the sportsmanship of their opponents.

The drama happened when the Japanese player and her Indonesian partner were leading 3-1 in the second set after opponents Marie Bouzkova and Sorribes Tormo had claimed the opener. Standing at the net, Kato gently backhanded a ball in the direction of the ballgirl standing at the opposite end of Court 14 in an apparent effort to help the flow of the match.

Instead, it hit the youngster on the back of the head.

Kato, 28, immediately apologised to the girl who was crying and shaking.

At first Kato received just a warning but the supervisor was then called to the court and the pair, seeded 16 in the tournament, were disqualified from the third round match after Bouzkova and Sorribes Tormo had protested to the umpire.

"I didn't see it, our team saw it," said Bouzkova.

AFP

Great opportunity to showcase our potential: Maqsood

Oman's challenging mission at the World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe starts on June 19

Muscat - With less than two weeks to go for the start of the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe, Oman cricketers are currently in South African city of Durban to acclimatise themselves to the weather conditions and give final touches to their preparations.

Oman will be bidding to make history in Zimbabwe as they attempt to qualify for the ODI World Cup for the first time. The ICC Men's World Cup Qualifier will be played in Harare and Bulawayo in Zimbabwe from June 18-July 9 with ten teams vying for the two available spots in the World Cup to be played in India later this year.

Oman, coached by Duleep Mendis of Sri Lanka, face a tough

challenge as they are pooled in Group B along with World Cup winner Sri Lanka, Ireland, Scotland and the UAE. Group A comprises hosts Zimbabwe, two-time winner West Indies, Nepal, Netherlands and United States.

Oman skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, also the most experienced all-rounder in the squad, believes that his players have the potential to beat any team on their day but admitted that the "mission to qualify for the World Cup is daunting" but promised that the team would give its best.

"It is a great opportunity to showcase our potential at the top level. We have played in two ICC T20 World Cups but to reach the final stage of qualification of the ODI World Cup is a new chal-

lenge for us. The boys are motivated to perform at this level and we have the belief and the potential to beat any team on our day. If we use our skills and execute our plans and play good cricket, as a team we can achieve the dream of qualification," said Maqsood.

The skipper added: "We have worked hard to reach this stage. I am aware that Oman had made it to this level twice in the past but that was long back in 2005 and 2009. The four-year World Cricket League Division 2 cycle we went through was tough and to finish second among seven nations was a testimony to our hard work."

For Oman's most experienced ODI cricketer and opening batter,

Jatinder Singh, the "World Cup Qualifier is a great chance to perform at the big stage."

"We are fully focused on the mission and there is a calmness in the camp. We are aware of the challenges while playing against Test-playing nations and World Cup winners but as a batter, I know the responsibility and I hope to perform well."

For Bilal Khan, the pace spearhead, who excelled in the WCL Division 2 picking up the highest 76 wickets in 36 games, "it is time to deliver the best."

"To reach this stage was a result of our hard work. And, now to represent Oman at the World Cup Qualifier, we are excited. We will compete there and not just make up numbers. There is no

pressure on us and will out our best foot forward," said Bilal.

Oman vice-captain and key all-rounder Aqib Ilyas said, "it is a very good chance for us."

"We back ourselves and have the talent to take on stronger teams. On our day, we can beat any team and I am looking ahead to the matches. I have come back after a gap of two-year and I am in good shape. I am confident of making a strong return as a comeback is much stronger than a setback," said Ilyas.

Oman begin their campaign against Ireland on June 19 followed by a match against the UAE on June 21. They take on Sri Lanka two days later before completing their pool engagements with a match against Scotland.



Zeeshan Maqsood

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Moldova wine fountain in Chisinau the capital city of the Republic of Moldova (Below) The Moldovan Independence Day parade



Moldova, which is hosting the second summit of the European Political Community on Thursday, grouping up to 47 heads of state and government, is landlocked between Ukraine and EU member Romania.

One of Europe's least visited countries, it is known for its wine industry and Orthodox monasteries. A frozen conflict over the mainly Russian-speaking Transnistria breakaway region is a key political issue.

Here are five things to know about the little ex-Soviet country, which this week will become the centre of European diplomacy:

Between Russia and Europe

Under pro-European President Maia Sandu, who defeated the Russia-friendly incumbent Igor Dodon at the end of 2020, Moldova applied last year to join the EU and in June 2022 became a candidate country, alongside Ukraine.

The country's pull between Moscow and

Brussels reflects a complex history and a polarised society.

It was part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, followed by Russian rule and then part of Romania before becoming the Soviet Socialist Republic in 1940. It was independent from the USSR in 1991 and was renamed Moldova.

Moldova's main language is Romanian. Russian is also quite widely spoken and many Moldovans work in the EU and Russia. The minority Turkic population speaks the Gagauz language, listed as endangered by UNESCO.

Among Europe's poorest countries

Moldova is one of Europe's poorest



Soroca Fort, a historical place in Soroca, Moldova

Least visited in Europe

FIVE ASPECTS OF MOLDOVA, ONE OF THE LEAST VISITED AND POOREST COUNTRIES IN EUROPE THAT THRIVES ON TOURISM, MAKE IT WORTHY OF A VISIT

countries. According to the World Bank, in 2021 it had a gross domestic product per capita of US\$5,230 - slightly more than a third of that of Romania and less than an eighth of that of France.

The country relies in large part on remittances sent by people working abroad, but this has caused the working-age population to fall sharply.

Moldova's army of 6,500 soldiers is equipped with mostly dilapidated equipment dating from the Soviet era that has not been modernised.

Meanwhile, Moldova has one of the lowest employment rates in Europe, particularly among its Roma population.

Wine and tourism

With its 300 days of sunshine per year, the climate in Moldova is ideal for agriculture and particularly vineyards. The wine industry is a major economic sector, representing 3% of Moldova's GDP and 8% of the country's total exports, according to government data. Moldovan wine is being exported into over 70 states worldwide.

Barely larger than Belgium, the country has 122,000 hectares of vineyards and is among the 20 largest producers in the world, according to a report by the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV).

Breakaway region

The Russia-backed breakaway region of Transnistria is one of the most complex issues for the country of 2.6 million people. The Russian-speaking region broke away after a brief civil war following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and is not internationally recognised.

Moscow helps prop up the region which has close to 400,000 people. Its currency is called the ruble.

Moscow maintains around 1,500 soldiers and a large stockpile of ammunition in Transnistria. Moldova has repeatedly called for the region to be demilitarised.

Inspiration for Tintin, comedians

Moldova's identity as one of the least-known countries in Europe has prompted authors to create fictional nations with similar names - Belgian cartoon character Tintin visited a place called Syldavia, while a group of Australian comedians wrote a parody travel guide to a generic eastern European country called Molvania.

British comedian Tony Hawks wrote a book called 'Playing the Moldovans at Tennis' about his bid to win a bet that he could beat the entire Moldovan football team on a court.

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A Hercules beetle

The 'cloud forest' of Monteverde, in the centre of Costa Rica, will soon no longer be worthy of the name - climate change threatens this unique ecosystem, and its fauna and flora face an unclear future under a brilliant blue sky.

In the forest, what a visitor should hear is the constant drip of moisture falling from the trees. Instead, it is the sound of dead branches snapping underfoot that breaks the silence on the dry trails.

The high-altitude forest is still clinging to life, and it delights walkers with an infinite variety of greens under an uncomfortably bright sun - the fog which reigned supreme here only a short time ago dissipates as the temperature rises, explained 24-year-old forest guide Andrey Castrillo.

"The forest should be cool," he said. "You should hear the drops falling all over the forest, but that only happens during the wettest and windiest days of the rainy season. Here there was no sun... We had about 30 days of sunshine a year. Now we have more than 130," he said.

At 1,400m above sea level and 140km northwest of the capital San Jose, the private nature reserve extends over 14,200 hectares and is home to a hundred species of mammals, 440 bird species, and 1,200 types of amphibians.

CLIMATE CHANGE

IN COSTA RICA, CLIMATE CHANGE THREATENS ITS POPULAR 'CLOUD FOREST'. THE SUN WHICH WAS RARELY SEEN HERE DURING THE YEAR IS NOW PRESENT FOR OVER 130 DAYS, TAKING ITS TOLL ON THE PRESENCE OF FOG

BOOK

A black green palm snake



Tourists look for birds (Above) Park rangers walk along a path at the Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve

Walking in the clouds

This exceptional type of altitude forest represents only 1% of the world's tropical and subtropical areas.

"Near-ground cloud cover forms when the humidity saturation is above 90% with temperatures between 14 and 18 degrees Celsius degrees," researcher Ana Maria Duran, of the University of Costa Rica, told AFP.

The researcher said she had been coming here regularly for more than twenty years.

Normally, the 'almost permanent' fog gives the impression of practically walking in the middle of the clouds, with visibility down to barely a metre.

As she spoke, she stared into the forest where the temperature had risen to more than 25 degrees Celsius, under a blue sky where only a few clouds crowned the peaks.

"Coming to Monteverde to find such dry conditions and not being in the clouds like it was 20 years ago when I started coming is obviously very sad," said Duran.

Rising temperatures mean lower humidity and more sun. The mosses have dried on the tree trunks, the rivers are no more than streams, and the amphibians here have been the first victims of climate change.

"The decline of amphibians in cloud forests may serve as a wake-up call," warned biologist Andrea Vincent, who teaches at the University of Costa Rica.

Already, the species Incilius periglenes, known as the golden frog, has been considered extinct since 2019 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"A cloudless cloud forest, it will disappear, it has to," said Vincent, warning that "there will be a lot of extinctions" of various species. But this dispiriting scenario can still be avoided, she said.

"Ecosystems are resilient. If we make efforts to stop climate change it is possible that cloud forests will recover... not during our lifetime but perhaps for the next generations."

AFP