

CAA works to expand Oman’s airspace; Sayyid Fahd receives ICAO chief



H H Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said receives Juan Carlos Salazar, Secretary-General of ICAO, on Tuesday

Muscat – H H Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud a Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received Juan Carlos Salazar, Secretary-General of International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), on Tuesday.

The ICAO chief and his accompanying delegation are currently visiting the sultanate to attend the 2nd Civil Aviation Legal Advisers Forum (CALAF/2) being held in Muscat from Feb 21 to 23.

After welcoming the guest

and his accompanying delegation, H H Sayyid Fahd affirmed that establishment of modern airports is counted among the major achievements of Oman as these constitute a link to the world.

He pointed out that the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has placed a project for expansion of Oman’s airspace among its top priorities. In coordination with the concerned departments in the country, CAA has begun taking approvals for the project which is subject to ICAO approval on air-

space sovereignty according to the Chicago Convention.

H H Sayyid Fahd underscored the importance of Oman hosting CALAF/2 as a way to explore the best options of supporting air transport. He also commended ICAO’s role in ensuring security and safety of passengers and global aviation traffic.

On his turn, Salazar expressed his appreciation and that of his accompanying delegation of Oman’s comprehensive renaissance covering many fields. He

also lauded Oman’s international airports and ports operating with the latest technologies set to global standards.

Salazar pointed out that the forum will contribute in reaching many positive outcomes serving international air transport traffic.

Meeting with Slovak Deputy PM

In a separate meeting, H H Sayyid Fahd received Stefan Holly, Deputy Prime Minister for Legislation and Strategic Planning in

the Slovak Republic.

After welcoming the guest and his accompanying delegation, H H Sayyid Fahd reviewed the existing relations between the two countries.

Holly conveyed greetings and best wishes of the Slovak leadership to the leadership in the Oman, wishing the Omani people further progress. He expressed his country’s interest in promoting relations with the sultanate in various spheres.

ONA

Tracking of trucks mandatory

Our Correspondent
Muscat

All transport vehicles registered in Oman and those entering the sultanate’s borders will have to instal tracking devices as per a new decision of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

H E Said bin Hamoud al Ma’awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, has issued a ministerial decision (No 47/2023) amending some provisions of the executive regulations of the Land Transport Law.

The decision was issued on February 13 and came into effect a day following its publication in the Official Gazette.

As per the decision, all types of land transport vehicles that are not registered in the sultanate must instal tracking devices - through authorities sanctioned by the ministry - when entering Oman or crossing its territory.

The decision also mandates installation of a tracking system in every truck registered in the sultanate.



The decision will curb the practice of random dumping of construction waste in undesig-nated areas

MOHAMMAD MAJID AL KASBI

Additionally, the decision mandates the need for truck drivers to abide by the time and traffic routes for truck specified by the ministry.

According to the decision, a fine of RO400 will be slapped on any individual who installs a tracking device without approval from the ministry. The fine will be doubled in the event of a repeat violation. ‘In case it is repeated a



third time, the licence will be revoked,’ it stated.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Dr Mohammad Majid al Kasbi, director of Environment Authority’s Department of Chemical Materials, said, “The decision is very important to ensure owners of transport vehicles instal In Vehicle Monitoring System (IVMS) devices. It will reduce illegal dumping of construction

waste.”

According to Kasbi, the decision will curb the practice of random dumping of construction waste in undesignedated areas and monitor trucks while transporting waste.

“It also aims to facilitate the private sector manage this waste, recycle and benefit from it economically, and take legal measures against violators.”

The new decision will help be’ah dispose waste in the appropriate way, besides generating data on the amount and type of waste. “This will help in re-sorting waste and finding integrated solutions for its management and recycling. The decision will also limit the smuggling and transportation of hazardous chemicals and waste outside the sultanate,” Kasbi added.

Putin suspends US nuclear treaty, vows to continue fight in Ukraine

Moscow, Russia - President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday suspended Moscow’s participation in a nuclear arms reduction treaty with Washington during a speech in which he accused the West of escalating the Ukraine conflict.

In his scathing state of the nation address to Russian lawmakers, Putin also vowed that Russia would keep fighting in Ukraine ahead of the first anniversary of the military campaign.

Accusing Western powers of wanting “to be done with us once and for all”, he said Russia was “forced” to suspend the New START treaty but would not pull out of the agreement altogether.

The 2010 treaty is the last major US-Russia arms control pact still in force but it has frayed in recent years, with accusations from Washington that Moscow was not complying with it.

Putin was speaking a day after US President Joe Biden made a surprise visit to Kyiv in which he promised additional arms deliveries for Ukraine, and ahead of a speech by Biden in Warsaw.

Referring to the conflict in Ukraine, Putin said, “Step by step, we will carefully and systematically solve the aims that face us.”

He said it was “impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield”.

“The responsibility for fuelling the Ukrainian conflict, for its escalation, for the number of victims... lies completely with Western elites,” Putin said.

A top US official described as an “absurdity” Putin’s accusations that Russia had been threatened by the West as justification for sending troops into Ukraine.

“Nobody is attacking Russia. There’s a kind of absurdity in the notion that Russia was under some form of military threat from Ukraine or anyone else,” White House National Security Advisor



They have not succeeded and will not succeed. The Russian economy has proved much more resilient than the West expected

VLADIMIR PUTIN

Jake Sullivan told reporters in Warsaw.

Sanctions ‘will not succeed’

Putin also issued a warning to critics within Russia, saying, “Those who have embarked on the path of betrayal of Russia must be held accountable under the law.”

Turning to the economy, Putin said sanctions against Russia had not succeeded and were in fact hurting the West by raising energy prices.

“They have not succeeded and will not succeed,” he said.

“The Russian economy has proved much more resilient than the West expected.”

Russian official data on Monday showed the economy contracted 2.1 per cent last year despite sanctions - far less than had been expected.

Biden is due to deliver his own speech after talks with Polish President Andrzej Duda, who has been a key advocate for Ukraine within the EU and NATO.

AFP

► NEWS BRIEF

H M SENDS MESSAGE TO KING OF NETHERLANDS

The Hague, Netherlands - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a written message to King Willem-Alexander of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The message deals with bilateral relations and means of promoting these. It was handed over by Dr Abdullah Salim al Harthy, Oman’s Ambassador to the Netherlands, in the Hague to Paul Huijts, Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands, on Tuesday.



Thai election to be held in May: PM



‘Banshees’ (Achill) Islands reap Oscars tourism boom

Oman-Etiihad Rail Company, Mubadala sign pact to develop UAE-Oman rail network

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Oman-Etiihad Rail Company, a joint venture between Oman Rail and Etihad Rail and the developer and operator of UAE-Oman Rail Network, signed a cooperation agreement with Mubadala Investment Company to support the development of the 303km railway network on Tuesday.

Mubadala is a sovereign investor in Abu Dhabi, which will support the development of the rail network with an overall investment value of US\$3bn.

The partnership comes in line with the two parties’ efforts to explore investment opportunities in the railway sector and strengthen



cooperation to support the Oman-Etiihad Rail Company in accelerating the planning and execution process of the UAE-Oman Rail Network.

The agreement includes formation of working groups and joint committees to benefit from

the shared expertise and knowledge, joint efforts in developing economic and financial feasibility studies, in addition to joint investments in the development of the UAE-Oman railway network and cooperation to enhance the project’s added value.

The agreement was signed by Ahmed al Musawa al Hashemi, CEO of Oman-Etiihad Rail Company, and Dr Bakheet Saeed al Katheeri, Executive Director of UAE Industries Unit, at Mubadala’s UAE Investments platform.

On the occasion, Suhail bin Mohammed al Mazrouei, Minister of Energy and Infrastructure and Chairman of Oman-Etiihad Rail Company, said, “The establishment of UAE-Oman Rail Network is an extension of the strategic relations and strong historical ties between UAE and Oman, and the foundation of the strong partnership between Etiihad Rail and Oman Rail.”

Call for tougher measures to prevent drifting in public places

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Experts and racing drivers have called for tougher penalties in the sultanate after Royal Oman Police (ROP) released a video of a drifting accident in which two people were seriously injured by a citizen in North Batinah on the weekend.

On February 18, North Batinah Governorate Police Command arrested a citizen in the Al Bidaya area of Suwaiq following a drifting stunt that went wrong leading to seriously injuring two people. The citizen fled the scene to hide his vehicle.

Earlier on February 4, Buraimi Governorate Police Command arrested a driver for drifting and disturbing public peace.

The video sparked strong reactions from citizens and experts who called for finding a way to put an end to the practice of drifting on public roads and places.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Ali al Barwani, former CEO of Oman Road Safety Association, described the practice as “widespread” despite efforts exerted by ROP and several campaigns to spread awareness on the risks involved. “I believe harsher punishment will limit this phenomenon and reduce the tragic accidents.”



Abu Abdullah, a citizen who lives in Al Bidaya, said, “We are tired of the screeching sound of tyres of cars drifting in the middle

of the night, especially on holidays. I appeal to the authorities to establish an area dedicated for drifting to reduce the disturbance

and also risk of accidents.”

According to racing driver Ali Al Balushi, Oman Automobile Association has a secure place for drifting and organises championships throughout the year. The association provides designated places where safety and security standards are followed to prevent accidents.

“There are a few who do not adhere to the safety standards and engage in drifting in public places, which causes fatal accidents. I urge the Omani youth to visit Oman Automobile Association, learn about its programmes and competitions, participate in these and abide by traffic laws.”

Nasser al Hosni, director of Happy Line Transport, noted that fatal drifting accidents occur from time to time in some regions of the sultanate. “The authorities should establish arenas for drifting and car racing for young people in governorates such as Buraimi and North Batinah.”

Appalled that drifting continues on Omani streets, Rashid Faqir al Balushi, safety officer for FIA World Rally, called for “deterrent laws and an increase in awareness campaigns to save lives. We also need to increase efforts to monitor garages that modify cars and violate traffic laws”.



Sayyid Badr receives Slovak Deputy PM

Muscat – H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received in his office Stefan Holly, Deputy Prime Minister for Legislation and Strategic Planning of the Slovak Republic, on Tuesday.

Their meeting reviewed areas of economic cooperation between the two countries and opportunities for exchanging expertise.

It also touched on investment diversification in various fields, including those related to strategic planning for infrastructure, reconstruction, digital transformation and industrialisation by employing the latest systems, technical devices and artificial intelligence.

Additionally, the meeting dealt with Slovak experience in developing programmes to reduce carbon

Their meeting reviewed opportunities in exchanging expertise

emissions, promoting green industries, stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship, and empowering the private sector.

The two sides discussed regional and international developments of common interest.

The meeting was attended by Yousef Issa al Ra'eesi, Head of the East Europe Department, H E Lenka Mihalikova, Non-resident Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the sultanate, and officials from both sides.

ONA

MoH lays foundation stone of Central Public Health Laboratory

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) held a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of a world-class public health laboratory in Muscat on Tuesday.

The project is in implementation of a Royal Directive and is being carried out by Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company. Spread over an area of 18,155sqm in Seeb, the project will be built at a cost of RO18.2mn.

According to Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, the laboratory is a vital national project, resulting from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's concern to develop and promote the health sector in line with the requirements of the times and to achieve sufficiency of local laboratory testing facilities.

He added that the world-class Central Public Health Laboratory will be a reference and diagnostic facility for conducting investigations to support surveillance and



epidemiological investigation programmes locally and regionally.

Dr Sabti affirmed that the new laboratory will perform diagnostic and investigation works using the latest technologies and strictly comply with quality and bio-safety standards.

The laboratory will also provide training and continuous education for technicians.

Dr Sabti pointed out that the

project aims to enhance the capacity of the current public health laboratories. The new facility will increase capabilities to collect, register, store and process samples according to the most recent international practices.

The lab will also support the increasing demand in public health and academic requirements to strengthen interaction with scientists, laboratories, students and health administrators

worldwide.

The central laboratory will perform epidemiological surveillance for all kinds of medical developments and surveys in coordination with the concerned authorities. It will carry out awareness drives among local communities in cooperation with other relevant authorities in the sultanate in areas of public health.

The lab will coordinate with

educational institutions in the sultanate and abroad in specialised research works to promote health and disease prevention.

It will also be prepared to respond quickly to any public health emergency.

In addition, the lab will promote health and prevent diseases by taking a lead in laboratory science activities and supporting public health and environmental conservation efforts.

The main building of the project will have three floors, including sections for biochemistry and toxicology, foodborne disease outbreaks investigation, a bacteriological laboratory (antimicrobial resistance reference laboratory and molecular bacteriology reference laboratory), quality and risk management, public health affairs, a virology laboratory (regional polio laboratory, regional measles and rubella laboratory, national influenza centre, regional SARS-CoV-2 laboratory), and a national TB laboratory.

First-of-its-kind thoracic surgery unit opens in The Royal Hospital

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Royal Hospital inaugurated a thoracic surgery unit on Tuesday. It is the first of its kind in Oman and aims to provide advanced and comprehensive care.

The unit will deal with lung and esophageal cancers, pleural diseases, tumours of the medi-

astinum, thorax, diaphragm problems, lung diseases, and benign esophagus and chest injuries, in addition to surgeries and diagnostic and treatment services through pulmonary and gastroscopy endoscopy.

Dr Sami bin Sulaiman al Farsi, Director General of Royal Hospital, confirmed to ONA that the opening of the thoracic surgery



unit is realisation of one of the most ambitious plans to expand the services provided by the hospital.

"The unit targets various segments of society, especially since the hospital is one of the most important reference institutions in Oman," he said.

On the occasion, Dr Aziza bint Nasser al Rawahiya, from

the thoracic surgery unit, said that inauguration of the unit reinforces the Ministry of Health's commitment to provide specialised, high-quality healthcare, keeping abreast of developments in the field and pioneering the use of new surgical techniques.

She informed that the unit works closely with the depart-

ments of oncology and radiology to evaluate diagnosis and treatment options to ensure patients receive the best and most appropriate treatment for cancer.

"The unit also works to improve public awareness on diseases of the chest and esophagus, and encourage people to seek care when symptoms of cancer appear," Dr Aziza added.

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SULTANATE OF OMAN

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Fees R.O	Grade In Tender Board Registration
Re-tender 17/2021	Services	Construction Of Grassed Football Pitch At Majees Sport Club	25/- OMR	Excellent & First
2/2023	Electromechanical and Telecommunications Contracting and Maintenance	Laying Of 4c X 240 Sq L. T U/G Cabling At Seeb Sports Stadium	25/- OMR	First

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) until 26/02/2023.

The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site at 09:00am 06/03/2023

A Tender Bond equivalent to 1% of the tender sum issued from a registered bank, in the prescribed form, in Sultanate of Oman and valid for 90 days should enclosed with the tender.

Any tender without the bond will be reject and the tender committee is not bound to accept the lowest or any tender received.

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24402200 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

SAF chief meets Iran navy commander

Muscat - Vice-Admiral Abdullah Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), received in his office at Al Murtafa'a Garrison Commodore Shahram Irani, Commander of Navy of Iran, on Tuesday.

Rear Admiral Saif Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of Royal Navy of Oman, was present at the meeting.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed military matters of mutual interest. They also reviewed various aspects of mutual cooperation.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Abdulaziz Abdullah al Mantheri, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations and Planning, several senior officers, Ambassador of Iran to Oman and the Military Attaché of Iran's Embassy in Muscat.

In another meeting, Vice-Admiral Raisi met the preparatory team of the Gulf Academy for Strategic and Security Studies, headed by Rear Admiral Tariq Khalfan al Za'abi.

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'Air traffic to return to 2019 levels by 2023 end'

Muscat - The top most official of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has said that world's civil aviation traffic will return to 2019 passenger levels by the end of 2023.

Juan Carlos Salazar, Secretary-General of ICAO, was speaking during the launch of the Second Civil Aviation Legal Advisers Forum (CALAF/2), organised by ICAO and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), in Muscat on Tuesday.

As many as 63 countries and three international organisations are participating in the three-day forum.

CALAF/2 facilitates a continuous attention on issues of interest to the international aviation community in the legal field.

The forum is featuring presentations on a variety of civil aviation topics, and in particular, the matters related to recent developments and emerging issues in the civil aviation law field, and ICAO's work in the legal field.

It will also cover topics related



to crisis management and air travel recovery; data privacy; competency framework for legal advisors; settlement of aviation disputes; enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of civil aviation legal advisors; and current issues in aviation law and practice.

The opening ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Dr Abdullah Mohammed Said al Saïdi, Minister of Justice and Legal Affairs.

In his speech, Naif Ali al Abri, Chairman of CAA, underscored the importance of keeping pace

with the rapid developments taking place in the civil aviation sector locally and globally. He also stressed the importance of examining the compatibility of the provisions of the Civil Aviation Law in the sultanate with the requirements of ICAO.

Abri pointed out that Oman recently joined the Convention on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Relating to International Civil Aviation and the Protocol to Amend the Convention on Offences and Certain Other Acts Committed on Board Aircraft.

ICAO Secretary-General Salazar said that the ICAO's Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART) developed and provided practical guidance to governments and industry operators in order to maintain essential services in the COVID-19 aftermath, safely restart the international air transport sector, and now accelerate the recovery through coordination at the global level. The forum includes five sessions covering a spectrum of topics related to international civil aviation.

CAA, ICAO ink pact to ensure civil aviation safety compliance

Muscat - The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) inked a management services agreement with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) on Tuesday. The agreement will support the sultanate's efforts to ensure compliance with the highest safety standards in the field of civil aviation.

It was signed by Nayef Ali al Abri, Chairman of CAA, and Juan Carlos Salazar, Secretary-General of ICAO.

According to the agreement, Oman will seek the assistance of qualified international experts from ICAO. Additionally, the pact covers staff training to assist all efforts pertaining to civil aviation safety in Oman.

The signing of the agreement is in line with CAA's attempts to comply with ICAO's



standards and attain the requisite compliance accreditation.

Later on Tuesday, Salazar met H E Gen Sultan Mohammed al Nu'amani, Minister of Royal Office, in his office.

Salazar thanked Oman for hosting the second edition of the Civil Aviation Legal Advisers Forum (CALAF/2). He also expressed his appreciation for Oman's role in boosting cooperation in field of international civil aviation.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest.

ONA

MoL initiative develops future entrepreneurs

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) is making concerted efforts to support small and medium enterprises as new businesses help in Oman's economic growth.

To create an environment conducive for entrepreneurs and provide the labour market with trained national cadres, the ministry recently launched a training initiative to prepare future entrepreneurs.

Under the initiative, training is provided to university degree, diploma and its equivalent, and general diploma holders in the field of entrepreneurship.

The duration of the training ranges from three to 12 months for which MoL will pay training fees, a monthly stipend - from RO150 to RO250 - based on the trainee's qualification, and a monthly salary for one year after completion of the requirements of the training and starting their own businesses.

"The training of future entrepreneurs is helping qualify job-seekers from different disciplines and educational qualifications in the field of entrepreneurship through establishment of small and medium enterprises in various sectors," said Fatima Mohammed al Hinai from the Training Support Centre of the ministry. Fatima noted that the initiative is important as it encourages jobseekers to work in the field of entrepreneurship and establish their own businesses with the ministry's support or related entities. "Moreover, it creates job opportunities and helps in starting new companies."



Fatima Mohammed al Hinai

Ahmed Mohammed al Khadouri, electrical engineer and a beneficiary of the initiative, described it as one of the most important in training youth to establish their own business and increasing job opportunities.

"Moreover, the initiative enhances existing projects by offering facilities, assistance and consultation to ensure the success of running projects," Khadouri said.

The initiative has two categories. In the foundation category, projects still in planning stage are supported, while in the second category, existing projects are targeted which need further development.

"This initiative is vital for job-seekers as it develops ideas and promotes them in a way that expands their horizons in the field of entrepreneurship. This course also provides facilities such as licences, loans and exemptions that can contribute to the project's growth and success," said civil engineer Laith Hamed al Shabibi, another beneficiary.

Farmers to register for selling wheat to OFMC

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) announced on Tuesday that it has started receiving requests from framers to sell wheat produced in the 2022-23 season to Oman Flour Mills Company (OFMC) for RO500 per tonne.

"The ministry urges Omani farmers who wish to sell their produce to the company to sub-

mit their request by filling out a form available in the Department of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources in their respective wilayats," an official at MAFWR said.

The deadline for accepting farmers' requests to sell their wheat crop is February 28.

According to the official, the ministry has set a few conditions, including the variety of wheat must be Omani and registered with the ministry, besides being produce of this year.

The wheat must be a pure variety, not mixed with other impurities and seeds.

"The farmer should himself supply his harvest to the company's warehouses in Muttrah in Muscat," the official added.

MAFWR recently signed an agreement with Oman Flour Mills Company to purchase wheat crop from Omani farmers following the 2022-23 harvest season in its efforts to enhance food security and support farmers.

Tender Announcement

Muscat Electricity Distribution Company S.A.O.C invites interested companies to participate in the following tenders:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Site Visit	Attendee	Grade	Tender Price (R.O)
MEDC/2023/011	Supply and Installation of Mechanical Sealant inside primary substation No. P097	08/03/2023	15/03/2023	09/03/2023 At 8:30 in MEDC Head Office	Engineer must wear the full PPE	Specialized	26.250

The table below shows the instructions for participation: -

Participation	- Companies registered with Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and in I Supplier with Nama Groupe may obtain Tender documents. - The amount specified above is including 5% VAT. - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from Tender fees - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply) - To obtain the tender document and payment procedure , please visit MEDC Website/Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com or call 24588600 – Ext: 8685 , 8952, 8707
Enquiries	- Any inquiry can be sent to MEDC Website/Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com, one week before bid submission date. - Any request for clarification received after the above-mentioned period will not be considered.
Tender Submission	Please follow SUBMISSION OF TENDER mentioned in clause 20.0 in Prime Document and to the supplier guideline available MEDC Website/Vendor/E-Tendering, www.medcoman.com
Guarantee	- The Tender should enclose a bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman Unconditional and irrevocable and shall be disbursement as soon as it is submitted for the value of (1%) of the tender value valid for a period of at least ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF MINOR TENDER COMMITTEE, MUSCAT ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION COMPANY S.A.O.C. - The bid bond should be included in the commercial proposal only as sof copy. Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from bid bond requirements. - After the commercial opening , the qualified bidders will be notified to submit the original (hard copy) of bid bond to MEDC office. - Any tender not accompanied by a Tender Bond shall be rejected.
Terms and Conditions	- The Tender shall be valid for a period of at least ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission including any extension thereof. - If the submission date extended, the bank guarantee or a certified cheque shall be extended in accordance with the bid extension date. - MEDC is not bound to accept the lowest (or highest) Tenderer. - Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from Local Products and have a High-level percentage of Omanization - Muscat Electricity Distribution Company gives priority to award the projects to riyada card holders companies. - For projects whose value is less than OMR 10K, the priority to award will be given to registered companies that hold a valid certificate Of Reyadah. - Failure to comply with the instructions in tender document may lead to disqualification.



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Pakistan	682.53
Bangladesh	276.40
Philippines	143.08
Sri Lanka	949.95

*Rates as on February 21

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Iran rial sinks to record low after fresh EU sanctions

Iran's currency plunged to new lows Tuesday amid fresh European Union sanctions, crossing the psychologically important rate of 500,000 rials to a dollar in foreign exchange markets.

To counter the slump, central bank chief Mohammad Reza Farzin proposed opening a new foreign exchange centre.

"We will supply the currency needed for basic goods from the sale of ... oil and gas condensate," state television quoted him as saying, referring to a light type oil produced during natural gas production.

Iran is suffering from a nearly 50 per cent inflation rate and increasing commodity prices.

Last week, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei acknowledged Iran is facing many shortcomings such as "high prices, inflation and the depreciation of the national currency."

IEA says energy firms not doing enough to cut methane

Paris, France - Oil and gas companies are not doing enough to cut methane emissions the International Energy Agency (IEA) said Tuesday, despite high energy prices making abatement measures mostly pay for themselves.

In its latest annual Global Methane Tracker report, the IEA found that emissions from the energy sector rose slightly last year to 135mn tonnes, to just below the record set in 2019.

"Our new Global Methane Tracker shows that some progress is being made but that emissions are still far too high and not falling fast enough - especially as methane cuts are among the cheapest options to limit near-term global warming," said IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol. "There is just no excuse."

Methane is responsible for around 30 per cent of the rise in global temperatures since the Industrial Revolution. As it has a faster and more powerful impact than carbon dioxide reductions, methane emissions may prove the best way to limit short-term global warming and rapidly improve air quality.

The energy sector accounts for around 40 per cent of total methane emissions attributable to human activity, second only to agriculture, and cost-effective solutions are available.

"We estimate that around 70 per cent of methane emissions from fossil fuel operations could be reduced with existing technol-



IEA found that emissions from global energy sector rose last year to 135mn tonnes

ogy," the IEA said in the report.

While fossil fuel operations are reducing the amount of methane emitted per unit of energy and leaks into the atmosphere, overall emissions are still rising.

This despite steps to reduce emissions which largely pay for themselves.

"Based on the record gas prices seen around the world in 2022, we estimate that about 80 per cent of the options to reduce emissions from oil and gas operations worldwide could be implemented at no net cost," said the IEA.

The IEA estimates that US\$100bn - less than three per

cent of the income of oil and gas companies worldwide last year - would be enough to achieve a 75 per cent reduction in methane emissions.

Meanwhile, the IEA said the most impactful measure countries can take to rein in emissions is stopping all non-emergency flaring and venting of methane.

The IEA also noted that the explosions last year which destroyed the Nord Stream pipelines that carried Russian natural gas to Germany released a huge amount of methane into the atmosphere.

"But normal oil and gas operations around the world release the same amount of methane as



CBO issues RO18mn worth of treasury bills

Our Correspondent

Muscat

4.9332 per cent, respectively.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

The interest rate on the repo operations with CBO is 5.25 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with CBO is 5.75 per cent.

Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates.

Additionally, the government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

The total issuance of government treasury bills by the Central Bank of Oman amounted to RO18mn this week.

The value of allotted treasury bills amounted to RO9mn, for a maturity period of 28 days. The average accepted price reached RO99.655 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO99.650. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 4.4973 per cent and 4.5128 per cent, respectively.

Moreover, the value of the allotted treasury bills for a maturity period of 91 days amounted to RO9mn. The average accepted price reached RO98.785 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO98.775. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 4.8733 per cent and

Over half of Middle East CEOs expect resilient economic outlook: Survey

Dubai, UAE - Despite current challenges, CEOs of the world's largest companies are embracing the positive and seeing the opportunities in turmoil. According to a new survey, over half (61 per cent) of CEOs in the Middle East expect a stable or positive worldwide economic outlook over the next three to five years.

Arthur D. Little (ADL), the leading management consultancy firm with the longest-standing presence in the Middle East region, on Tuesday elaborated on this and many other findings in their new 2023 CEO Insights study, which englobes insights from nearly 250 CEOs from companies worldwide with turnover of more than US\$1bn.

In a press release, Thomas Kuruvilla, managing partner at Arthur D. Little Middle East, said, "In the Middle East, we see good examples of an industry's moves to improve both efficiency and

innovation in the travel and transportation industry. The COVID crisis pushed airlines and airports into large-scale efficiency programs to achieve major cost reductions, impacting thousands of jobs. However, at the same time, these companies are forming new partnerships to offer new services to passengers, such as combined intermodal mobility offerings (e.g., bringing together aircraft, rail, and mobility on-demand services)."

He said, "The next eight years will showcase tremendous advances in new client segments in the region as more investment is poured into reskilling initiatives for employees in the manufacturing and energy and utilities sector, ultimately contributing to competitive sustainability projects in the run-up to COP."

Despite the current energy crisis, all CEOs are focusing on innovation when it comes to



Thomas Kuruvilla

drivers of future growth. Following the global trend of new geographies, Gulf executives will put less emphasis on diversification and disruptive offering to focus more on new client segments. Globally, over a quarter (26 per cent) listed technology innovation as the most critical factor to growth, well ahead of raw material/energy prices (11 per cent). Factors such as supply chain, and cyber risks both outranked raw material prices globally.

However, there are clear regional differences.

Environmental and climate change issues are a key focus in Europe, North America, and Asia, but receive less attention in other regions. Though more and more CEOs in the Middle East (7 per cent) are prioritising environmental and climate change as a factor in future growth, they remain closely aligned to their global (10 per cent) counterparts.

Cyber risk is viewed as a key, urgent factor by 15 per cent of CEOs in Africa, 14 per cent in Asia, and 13 per cent in Middle East and Africa (MEA)/South America, ahead of their peers in Europe and North America. Additionally C-suite in the Middle East believe the most critical factor in economic growth is technology innovation at 29 per cent as compared with the global average of 26 per cent.

Abraj IPO boost investors confidence in Oman

Muscat - Boosting investors' confidence in the subscription of Abraj Energy Services' initial public offering (IPO), 40 per cent of the shares offered in the IPO were purchased by the founders of the company including Saudi Omani Investment Company (SOIC).

These entities collectively constitute the 'main investors' and have subscribed for 40 per cent of the Abraj IPO with a total payment of RO37.588mn.

Abraj, a subsidiary of Oman's integrated energy group OQ, has offered its shares for public subscription in two parallel categories. The first category is allocated for major investors and will account for a maximum of 85 per cent of the total public offering. This is directed to major and corporate investors in Oman and international investors.

The subscription price in the



first category is set within the range of 242bz to 249bz per share.

Based on the price band, the total value of the Abraj IPO will be between RO91.33mn - RO93.97mn. The company's market value on the listing at the Muscat Stock Exchange will range between RO186.39mn-RO191.78mn.

In a press release, Eng Ahmed bin Said al Azkawi, chief executive of OQ Upstream, said, "The

subscription of the founders in 40 per cent of Abraj Energy Services' shares enhances the confidence in the success of the IPO. The signing of the anchor investment agreement by Saudi Omani Investment Company for the purchase of 20 per cent of Abraj's shares put for sale in the IPO reflects the regional growth strategy adopted by our company and its commitment to supporting the objectives of Oman Vision 2040."

Green hydrogen market seen growing in 2023 despite slowing economy

London, UK - Hydrogen development, given its application across various industries, is indispensable to attaining energy transition, meeting decarbonisation goals, and positioning leading companies as market experts. In 2022, green hydrogen production capacity reached over 109 kilo tonnes per annum (ktpa) worldwide, representing 44 per cent growth compared to 2021, said GlobalData, a leading data and analytics company.

GlobalData's recent publication 'Hydrogen Transition Outlook and Trends: Q1 2023,' highlights deals, trends, and investments as useful benchmarks to identify those leading companies driving the hydrogen market

growth.

In a press release, Andres Angulo, energy analyst at GlobalData, said, "During 2022, over 393 deals related to hydrogen were closed, representing a significant increase compared to 277 deals registered in 2021. This shows an upward trend in the low-carbon hydrogen market development, which could be decisive in achieving over 111mn tonnes per annum (mtpa) capacity worldwide by 2030. However, the partnerships represented 66 per cent of the deals last year, and the number of deals decreased after Q2 2022 to numbers even below those seen in the same quarter in 2021. This could have been due



to the companies trying to strengthen their core business and diversify the investment risk given the global economic situation."

Despite the high number of partnerships formed between

companies as compared to government agencies, investing and raising capital were of the utmost importance to developing the hydrogen economy in 2022.

Last year, mergers and acquisitions (M&A) deals reached

US\$24.4bn in monetary value, representing a 288 per cent increase compared to 2021 levels. On the other hand, venture finance deal values also grew from US\$595.23mn to over US\$3,001.1mn.

In 2022, over 111.9 mtpa low-carbon hydrogen capacity was announced in the US, Denmark, Egypt, Canada, Portugal, and other countries. In Canada, Green Hydrogen International (GHI) announced two important green hydrogen projects as a sole participant, with 43 mtpa capacity each, which are expected to begin production in 2030. Some other companies took part in multiple project investments globally to diversify

their risk, including Fortescue Industries, which has two-thirds of its capacity outside its home country, Australia.

Companies like GHI, Suez Canal Economic Zone, New and Renewable Energy Authority, Sovereign Fund of Egypt, and Egyptian Electricity Transmission Co are the global leaders in low-carbon hydrogen, with 56.3 mtpa active and upcoming capacity combined.

During last year, as the hydrogen economy raised, companies like Globeleq Africa, Linde, John Wood Group, ThyssenKrupp, H2-Industries, Alcazar energy, and Samsung Engineering took advantage of the growing demand for hydrogen capacity and

became the Engineering, Procurement & Construction (EPC) leaders for green projects.

Angulo concluded, "Despite the challenging global economic conditions, the number of investments in low-carbon hydrogen increased from 600 to over 1,700 between Q4 2021 and Q4 2022. As of January 2023, over 90 per cent of pipeline hydrogen projects are green, as reflected by the increasing manufacturers' electrolysis capacity and the number of EPC contractors participating in bigger green projects. This, in addition to the renewable energy development, will create a momentum that will accelerate the cost reduction across the entire hydrogen value chain."

HSBC says pre-tax profits slip to \$17.5bn in 2022

Hong Kong, China - Banking giant HSBC on Tuesday announced a dip in 2022 pre-tax profits last year, calling the ongoing impact of Covid-19 the main factor in its financial performance.

The Asia-focused lender said it made US\$17.5bn before tax, down more than seven per cent on-year, while reported revenue increased four per cent to US\$51.7bn.

In a statement to the Hong Kong stock exchange, HSBC detailed the tough global economic climate international banks are facing. It cited renewed virus outbreaks in Hong Kong and mainland China as denting last year's economic growth.

It added that global uncertainty sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, elevated inflation and rising interest rates contributed to a difficult financial environment that it expects will spill into 2023's earnings and even eclipse the toll of the pandemic.



"We are already seeing... a cost of living crisis affecting many of our customers and colleagues," Mark Tucker, the group's chairman said in a statement.

However, after-tax profits rose US\$2bn to US\$16.7bn, while fourth-quarter pre-tax profit nearly doubled from US\$2.5bn to US\$5.2bn.

"All of our businesses grew profits in 2022, and we maintained our strong capital, funding

and liquidity positions," Tucker added.

The bank said last year reflected "a strong overall financial performance", and announced a full-year dividend of US\$0.32 per share.

At an event last month, Tucker said China's reopening and latest measures to stabilise its turbulent property market "will be positive for both its economy and the global economy".

The lender has vowed to ac-

celerate a multi-year pivot to Asia and the Middle East, and its ambitions to lead Asia's wealth management market has shown early signs of success.

In November, the bank agreed to sell its Canadian division for US\$10.1bn, saying it would use the funds to invest in its core business and return cash to investors.

The Canadian sale comes after a months-long campaign by HSBC's biggest shareholder and Chinese insurance giant Ping An to cut costs and shift more resources to Asia.

Ping An has argued that spinning off HSBC's Asian operations will unlock shareholder value amid tensions between China and Western powers, though the bank has rejected the move.

"It has been, and remains, our judgement that alternative structural options would not deliver increased value for shareholders," Tucker said.

AFP

WTO launches fishing subsidy talks

Geneva, Switzerland - The World Trade Organization set sail on a "second wave" of negotiations on fisheries subsidies, the new head of the talks announced, after months stuck on the rocks.

The second stage is a follow-up to the historic agreement on fishing subsidies reached at the 12th WTO ministerial conference in June last year.

But the absence of someone to chair the process, after the de-

parture of Colombian ambassador Santiago Wills at the end of September, led to paralysis at a crucial point in the talks.

Under the June agreement, the global trade body's 164 members committed to keep

talking on outstanding issues in order to strike a comprehensive agreement at the next WTO ministerial conference, to be held in the United Arab Emirates in February 2024.

AFP

Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG

Post Box 38, Mina Al Fahal, Postal Code 116, Sultanate of Oman

INVITATION FOR THE ANNUAL ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING 2023

The Board of Directors of Shell Oman Marketing SAOG (the "Company") are pleased to invite all the shareholders of the Company to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting of the Company ("AGM") scheduled to be held at **3 pm on Thursday, 9 March 2023** at Jabrin Hall, Intercontinental Hotel, Qurum, Muscat and through the electronic platform hosting the AGM. The platform can be accessed through Muscat Clearance and Depository Company's website (www.mcd.gov.om). In the event of not meeting the legal quorum, the AGM will be held at 3 pm on Thursday, 16 March 2023, at Intercontinental Hotel, Qurum, Muscat and through the electronic platform hosting the AGM, to discuss the following agenda:

Agenda for Annual General Meeting

- To consider and approve the Board of Directors' Report regarding the Company's activities and financial position during the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider and approve the Board of Directors' Report regarding Corporate Governance for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider and approve the Auditors' Report regarding the audited financial statements for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider and approve the proposed cash dividend to shareholders as of the date of the AGM, equivalent to 57 Baisa per share for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To approve the sitting fees of the Board of Directors and sub-committees payable to the Board of Directors for the previous financial year and to determine the sitting fees for the next financial year.
- To consider and approve the proposal of distributing the total sum of RO 53,000 as remuneration for the Board of Directors of the Company for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To inform the shareholders about Related Parties Transactions entered by the Company during the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To inform the shareholders about the expenditure in support of social services during the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider and approve the proposal of allocating RO 75,000 to support social services for the financial year ending 31 December 2023.
- To elect two board members in the Board of Directors of the Company to fill the vacant seats. Any person who wishes to be nominated to the Board of Directors of the Company is required to fill in a Director's Nomination Form and deliver it to the Company at least five (5) business days prior to the date of the AGM of the Company (by the end of working hours on Wednesday, 1 March 2023). The Company shall not accept any applications received after such date. Candidates must meet the required conditions for the Board of Directors' membership.
- To appoint the Auditors for the Company for the year ending 31 December 2023 and fix their remuneration.

In accordance with the Company's Articles of Association and CMA's regulations on holding AGMs using the electronic platform, we would like to bring to your kind attention the following:

- Any juristic person is entitled to authorize any natural person to attend the AGM and vote on their behalf through the electronic platform, provided that the natural person has an investor number in Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.
- Voting on any of the agenda items mentioned in the notice commences three (3) days before the date of the commencement of the AGM and until the end of the voting process on the day of the AGM. In the event that the shareholder's balance changes, the voting shall be considered void, and he/she shall vote again on the day of the AGM.

To prevent delay in starting the Meeting, shareholders are requested to arrive about half an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

For subsequent information, kindly contact **Mr. Azzan Hamed Al Yahmadi** on telephone number: **96622566**



TENDERS ADVERTISEMENT

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) Announce the following Tenders:

Sr.No	Tender No.	Tender Name	Last Date for Obtaining Tender Documents	Closing Date	Grade	Tender Document's Fees (Including VAT) (RO)
1	10/2023 (International)	Enhancement of ERDS with AMR System.	09/03/2023	04/04/2023	Local & International Companies with Experience in Same Field, Have A Valid Commercial Registration.	26/250
2	12/2023	Interface Works Between MZEC and OETC in Adam, BAM , and Sumail Grid Stations	09/03/2023	04/04/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same field, Have a valid Commercial Registration Certificate, DCRP and OETC Registration Certificate	52/500
3	13/2023	Consultancy Services for Design and Supervision of 132kV JBB Ali Wind Farm Grid Station along with associated 132kV LIL0 from JBB Hassan to Al Jawabi.	09/03/2023	04/04/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same Field, Have A Valid Commercial Registration.	105/-
4	14/2023	Telecom & Integrated Security Systems Maintenance Services	09/03/2023	04/04/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same Field, Have A Valid Commercial Registration.	1,575/-

Participation:	Interested Companies may obtain Tender Document with the necessity Apply on E-tendering
Buying the Tender:	By E-Tendering System.
Fees:	Against non-refundable payment as mentioned above against each set of document. (Payment Through Bank Transfer)
The deadline for clarification:	Before (21) Days from closing date.
Submission:	The submission of hard copy will be only for Bid Bond & other documents by E-Tendering
Terms and conditions:	- No other writing or any reference thereto should be mentioned on the envelope. - The bid should be valid for not less than (90) days from closing date. - The Tenderer should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the bid value and should be valid for (90) days from closing date, addressed to Oman Electricity Transmission Company (SAOG). - Any bid not comply with the required guarantee, will not be accepted. - OETC is not bound to accept the lowest or any other offers.
Offer:	The bid bond should be submitted in Tender Box No. (1) at the company's building before 11:00 am on the assigned date for submission of the Tenders.
Company Address:	Muscat - Al Mawaleh Road No: 2153 - Building No. 423 0 Block No: 321 - Contact Details: 93515198, 91777378, 92217856
Email:	tenders@omangrid.com
Website:	www.omangrid.com / link of E-Tendering System https://www.omangrid.com/en/Pages/Services.aspx



Oman Electricity Transmission Company S.A.O.C.
P.O. Box 1389, Al Khoudh, PC 132, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: +968 2428 3000 I Fax: +968 2230 9046
www.omangrid.com

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2040

إعلان طرح مناقصات

تعلن الشركة العُمانية لنقل الكهرباء عن طرح المناقصات التالية :

م	رقم المناقصة	عنوان المناقصة	آخر موعد للحصول على مستندات المناقصة	آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات	الدرجة	لمن الوثيقة (شامل ضرورة القيمة المضافة) (دع)
١	٢٠٢٣/١٠ (دولية)	تطوير برنامج قارئ عمادات الطاقة الكهربائية ومعد تقارير الطاقة و مشاركة البيانات	٢٠٢٣/٠٣/٠٩	٢٠٢٣/٠٤/٠٤	الشركات المحلية والدولية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول	٢٩/٢٥٠
٢	٢٠٢٣/١٢	الأعمال المشتركة ما بين شركة مزون للكهرباء والشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء في محطات سمائل و آدم و بركة الموز	٢٠٢٣/٠٣/٠٩	٢٠٢٣/٠٤/٠٤	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول . لديها شهادة من مجلس مراجعة قواعد التوزيع ومسجلة لدى الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء	٥٢/٥٠٠
٣	٢٠٢٣/١٣	الخدمات الإستشارية لإنشاء محطة محولات الكهرباء جهد 33/132 المرتبطة بخلافة الرياح بجعلان بني بوعلی وخلاطة الكهرباء جهد 132 ك.ف المصاحب لها بين محطتي جعلان بني بوحسن والجوابي	٢٠٢٣/٠٣/٠٩	٢٠٢٣/٠٤/٠٤	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول.	١٠٥/-
٤	٢٠٢٣/١٤	خدمات صيانة الأنظمة الأمنية والإنصالات	٢٠٢٣/٠٣/٠٩	٢٠٢٣/٠٤/٠٤	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول	١,٥٧٥/-

الاشتراك	يمكن للشركات والمؤسسات المتخصصة الحصول على مستندات المناقصة بعد تقديم الطلب عن طريق نظام المناقص الإلكتروني
طريقة الشراء	من خلال إستخدام نظام المناقص الإلكتروني
الرسوم	مقابل دفع المبلغ المحدد أعلاه للنسخة الواحدة - لا ترد . (الدفع عن طريق التحويل البنكي)
آخر موعد للإستفسارات	قبل (٢١) يوم من تاريخ آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات
تقديم العروض	بتم تسليم النسخة الأصلية فقط من الضمان البنكي للعطاء في الصندوق . أما العرض فيتم تسليمه من خلال نظام المناقص الإلكتروني.
الشروط و الضمانات	- عدم تحيد اسم صاحب العطاء أو ما يشير إليه على المطرّف. - أن تكون العروض سارية المفعول لمدة لا تقل عن (٩٠) يوما من تاريخ تقديم العطاء . - إرفاق تأميناً في صورة ضمان مصرفي من أحد البنوك العاملة في البلاد قدره (٧٠٪) من قيمة العطاء ساري لمدة (٩٠) يوما من تاريخ تقديم العطاء . - ويعتبر تأميناً باسم الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء . - كل عطاء لا يستوفي التأمين المطلوب لن ينظر فيه . - الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء غير مقيدة بقبول أقل العروض أو أي عطاء آخر.
العرض المقدم	يجب وضع الضمان البنكي للعطاء فقط في صندوق المناقصات رقم (١) بمبنى الشركة قبل الساعة ١١ صباحاً من التاريخ المحدد لتقديم العطاءات
عنوان الشركة	عنوان الشركة: محافظة مسقط - الموالح رقم السكة ٢١٥٣ - مبنى رقم ٤٣٠ تفاصيل التواصل: ٩٢٢١٧٨٥٦, ٩٢٥١٥١٩٨, ٩١٧٧٧٣٧٨
البريد الإلكتروني	tenders@omangrid.com
الموقع الإلكتروني	www.omangrid.com link of E-Tendering System https://www.omangrid.com/en/Pages/Services.aspx



الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء ش . م . ع . م
ص . ب : ١٣٨٩ . الخوض الرمز البريدي : ١٣٢ . سلطنة عمان
الهاتف : ٩١٨٢٤٢٨٣٠٠٠ / الفاكس : ٩١٨٢٢٣٠٩٠٤١
الموقع الإلكتروني: www.omangrid.com



Bank Muscat opens new Green Sports field



Bank Muscat, a leading financial service provider in the sultanate, recently inaugurated a new Green Sports field in the wilayat of Khabourah under the patronage of Sheikh Sultan Humaid Mohammed al Hosni, a member of the Shura Council and the Khabourah representative.

In line with its commitment to social responsibility, community development and the youth,

Bank Muscat continues to hand over new Green Sports fields to sports teams across Oman, the bank said in a statement.

The event - organised to hand over the latest Green Sports field to Al Khuwairat Sports Team in Khabourah - was attended by Yaqoob Abdullah al Hosni, Bank Muscat's Khabourah branch manager, and Ahmed Said al Qutaiti, head of the Al Khuwairat

Sports Team.

Speaking on the occasion, Yaqoob al Hosni said that the new floodlighting facility provided under Green Sports support would greatly help the Khuwairat team improve its capabilities and talent. He congratulated the team for completing the project on time and requested the community to make the best use of the facilities, including for social and community events, adding that community and social events would help improve community bonding.

Hosni hoped that the Khuwairat team would contribute talent at the very top level so as to enhance the sporting talents and capabilities of Omani youth.

Ahmed al Qutaiti of the Al Khuwairat Sports Team thanked Bank Muscat for its pioneering

role in corporate social responsibility, particularly in Green Sports, which is contributing to the building of quality sports infrastructure across Oman. He affirmed that the team would continue to work hard to develop the capabilities and talents of its members as a way to contribute to developing the overall sports sector in Oman.

Bank Muscat's Green Sports

programme is one of the leading CSR programs in Oman, which provides support to local sports teams as part of the bank's efforts to develop sports infrastructure and green spaces throughout the Sultanate of Oman. The support includes greening of football pitches, water desalination and lighting.

It is a matter of great encouragement that the Bank Muscat's

Green Sports programme has so far benefitted 163 teams with over 50,000 team members across the Sultanate of Oman.

The bank recently concluded the registration for teams applying for Green Sports support in 2023, with the evaluation process set to start soon. In 2023, the bank will support 20 youth sports teams across the sultanate through the programme.

Delegation from State Council visits PDO

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) on Tuesday hosted a delegation of State Council members on an official visit to its Mina al Fahal headquarters, headed by the Chairman of the State Council H E Sheikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah al Khalili.

A senior PDO management team, headed by Managing Director Steve Phimister, gave an overview of the company's performance on a range of matters including health, safety and the environment, production, major projects and the creation of job and training opportunities for Omanis, through its pioneering In-Country Value (ICV) and Lean efficiency programmes.

"I was honoured to visit PDO and learn more about its significant projects and the role of its national workforce to support strategic projects in Oman and its economy," H E Khalili said, while commenting on PDO's contribution.

"I praise PDO for its commitment towards achieving sustainable development in the concession area and supporting government efforts. I also commend its efforts in social respon-

sibility as well as finding collaboration with the government, private sector and civil community towards achieving sustainable development."

"We are proud of PDO's endeavors to develop innovative solutions aligned with its business in regards to environment protection, which is aligned with achieving the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, and to create a sustainable and balanced environment," he added.

This is the third time that PDO has hosted visitors from the State Council. The first was in March 2016 when a delegation, consisting of most of the Council's 84 members, paid a visit to PDO's Bait Mina Al Fahal HQ building, and the second was in October 2018, when they visited PDO's landmark projects in the south of its concession area.

PDO Managing Director Steve Phimister said, "We are thrilled to share with the honourable members a glimpse of our refreshed strategy, newly defined purpose, and how PDO is developing and implementing the Net-Zero Emission plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050."

Short film competition on familial hypercholesterolemia comes to end

The joint committee between the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Health (MoH), and the World Health Organization (WHO), in cooperation with the Omani Association for Lipids and Atherosclerosis, and the Medical Research Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, concluded the competition for the best short educational film for students on familial hypercholesterolemia.

The competition targeted students of the public, private, and international schools in grades XI-XII across the Sultanate of Oman. The competition, launched in the beginning of the academic year 2022-23, had approximately 60 visual presentations, said a press statement.

The competition sought to introduce familial cholesterol, its risks to humans, symptoms of familial hypercholesterolemia, and innovative methods to raise community awareness of familial hypercholesterolemia.

The closing ceremony of the competition was held to honour the winners under the auspices of Hamad bin Ali al Sarhani, advisor



to the Minister of Education for the Educational Administration.

The ceremony included a speech by the joint committee of the competition delivered by Fadhel bin Humaid al Hadrami, Director of Counseling and Awareness Department at the Career Guidance and Student Counseling Centre.

"The competition has proven that there are student talents with artistic and creative tendencies, and this was evident through the wonderful works of art it produced for us that carry meaningful awareness messages, and their products proved that there are latent creative energies that need more care and

attention," Hadrami said.

"From this standpoint, the joint committee involving the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the High Health Organisation strives to continue achieving the objectives of the competition, which are represented in artistic, literary, and indirect works carrying na-

tional, social, and health dimensions that communicate the principles of health and disease prevention," he added.

A visual presentation showcased the committee's efforts on the familial hypercholesterolemia programme that was implemented in Dakhiliyah governorate. It also showed a direct dialogue with the winners of the competition.

At the end of the ceremony, the results of the participating works were announced. Rawan bint Salem al Maamari from Bu-lugh al Amal School in North Batinah won the first place, while Zainab bint Hamad al Bada'i from Hail al Awamer School in Muscat Governorate won the second place. The third place went to a group of students - Ragwa bint Khalid al Mukhaini, Al Walid bin Khalid al Mahrooqi, Abdul Rahman bin Mansour al Battashi, and Muhammad bin Hamad al Rahbi - from Al-Amal School for the Deaf.

After the announcement, the winners and the organisers of this competition were honoured, the statement added.

Oman Air strengthens safety standards with eighth IOSA Renewal Certification

Continuing to set benchmarks for safety and quality, Oman Air has achieved its eighth International Air Transport Association (IATA) Operational Safety Audit (IOSA) certification.

The airline was awarded the renewal for the global accreditation after a successful audit on its operational management and control systems, Oman Air said in a release.

"The new certification has once again demonstrated the airline's adherence to the world's top aviation safety standards. Safety is a continuous journey and our consistent success in the IOSA audits is a testament to our efforts to remain on track," said Capt Nasser al Salmi, Oman Air's Chief Operating Officer.



"We continue to foster a robust safety culture and uphold the highest possible standards in all our operations," he added.

Capt Salim al Rashdi, Vice President Quality Assurance Operations, asserted that at Oman Air, "safety and security are always our top priority".

"We are proud of this latest accomplishment and extend our gratitude to all our employees on their steadfast commitment to the security and safety of our passengers."

Having established itself as an industry leader in aviation safety, Oman Air maintains a strong safety and security performance track record. In 2018, the airline was named one of the top five most secure and airlines in the world.

'Khedmah' provides support to MoSD

Committed to its social responsibility programme, Oman Investment and Finance Company 'Khedmah' has remained steadfast in its endeavours to support the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) through various initiatives that add value to the lives of individuals.

Acknowledging the need for high-quality services in the field of rehabilitation and adequate monitoring devices to measure vital indicators for people with critical health issues, 'Khedmah' recently extended financial support to the ministry to provide a range of rehabilitation services as well as other medical and assistive devices for people with disabilities, the company stated.

In line with the nation's broader goals, the Directorate General of People with Disabilities Affairs seeks to partner with private sector companies, civil society institutions, and individuals who share similar values that are geared at enriching the lives of people with disabilities. As a community-centric organisation that upholds principles of inclusivity and equality, 'Khedmah' has taken various concerted efforts to assist the directorate in fulfilling its objectives.

Commenting on the partner-



ship, Hamoud bin Murdad bin Hamoud al Shabibi, Director General of the Directorate General of People with Disabilities Affairs, said that their focus continues to remain on further integrating people with disabilities

with the larger society and helping them lead fulfilling lives.

"While our programmes and activities are designed specifically to cater to their varying needs, we also place a keen emphasis on providing the right

medical devices and aid that will help boost their interaction and participation in society," Shabibi pointed out.

"We appreciate the ongoing partnerships with organisations like the Oman Investment and Fi-

nance Company which has been instrumental in helping us achieve our goals. Such partnerships play a key role in accelerating the process of providing the necessary assistance to people with disabilities. They also fur-

ther attest to the strong sense of social responsibility that these distinguished companies persistently advocate," he added.

Saud al Siyabi, Chief Operating Officer at Khedmah, applauded the relentless efforts

and the pioneering role played by the esteemed Ministry of Social Development in supporting people with disabilities.

"At Khedmah, CSR forms a critical pillar of our operations, and we will always remain at the forefront of spearheading such initiatives. It is important to acknowledge that people with disabilities are an important part of our community, and it is our humanitarian duty to empower them with opportunities to thrive so that they can contribute positively to the socioeconomic growth of the nation," he added.

Apart from being revered for its philanthropic efforts, OIFC has established itself as a unified platform that provides a range of services. Through its network of 68 branches across Oman, its well-equipped kiosks, and other digital portals which include the popular Khedmah app; customers can easily pay their electricity prepaid meter bills, other utility bills, and traffic fines, as well as recharge their phone balance. In addition, customers can also make payments to the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), recharge any entertainment subscription, complete their car insurance, and print property-related documents.

W Muscat's AWAY Spa offers an escape from hustle and bustle

Whether you are overburdened, stressed out or exhausted, AWAY Spa promises just the remedy you need. Comprising rejuvenating massages, luxury facials, body experiences, and beauty treatments, AWAY Spa's expansive menu is designed to help guests get their glow on from the inside out.

"At AWAY Spa, we offer an escape within an escape - a literal disappearing act from the everyday - where you can replenish your mind and body with a carefully curated bodily experience," said Gerald Chevasson, the general manager of W Muscat.

Its ambience offers a sensorial concoction of scents, sounds and sights for guests to relax, unwind and forget the rest of the world. A geometrical skylight in the treatment rooms, floods the room with light from above, giving the feeling of being deep underwater. With a minimalistic design, the space suggests the notion of being lost within a cave - a cave of rejuvenation.

The clean lines and simplistic decor, makes for a therapeutic and calming space of contempla-



tion, reflection, and relaxation.

AWAY Spa's facials, body, hair and beauty treatments, massages and the famous winding down area reflect the spa's commitment to wellness. Its treatment rooms, sauna, experiential showers, hammam and a steam room are a class apart.

In addition to the luxury spa, here you can also discover an urban sanctuary complete with an energy-charged fitness centre FIT and glamorous swimming pool WET.

The skin formulas which are available to buy from AWAY Spa are designed to be totally func-

tional, with high concentrations of powerful botanicals and high-tech ingredients.

"At AWAY Spa, we use products from Comfort Zone, an upscale Italian skincare brand that focuses on sustainability and wellness," the hotel management said.

The two brands are collaborating to create an environment where ethical beauty meets physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Comfort Zone skin regimen-based packages are specifically designed to help de-stress the hardworking and mentally/physically tired people and

meet the needs of today's multitaskers. Their potent formulas combat accelerated aging from stress and pollution.

The general manager adds, "With an extravagant spread of treatment areas with total privacy, an extraordinary vibe welcomes you to explore sensory delights set against vivid colours, playful scents, imaginative sounds, energising light and purifying potions."

AWAY Spa is offering a variety of treatments to feel better. "As part of the 'massage per minute' offer, guests can keep on extending their massage for only 600 baisa per minute! AWAY Spa is also offering a 'book five 60-minute body or facial treatments and get a free 60-minute treatment of your choice'," the management further said.

Guests can also book their favourite massage and indulge in an extraordinary experience with a free add on of Theragun for that extra relaxing effect.

For an appointment, one may contact AWAY Spa reservations team by calling 22120020 or WhatsApp at https://wa.me/+96871919123

Oman Women Sports Committee participates in world summit

Sayyida Sana bint Hamad al Buisaidi, president of Oman Women Sports Committee and Gender Equality, and its vice president Saada bint Salim al Ismailia participated in the Women World Summit 2023, in the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, on Tuesday.

This year's summit bears the title 'The Role of Women Leaders in Building Peace, Social Inclusion, and Creating Prosperity', coinciding with the 100th anniversary of women's obtaining the right to vote and be elected. The scientific sessions accompanying the summit aimed to unify the arms of women of different races, religions and cultures in order to face challenges, enhance their contributions with wisdom in building peace, and contribute to achieving economic recovery and social integration.

The summit witnessed the participation of a number of prominent global women leaders, as well as political leaders, entrepreneurs, community workers, and prominent cultural, media and scientific figures from more than 100 countries.

The summit included 12 sci-



entific sessions that included all the issues and challenges of concern to women in these critical circumstances, in addition to discovering ways to build bridges of peace and achieve integration and prosperity of nations.

Women in education and scientific research, women leaders in the parliamentary and diplomatic field, women in the global technology sector and major

trends, women, fine arts and intangible heritage, climate change and gender equality, in addition to the role of women in promoting the circular economy and sustainability, women in media and creative industries, and women in thinking and consulting groups in the areas of sustainable development and climate change, women and soft power, and women leaders in the sports field.

Eighteenth edition of Oman Design & Build Week set to begin on March 13

Revered as the largest trade and exhibition conference catering to the sultanate's booming building, construction, design and real estate industry, the 18th edition of the Oman Design and Build Week (ODBW) is scheduled to commence on March 13 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center (OCEC).

The three-day event, which will run until March 15, will be organised by CONNECT under the patronage of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning in partnership with the Oman Real Estate Association.

Co-located with ODBW, the Oman Real Estate Expo (OREX) has earned its name as an iconic networking platform that connects local and international property developers and real estate brokers to potential buyers and investors from the local mar-

ket as well as other relevant authorities and service providers.

Assuming the role of Lead Sponsor will be Wujha, a leading real estate company renowned for promoting modern commercial and residential projects.

Muriya, Oman's largest and most diversified private integrated real estate and tourism developer, will be the Platinum Sponsor at ODBW. Acting as the Strategic Partner of ODBW is the premium mixed-use waterfront project, Al Mouj Muscat.

At the event, Al Mouj Muscat will be showcasing its unique Golf Business Park which is a distinctive destination that reimagines business in Oman and across the region with unparalleled ocean and golf views while being in close proximity to the Muscat International Airport.

Commenting on the event,



Ashley Roberts, Managing Director, CONNECT said, "The construction and real estate industry in Oman has emerged as a stable sector for investments

and has attracted significant local and international investors. It has also been identified as a vital industry that will continue to contribute to the revenue diver-

sification goals of the country.

"A large-scale event of national importance, ODBW provides an ideal platform to gain insights into the latest trends in

the segment, learn about new innovations that have been driving development in the sector and enhance industry knowledge by engaging with key players and experts."

A key highlight of the event will be the ODBW Conference organised in collaboration with the Oman Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning and the Oman Real Estate Association.

The three-day CPD-credited sessions will provide insights into the Oman Spatial Strategy and Oman Real Estate Strategy and their influence and impact on the investment environment and construction industry in the sultanate.

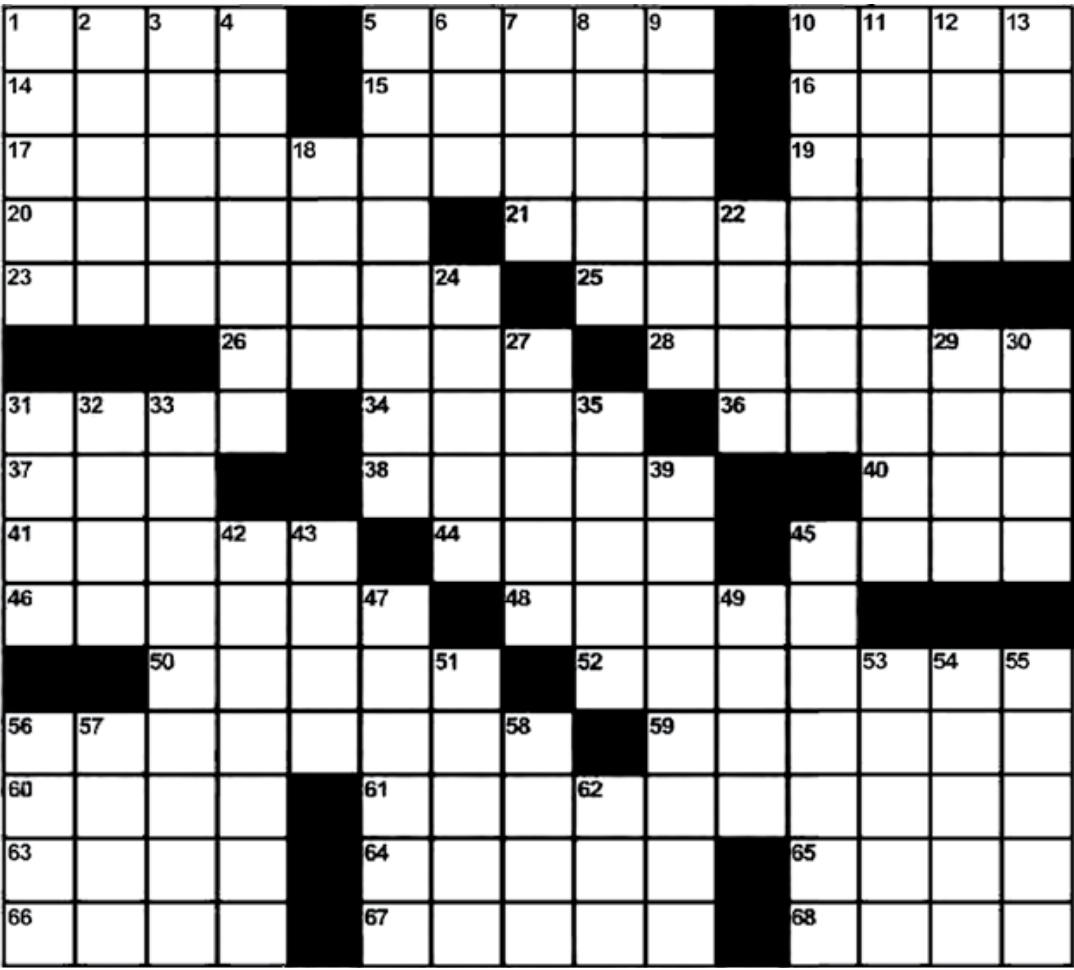
Additionally, high-profile speakers from Oman and the region will be discussing the future of real estate in light with the evolving technological landscape

and sustainable development goals. Various panels will cover important subjects such as real estate brokerage, VAT, capital markets, governorates development and more.

Parallel to the event will be a Hackathon organised by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, which will provide the youth an opportunity to engage in contests and creativity competitions covering elements from the Sorouh's projects.

At ODBW, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning will also announce the launch of a number of new projects in the real estate sector in Muscat and across the sultanate. The event will, therefore, witness multiple project signing ceremonies between the ministry and mega projects developers in the country. Entry to the event is free.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Citrus fruit
5) Backward parts?
10) Hit a baseball long and far
14) "Move" or "cash" followers
15) Noted Swiss miss
16) Privileged person
17) Heavenly hit from the '50s
19) Precisely (with "to")
20) Polar wear
21) Cash dispensers?
23) Lengths of service
25) Royal house
26) Kind of silence
28) Yellow American fruit
31) Brit's elevator
34) In the military it's messy?
36) Japanese city
37) Jackie O's second spouse
38) Anteroom
40) K-O links

41) Most unfavorable
44) Dorothy Gale's dog
45) Chimney sweep's concern
46) Villainous visages
48) "The March King"
50) Plath's Muse
52) Grapefruit serving, often
56) Startling things
59) Sweetie pie
60) Hayworth the Hollywood legend
61) Draft
63) Track-and-field contest
64) Subside to a drizzle
65) Chip in a pot
66) "You bet!"
67) Jalousie parts
68) Roll call refusals

DOWN

1) _ anchor (stay put, nautically)
2) Beyond silly
3) An Einstein he's not
4) Leave confidently in one's care
5) Refuse to be annoyed by
6) Sawbuck
7) Semis
8) Skilled
9) Interstate calamity
10) Nebulous
11) Pool game
12) Profess
13) Summer shirts
18) Male red deer
22) Mont. neighbor
24) Elitist
27) Fluctuates
29) "Sphere" start
30) " _ you be my neighbor?"
31) Things to abide by
32) Decrease?
33) Sideshow sight
35) "Star Wars" surname?
39) Cattle drive actions
42) Saw-edged
43) London streetcar
45) Rainless
4 7) Bargains
49) Crystal-baller
51) Window for plants

53) Madison Square Garden, for one
54) Like the dryer filter
55) Celebrations
56) Octopod's octet
57) In _ of (replacing)
58) Madrid miss (Abbr.)
62) Lower, as prices

NOTE PAD

R	A	H	S	A	M	A	H	A	S	P	C	A
E	D	I	T	N	O	L	O	C	A	R	E	T
Y	O	D	A	N	O	O	B	A	N	A	M	E
G	N	A	S	H	B	R	I	D	G	E	S	
A	B	S	A	L	E	A	S	H	A	U	N	T
M	A	N	T	I	S	O	W	L	E	T	S	
S	T	A	I	R	V	E	R	D	I			
G	N	O	M	E	A	L	A	S	K	A		
I	B	E	R	I	A			A	F	G	H	A
N	I	N	E		M	O	O	S	H	U	Y	U
G	N	A	T	K	I	N	G	C	O	L	E	
R	A	M	I	E				O	D	O	R	A
I	R	E	N	E				N	E	T	S	S
D	Y	L	A	N				E	N	T	E	Y

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Adventure can't come quickly enough for you right now, because you're eager for a sense of renewal in your life, both in terms of the environment around you, and in terms of your own emotions. If you're feeling stale, you need to create your own fresh air and sunshine in the form of good energy and good times with your friends. Get together with the silliest folks you know and have a ball just sitting around talking. You can't go wrong when you're with them.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You've got a good grasp on even the most complicated emotional issues right now, and you can look at these issues deeply without getting overwhelmed, which means you can solve them faster and with greater clarity. Today, someone else needs you to help them sort out their issue. Help them if you have the time. You could be a valuable resource to them, but be careful that you don't put yourself front and center. This drama is about them, not you.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

What's with all the gloom and doom? Right now, your subconscious imagination is coming up with a future that is far darker and more troublesome than it should be, so why not start thinking more positively? Shake off your negativity by spending time with the positive thinkers in your life. Let their sunny disposition remind you that life is a lot more wonderful than you've been letting yourself believe it is. Getting out of a blue rut is easy if you just keep smiling!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You can drive away any pessimism today by focusing on one of the relationships in your life that brings you fulfillment. Even if this person lives far away from you, you should do what you can to get some sort of conversation going with them. Use whatever means necessary to communicate with them. Let them know what's going on in your life. This will help remind you of the positive influences you have in your life and make you feel valued.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You may not believe those with different views, but you should still listen to what they have to say today. There is wisdom in their words even if their logic escapes you. Their perspective is irksome, but it's also revealing. It gives you a chance to understand how people on the other side of the issue think, which gives you an advantage. Someone else could be making a big deal out of nothing today, which should alert you to where their loyalties truly lie.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

No matter what you need today, you have friends who can help you get it. Need a recommendation for a new hairstylist? Looking for the perfect place to hold a party? Wondering what the best route to drive to work each day is? Toss questions like this out to your social circle and you'll get some surprising, insightful, and downright helpful answers. Who knew that the people who make you smile and feel good about yourself could also be such a wealth of information?

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Today, you have that magical combination of charm, insight, and intelligence that enables you to sell your ideas to the most skeptical of folks. That means it's a great time to get what you want. Whether you're trying to sell your possessions, promote an agenda, or just convince a stick-in-the-mud friend to come along with you on an adventure, you're in luck today! Don't be too ruthless, though. Always make sure that you tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The primary motivator for you right now might be money, but is that really what you need most in life? This is a good day for you to take stock of your goals. Ask yourself what will really make you happy. Chances are good that the answer has little if anything to do with the numbers in your bank account. As they say, money can't buy happiness. Today, figure out how you can get the happiness you seek. A wise friend has a good word of advice that will set you on your way to an answer.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You've been trying to ignore it because you've been so busy dealing with the more frivolous aspects of life, but today your need to feel socially useful will finally overpower your other urges. Don't worry. Getting involved doesn't have to turn your entire life on its ear. All you need to do is devote one or two hours a week to helping a cause you believe in. And you don't even have to formally join anything. How about just picking up the trash you see in your neighborhood?

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

After a trying (but blissfully brief) period of emotional intensity and upheaval, your daily life is calming down. You're back to a nice and predictable rhythm once again. The return to your routine is quite welcome and makes you appreciate the quiet joys of your life, such as having time to be bored! You like having reflective moments just for you. For one thing, they give you time to appreciate where you are in your life. You have a lot to be proud of, and you should celebrate it.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Not everyone knows how to give credit where credit is due, so if you feel you aren't being as respected as you should be, speak up. You might be doing the other person a service by reminding them that you're part of things too. Certain people need to be made aware of the fact that you're a force to be reckoned with. If you aren't given what you deserve, you need to ask for it. Don't worry that people will think you're being too egotistical. They'll be impressed.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Despite the less than cheerful attitude of one of your more uptight friends, you're going to have an awful lot of fun with them today. They're going through a bit of an emotional upheaval that is putting a sour look on their face, but after a few minutes with you that frown will turn upside-down! Your sense of humor is likely to be the most effective tool for lighting a sparkle in their eye, so encourage their laughter to keep on flowing.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. In 2019, machinery, mineral oils, sugar, meat and what else, were among the top exports from the country which generates almost half of South America's exports?
A. Iron ores
B. Maize
C. Food industry waste
D. Honey

02. In the UK TV series "Foyle's War" (2002-2015), what was Foyle's profession or occupation?
A. Police officer
B. Bookseller
C. Brothel madam
D. Artillery officer

03. Which points on the Earth can see a total eclipse of the sun?
A. Those inside the moon's penumbra
B. Those completely inside the Moon's umbra
C. All points on the daylight side of the Earth
D. All points from 3 hours after dawn to 3 hours before sundown

Answers: 1. A 2. A 3. B

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

H	F	A	O
G	R	U	C
A	I	H	S
D	E	F	A

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

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

Israel takes step towards approving reforms

Lawmakers voted by 63 to 47 to support a bill in the judicial reform at first reading

Jerusalem - Israel's parliament took a step towards approving a controversial judicial reform on Tuesday despite weeks of mass protests against legislation critics see as a threat to democracy.

President Isaac Herzog, who has been attempting to broker dialogue on the divisive reform, which would boost the powers of politicians over the courts, warned of fears for national unity.

Lawmakers voted by 63 to 47 to support a key bill in the reform at first reading. It will now return to the law committee for more debate, ahead of its second and third readings in parliament.

The legislation advanced on Tuesday would give more weight to the government in the committee that selects judges, and deny courts the right to rule on actions they deem in conflict with so-called Basic Laws, Israel's quasi constitution.

The reform is a cornerstone of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's administration, an alliance with ultra-Orthodox and



A protestor walks past a banner depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on sunset outside the Knesset (parliament) in Jerusalem on Monday (AFP)

extreme-right parties which took office in late December.

"This is a difficult morning," said the president, whose powers are largely ceremonial.

"Many people fear for the nation's unity," Herzog said at a

conference organised by Ynet news website. "We need to make every effort to continue dialogue after this vote, to reach an agreed framework to take us out of this difficult period."

The Tuesday vote passed de-

spite weeks of protests in Israel's main cities.

Tens of thousands took to the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and, inside parliament, opposition lawmakers disrupted the debate with shouts of 'shame'.

'History will judge you'

Opposition leader Yair Lapid hit out at government lawmakers after the vote passed. "History will judge you for this night - for the attack on democracy, the

harm to economy, the harm to security, for tearing the unity of the people to shreds and simply not caring," Lapid said in a tweet.

The architect of the bill, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, called on the opposition to 'come and talk'.

"We can reach understandings," he said.

Netanyahu said: "We need immediate dialogue with no pre-conditions."

The prime minister has presented the judicial reforms as key to restoring balance between the branches of government, arguing judges currently have too much power over elected officials.

Another bill advanced as part of the reform would give parliament the power to overrule Supreme Court decisions with a simple majority of 61 votes in the 120-member parliament.

The opposition accuses the government of a power grab, and weekly protests against the legislation since early January have been joined by tens of thousands of people. Critics, including Supreme Court president Esther Hayut, have condemned the reform as an assault on the independence of Israel's judiciary.

Some of Netanyahu's critics have also tied the reform plan to his ongoing corruption trial, arguing he is seeking to undermine a judicial system he has accused of targeting him unfairly for political reasons.

Netanyahu has denied the corruption charges.

The veteran leader, who reclaimed power late last year after spending 14 months in opposition, has also firmly rejected any link between the reforms and his own trial.

AFP

Israeli settlements 'impede peace': UN Security Council

United Nations, US - The UN Security Council expressed its 'dismay' with plans by Israel's hard-right government to retroactively legalise settlements in occupied Palestinian lands, warning in a statement on Monday that such measures 'impede peace'.

"The Security Council reiterates that continuing Israeli settlement activities are dangerously imperiling the viability of the two-State solution," the Council said in a statement supported by all 15 members but which does not have the binding force of a resolution considered last week.

Israel was quick to hit back at the declaration, with the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying it denied the 'historic' rights of the Jewish people.

"The UN Security Council has issued a one-sided statement which denies the rights of Jews to live in our historic homeland,"



Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations Riyad H Mansour speaks to members of the media at the United Nations headquarters in New York City on Monday (AFP)

Netanyahu's office said in a statement. The UN statement 'fails to mention the Palestinian attacks' in which Israelis were killed in recent weeks, it added, saying it "should never have been made and the United States should never have joined it".

The earlier draft resolution,

proposed by the United Arab Emirates, had called on Israel to 'immediately and completely cease' settlement activities in occupied Palestinian areas.

Diplomatic sources told AFP on Monday that the draft, condemning 'all attempts at annexation, including decisions and

measures by Israel regarding settlements, including settlement outposts' had been dropped and would be replaced by the new statement issued by the president of the Security Council.

The draft resolution had also reiterated the demand 'that Israel immediately and completely

cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem'.

The initiative provoked opposition from the United States, which has the right of veto in the Council.

The White House said it was 'deeply dismayed' by the plans.

Washington had at the same time denounced the announcement a few days earlier by the Israeli security cabinet of the legalisation of nine settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The new statement on Monday said the Council 'strongly opposes all unilateral measures that impede peace, including, inter alia, Israeli construction and expansion of settlements, confiscation of Palestinians' land, and the 'legalisation' of settlement outposts, demolition of Palestinians' homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians'.

AFP

EU imposes bans on two Iran ministers in fresh sanctions

Brussels, Belgium - The European Union imposed asset freezes and visa bans on Iran's education and culture ministers on Monday, in a fifth round of sanctions against Tehran over its crackdown on demonstrators.

The new measures targeted 32 individuals and two entities, and were largely aimed at lawmakers, judiciary officials and prison authorities accused of involvement in the repression, according to the EU's official journal.

Iran was rocked by months of nationwide protests last year after the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September following her arrest for an alleged breach of the dress code.

Iran has arrested at least 14,000 people in the wave of protests, according to the United Nations.

Iranian authorities have executed four people for their role in the unrest and imposed the death penalty on a total of 18, triggering widespread international outrage.

The latest round of sanctions from the EU included Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili for persecuting artists and filmmakers

But the 27-nation bloc has so far stopped short of black-listing the Revolutionary Guards themselves as a terror group, despite calls from Germany and the Netherlands to do so.

The new round of sanctions came as thousands of opponents of Iran's government protested across the street from the EU headquarters in Brussels as the bloc's foreign ministers met. Demonstrators waved Iran's monarchist-era tricolour flag and called on the bloc to impose tougher measures against the Revolutionary Guards.

The latest round of sanctions from the EU included Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili for persecuting artists and filmmakers

The EU has ratcheted up its sanctions on Iran as efforts it is mediating to try to revive the 2015 deal on Tehran's nuclear ambitions have largely stalled.

European nations are set to toughen sanctions on Iran drone manufacturers helping to arm Russia in a new package of measures over the Ukraine war expected this week.

The bloc on Monday also blasted Iran over the detention of an growing number of EU citizens in what critics have described as Tehran's policy of 'state hostage-taking'.

AFP

Iran: Death penalty for German national

Paris, France - An Iranian court on Tuesday sentenced to death on terror charges an Iranian-German national who supporters say was abducted in the Gulf and forcibly returned to Iran for a show trial.

The Tehran Revolutionary Court convicted Jamshid Sharmahd in connection with the deadly bombing of a mosque in 2008, the judiciary's Mizan Online news agency reported.

Iranian authorities announced in August 2020 that Sharmahd, 67, who is also a German national and a US resident, was arrested in what they described as a 'complex operation' without specifying how, where or when he was seized.

His family say that he was abducted by the Iranian security services while in transit in Dubai and then brought under duress to Iran.

"They kidnapped Jamshid Sharmahd and now they've sentenced him to death after a sham



This file photo shows Jamshid Sharmahd attending the first hearing of his trial in Tehran on February 6, 2022 (AFP)

trial," said the head of the Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) group Mahmood Amiry Moghaddam.

"Basically the Islamic republic is threatening to kill a hostage," he added.

German opposition MP and foreign affairs committee member Norbert Roettgen tweeted that 'he was kidnapped by the regime in Iran and now sen-

tenced to death also to put pressure on Germany'.

"The government must now make it unmistakably clear that they do not accept this arbitrary judgement and are fighting for the life," he wrote on Twitter.

- 'Scapegoating my dad' -

Sharmahd is accused by Iran of leading the Tondar group which aims to topple the Islamic republic and is outlawed as a ter-

rorist organisation by Iran.

Mizan said Sharmahd planned to commit 23 'terrorist' acts, of which he succeeded in five, including the bombing of a mosque in the southern city of Shiraz on April 12, 2008, which killed 14 people and wounded 300 others.

Prosecutors had also accused Sharmahd of having established contact with 'FBI and CIA officers' and of having 'attempted to contact Israeli Mossad agents'.

In 2009, Iran convicted and hanged three men for the Shiraz bombing, claiming they had links to the monarchist group and had taken their orders from 'an Iranian CIA agent' based in the US in an attempt to assassinate a senior official in Iran.

Sharmahd's family have ridiculed the charges. "All of the charges are fabricated charges. They are scapegoating my dad who is innocent," his daughter Gazelle told AFP when his trial got underway last year.

AFP

Terror charges: Tunisia's former speaker in court

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisia's former parliamentary speaker Rached Ghannouchi appeared in court on Tuesday on new terror-related charges after being accused of calling police officers 'tyrants', his party said.

Ghannouchi, who leads President Kais Saied's arch-foes the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha, had already faced court in late November over allegations his party helped militants travel to Iraq and Syria. The latest hearing comes amid a series of arrests of high profile figures that have prompted criticism from rights groups in the North African country and abroad.

The former speaker is also due to be questioned on Thursday after another complaint from a policeman claiming to be in possession of a compromising telephone recording of Ghannouchi, Ennahdha said.

AFP

Six killed in new quake in Turkey, Syria

Antakya, Turkey - A 6.4-magnitude earthquake has rocked Turkey's southern province of Hatay and northern Syria, killing six people and sparking fresh panic after a massive February 6 tremor left nearly 45,000 dead in both countries.

The AFAD disaster response agency reported the deaths, as well as nearly 300 hospitalisations, while in Syria the White Helmets aid group said at least 150 people were injured in the Aleppo region.

The quake hit the Turkish town of Defne on Monday at 8:04pm (1704 GMT) and was strongly felt by AFP teams in the nearby city of Antakya. It was also felt in Lebanon and Cyprus.

Turkey's disaster management agency said on Twitter that a 5.8-magnitude quake followed three minutes later, with its epicentre in the Samandag district of Hatay province.

The agency recorded two more tremors with magnitudes of 5.2 around 20 minutes after the first on Monday.

"The road moved like waves. The building moved back and forth, the cars moved left to right. It knocked me off my feet," said Mehmet Irmak, who works at a notary's office in Antakya.

"Hatay is no longer a safe



Rescue workers search for victims at a collapsed building after an earthquake hit the Hatay province in southern Turkey, in Antakya, on Monday (AFP)

place. We could hear a lot of buildings collapsing," said Irmak, who had been sleeping in his car for two weeks after the first quake.

"We will wait for a new day,

but I don't know what I'm going to do," he said.

Among the dead were three people who became trapped after returning to their damaged flats to retrieve belongings, said

AFAD, warning people against going back to homes at risk.

On Tuesday the organisation said it was sending 6,000 extra tents to the region to shelter those in need.

'Earth opening up'

Images from DHA news agency showed a hospital in Antakya being evacuated, while broadcaster NTV reported that a hospital was evacuated in the city of

Iskenderun.

DHA said patients in an intensive care unit were taken by ambulance to field hospitals to continue their treatment.

Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said rescue workers were trying to find people trapped under rubble.

An AFP journalist reported scenes of panic in Antakya, with the new tremors raising clouds of dust in the devastated city.

The walls of badly damaged

Mazlum, who has lived in Antakya for 12 years, was looking for the bodies of his sister and her family as well as his brother-in-law and his family.

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) said five hospitals it supports in northwest Syria received several people who had sustained minor injuries, some when parts of damaged buildings fell on them.

In government-held areas of Syria, Aleppo hospitals also re-

You don't know what to do... we grabbed each other and right in front of us, the walls started to fall. It felt like the earth was opening up to swallow us up

ALI MAZLUM

buildings crumbled while several people, apparently injured, called for help.

On a street in Antakya, Ali Mazlum, 18, told AFP: "We were with AFAD who were looking for the bodies of our family when the quake hit.

"You don't know what to do... we grabbed each other and right in front of us, the walls started to fall. It felt like the earth was opening up to swallow us up."

ceived panic-stricken residents, while six people were injured by falling rubble, the state news agency SANA said.

Al Razi hospital in Aleppo received 47 cases, state media reported. "We rushed out, we don't know how we left. I was afraid that we would meet the same fate as those who died under the rubble," said Khadija Al Khalaf, a 45-year-old mother, in the rebel-held city of Azaz.

AFP



Delegates take part in the conference under UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, in New York City on Monday (AFP)

UN tries anew to finish treaty protecting the high seas

United Nations, US - UN member states embraced 'positive energy' on Monday as they launched two weeks of negotiations aimed at finally reaching a treaty meant to protect and preserve vast areas of the world's oceans.

After more than 15 years of formal and informal talks, this is the third time in less than a year that negotiators have converged on New York in what, yet again, is supposed to be a final and conclusive round.

But as the talks, set to run through March 3, opened on Monday, cautious optimism appeared to be taking hold.

"I hope we've come together here with a will to get us to the finish line," conference chair Rena Lee said as the talks began, adding that "an agreement that is universal, that is effective, that is implementable and that is future-proof is within our reach."

At the conclusion of the opening day, she added: "There is a lot of positive energy in this room. So it behooves us to enhance this positive energy, keep our focus, keep our eyes on the prize, and really work to make this (conference) final."

Lee also welcomed actor and activist Jane Fonda, who handed her a petition on behalf of ocean defenders worldwide, with 5.5mn signatures calling for a 'strong' treaty.

"We're losing the ocean. And if we lose the ocean, we lose us," the 85-year-old told AFP.

"This is the fight that will determine whether there's a tomorrow for human beings."

A historic agreement reached in Montreal in December at the United Nations COP15 conference on biodiversity is helping fuel the sense of promise.

Countries then committed themselves to protecting 30 per cent of the world's lands and

up to 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from coastlines. They thus fall under the jurisdiction of no country.

While the high seas comprise more than 60 percent of the world's oceans and nearly half the planet's surface, they have long drawn far less attention than coastal waters and a few iconic species.

But with no borders at sea, there is "just one ocean, and a healthy ocean means a healthy

Crew stuck on ISS to return to Earth in Sept, says Russia

Moscow, Russia - Russia's space agency on Tuesday said that the crew stuck on the International Space Station because of a damaged capsule were now expected to return to Earth in September, a year after they first launched into orbit.

Russian cosmonauts Dmitry Petelin and Sergei Prokopyev and NASA astronaut Frank Rubio flew to the ISS in September 2022 aboard a Soyuz MS-22 capsule. They were scheduled to return home in the same spacecraft, but it began leaking coolant in mid-December after being hit by what US and Russian space officials believe was a tiny space rock.

Russia plans to send a rescue ship, a Soyuz MS-23, on February 24.

Before the leak, the trio had been due to return to Earth on March 28, 2023.

But on Tuesday, Russia's Roscosmos space agency said in a statement that their return 'at the moment is scheduled to take place aboard the Soyuz MS-23 in September, 2023'.

AFP

China: Concerned over 'out of control' Ukraine conflict

Beijing, China - China's foreign minister said on Tuesday that Beijing is 'deeply concerned' about the conflict in Ukraine, which is 'intensifying and even getting out of control'.

China has sought to position itself as a neutral party on the war in Ukraine, while maintaining close ties with its strategic ally Russia.

Beijing has pledged to publish a proposal aimed at finding a 'political solution' to end the war ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion on February 24.

The United States has accused China of mulling arms shipments to Russia, claims Beijing has denied.

"It has been nearly a year since the crisis in Ukraine escalated across the board," Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang said at a conference on global security in Beijing.

"China is deeply concerned that the conflict is intensifying and even getting out of control."

Qin urged the 'countries concerned to stop adding fuel to the fire as soon as possible, to stop shifting the blame to China'.

Beijing would 'offer Chinese wisdom for the political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, and work with the international community to promote dialogue and consultation, address the concerns of all parties and seek com-



China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang speaks at the Lanting Forum at the Foreign Ministry in Beijing on Tuesday (AFP)

mon security', he added.

And regarding the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which China considers its territory and has vowed to seize one day, Qin urged countries to 'stop making an uproar by shouting 'Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan'.

"The pressures and attempts to contain China, coming from the outside, are getting stronger and stronger, they are getting worse and worse, posing a serious threat to China's sovereignty and security," he said.

China's top diplomat Wang Yi told the Munich Security Conference on Saturday that with regard to the Ukraine conflict, Beijing was against attacks on nuclear power plants, opposed

the use of biochemical weapons and was willing to work with all parties.

Wang is due in Moscow for talks on his final stop of a European tour that has seen him also visit France, Italy, Hungary and Germany.

The Kremlin said on Monday that Wang may meet with President Vladimir Putin during his visit, according to the official TASS news agency.

The high-level visits follow accusations by US top diplomat Antony Blinken that China could be 'considering providing lethal support' to Moscow ranging 'from ammunition to the weapons themselves'.

AFP

Thai election to be held in May: PM

Bangkok, Thailand - Thailand will hold a general election in May, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said on Tuesday, with unofficial campaigning already under way.

The embattled premier, who came to power as army chief in a 2014 coup before taking over as PM after a controversial 2019 election, told reporters he would dissolve parliament in March.

Under Thai constitutional rules, this would mean an election some time in May, with May 7 seen by many observers as the most likely date.

"I will dissolve (parliament). I said March so it will be March, so



Thailand's PM Prayut Chan-O-Cha

this would fit with May," he told reporters after a regular cabinet meeting.

With the economy struggling and the vital tourism sector hit hard by the pandemic, the 68-

year-old's popularity has been in the doldrums, but last month he announced a re-election bid at a rally.

Prayut will run under the banner of the newly created Ruam Thai Sang Chart party, with current ruling party Palan Pracharath Party (PPRP) last month naming Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan as its candidate for PM in the next election.

Campaign billboards are already popping up around the country and the main opposition party Pheu Thai has been campaigning in its traditional strongholds in the northeast.

Pheu Thai is polling well but

the current Thailand constitution, drafted under junta rule, gives army-linked parties a strong advantage.

The election will be the first since mass youth-led street protests rocked the kingdom in 2020, with calls for political reform and unprecedented demands for changes to the monarchy, which is heavily protected from criticism under Thai law.

Pheu Thai is expected to nominate Paetongtarn Shinawatra - daughter of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra - as one of its candidates for prime minister.

AFP



An activist of Sri Lanka's main opposition party throws a stone towards police during a protest held in Colombo on Monday (AFP)

Sri Lanka set to postpone local polls: Official

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Bankrupt Sri Lanka is set to postpone local elections due next month, according to a top official, prompting opposition protests on Tuesday that forced parliament to be adjourned.

The March 9 vote was meant to be a key test of support for President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took office in July after months of protests over a dire economic crisis.

According to a court submission by the Election Commission, the treasury has refused to fund the printing of ballot papers, fuel or police protection for polling booths.

"I had given an undertaking to the Supreme Court recently that the poll will be held on time," Election Commission chief Nimal Punchihewa told AFP.

"But, I am now informing court that we won't be able to do it because the government is not releasing the necessary funds."

The president previously said elections were impossible as state revenue was insufficient

to pay salaries, pensions and maintain essential services.

Wickremesinghe, who replaced Gotabaya Rajapaksa after protesters stormed the presidential palace, has implemented swingeing tax hikes and price rises in an effort to secure a bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

Parliament was adjourned Tuesday after opposition MPs carried placards to protest against what they said was a government attempt to avoid voter scrutiny and cling to power.

"The government is using the economic crisis to suppress democracy and sabotage elections," opposition MP Wimal Weerawansa said.

Sri Lanka's top court is expected to make a ruling on Thursday but it is unclear whether the government would have the cash to proceed even if the judge orders the polls go ahead.

The vote has been estimated to cost about 10bn rupees (US\$27.6mn).

AFP

India's Jaishankar questions timing of BBC documentary

New Delhi, India - 'Actual politics' is being conducted 'ostensibly as media' by people who do not have the 'courage to come into political field', India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told ANI, alluding to the controversial BBC documentary on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Terming the furore as 'politics by another means', Jaishankar, in an interview with ANI, said: "Sometime politics of India doesn't even originate in its borders, it comes from outside."

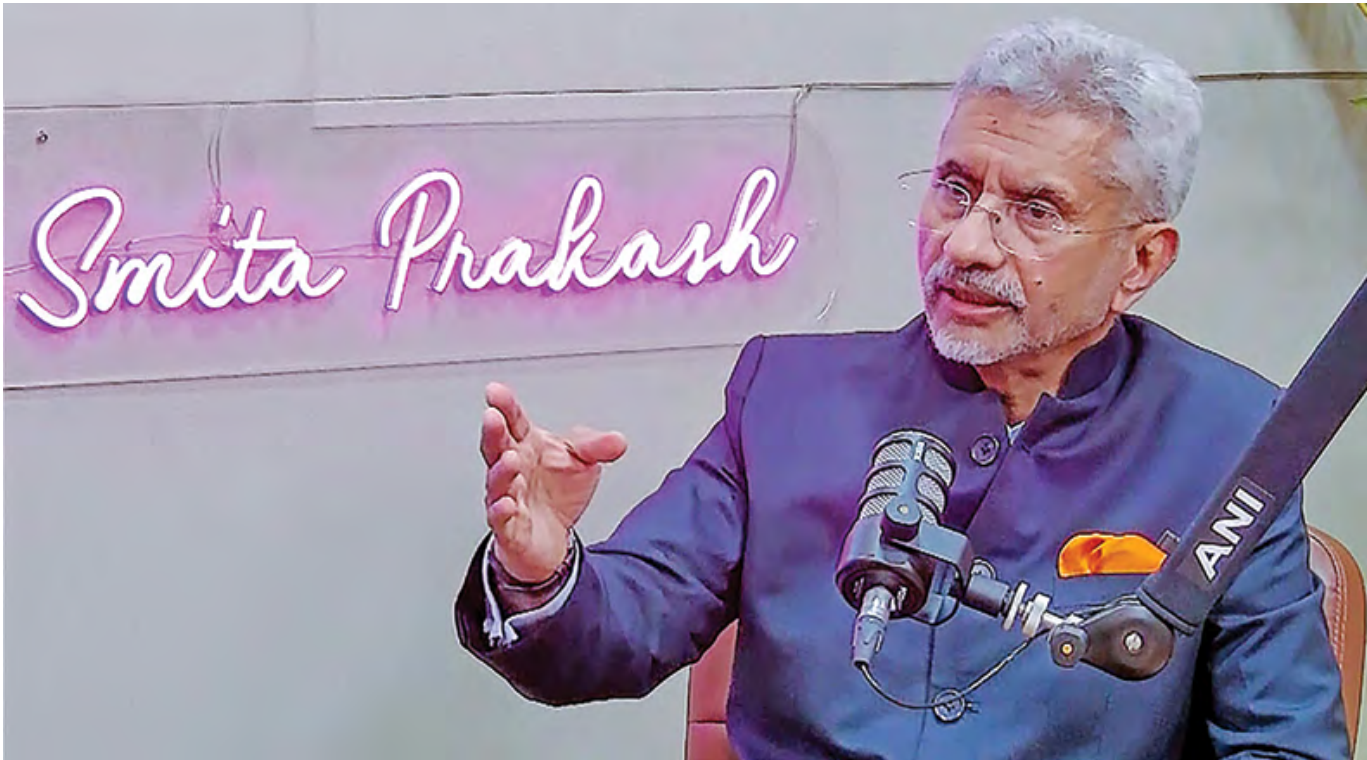
"We are not debating just a documentary or a speech that somebody gave in a European city or a newspaper edits somewhere - we are debating, actually politics, which is being conducted ostensibly as media - there is a phrase 'war by other means' this is politics by another means - I mean you will do a hatchet job, you want to do a hatchet job and say this is just another quest for truth which we decided after 20 years to put at this time," he said.

Coming a year just before the Lok Sabha polls of 2024, the external affairs minister questioned the timing of the documentary.

"I mean, come on, you think timing is accidental! Let me tell you one thing - I don't know if the election season has started in India, Delhi or not, but, for sure it has started in London, New York," he added.

The BBC, in January, released a documentary film titled 'India: The Modi Question' that features the Gujarat riots of 2002.

The film caused a controversy for alluding to PM Modi's role in the riots whereas disregarding the Supreme Court clean chit to



India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar speaks in an interview with ANI, in New Delhi on Tuesday (ANI)

We are not debating a documentary or a speech that somebody gave in a European city or a newspaper edits somewhere... (but) politics, which is being conducted ostensibly as media

S JAISHANKAR

Narendra Modi.

"I mean, do you doubt it? Look who the cheerleaders are. What is happening is, just like I told you - this drip, drip, drip - how do you shape a very extremist image of India, of the government, of the BJP, of the Prime Minister. I mean, this has been going on for a decade," said Jaishankar when asked about some western media's bias against PM Modi in India.

The EAM said that the motive

behind planting such stories abroad is to further the anti-India agenda.

"Let's not have illusions about it... there is an echo chamber, it will be picked outside and then they will say it is being said outside, it must be true. Then you will say it inside. There is a ding-dong going on, look this is a globalised world, people take that politics abroad," said the EAM.

He further asked: "Why sud-

denly there is a surge of reports and attention and views? I mean, were some of these things not happening earlier. Many things happened in Delhi in 1984, why don't we see a documentary on that? If that was your concern, you suddenly feel one day, 'I am very humanistic, I must get justice for people who have been wronged'," said Jaishankar.

He further advised to not get fooled by such agendas and challenged the propagator to come in the political field.

"This is politics at play by people who do not have the courage to come into the political field. They want to have that teflon cover saying that I am an NGO, media organisation etc. They are playing politics," Jaishankar asserted.

The EAM in his various interactions on multiple platforms abroad has hailed India's democracy as a guiding force not just for the country but for the world to emulate. In the interview with ANI, the minister said that the people's verdict will quell all the misconceptions. "Among other things in a democracy - don't you trust the ballot box, people's verdict to be the final opinion? I do. I know there are certain people who believe that their view supersedes elections. Look, I like you, you win election-great democracy. I don't like you win election. What are you - 'electoral autocracy'. That's reserved for people whom you don't like to win elections. This is politics," said Jaishankar.

ANI

Madagascar braces for Cyclone Freddy

Antananarivo, Madagascar - Tropical Cyclone Freddy was poised to strike eastern Madagascar on Tuesday, slightly weakening after brushing Mauritius with powerful winds and heavy rain, monitors said.

Located 500km (310 miles) away, the storm was expected to make landfall on the island's eastern coast on Tuesday evening, the UN's disaster agency OCHA warned.

The storm will be 'likely at an intense stage,' packing winds of up to 120km (75 miles) per hour, it said.

Freddy on Monday passed some 120km northeast of Mauritius and 190km from the French island of La Reunion.

Although expected to have slightly weakened, it will still



The fishing village of Mahebourg, Mauritius, is seen on Monday as Cyclone Freddy approaches (AFP)

bring 'devastating winds' and 'very dangerous conditions', the French forecaster Meteo-France said.

The storm is likely to land north of Mananjary, a coastal town of 25,000 people that remains devastated by last year's

Cyclone Batsirai, which killed more than 130 people across the country.

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) said more than 2.3mn people in Madagascar could be affected by Freddy, and the cyclone would pass through Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

The large Indian Ocean island typically takes several hits during the annual November-April storm season.

Freddy is the first cyclone, and the second tropical weather system, to hit during the current season, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

Flights headed for Madagascar's eastern coast regions were cancelled, a journalist in the capital Madagascar reported.

Locals in the coastal region told AFP by phone that they were busy reinforcing roofs with sandbags to prevent them from being blown away.

Since Sunday authorities driving all-terrain vehicles equipped with loudhailers have been driving around the streets reminding people to stay safe.

Women and children were starting to move into schools and other shelters.

Authorities in Mauritius on Tuesday lifted a cyclone warning but warned that they remained on alert for heavy rain.

The lifting of the warning enabled government offices to reopen and shops, banks and public transport to resume services.

AFP

Philippine plane crash: Rescuers climb volcano

Manila, Philippines - Philippine rescue teams began climbing an active volcano on Tuesday in a 'very risky operation' to reach the wreckage of a small plane that crashed at the weekend, officials said.

Four people, including two Australians, were on board the Cessna 340 aircraft when it went missing on Saturday morning after taking off for Manila from Bicol International Airport in the central province of Albay, several kilometres from Mayon volcano.

Civil aviation investigators on board a reconnaissance flight on Tuesday confirmed that wreckage spotted on the

volcano over the weekend was the missing plane.

It is not known if there are any survivors.

Manila-based Energy Development Corporation said previously the missing plane belonged to the company. The Australians were technical consultants for the renewable energy company.

Rain, clouds and the risk of an eruption have hampered efforts to reach the crash site.

The Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines said the plane was on the western side of the volcano, about 3,500-4,000 feet above sea level.

AFP

France's Emmanuel Macron defends pensions overhaul

Paris, France - French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday defended his government's hotly contested pensions overhaul, making a rare intervention on a reform he has championed but where he has kept a low profile.

A majority of the French population, according to polls, and left-wing groups in parliament are strongly opposed to the plan, which includes raising the age of retirement from 62 to 64.

But Macron, who put the overhaul at the centre of his re-election campaign last year, had until now largely avoided face-to-face meetings on the plan with members of the public and let his government handle the criticism.

On Tuesday, he told journal-

ists the later age was necessary as life expectancy was on the rise.

"There's no miracle: If we want to keep this system going, we need to work longer," he said as he toured the meat section of the massive Rungis wholesale food market south of Paris.

"Everybody has common sense... On the whole, people know that everybody has to work a little longer on average, otherwise we won't be able to properly fund our pensions," he said.

"If we don't create wealth, we cannot then distribute it."

The government has argued the changes are crucial to lift France's pensions system out of deficit by 2030.

The proposals would bring



French President Emmanuel Macron listens to a worker during a visit at the Rungis International Market, in Rungis, southern suburb of Paris, on Tuesday (AFP)

France closer into line with its European neighbours, most of which have retirement ages of 65 or higher. But hundreds of thousands of people have gone on strike or taken to the street on five separate occasions in recent weeks to protest against the proposed changes.

The adjustments would also include raising the number of years workers must contribute to receive a full pension, and abolishing certain special retirement schemes.

National 'treasure'

Macron described the French retirement scheme as a 'treasure' and the 'inheritance of those who don't have one'.

He admitted the reform came at a 'tough' time of inflation that

he hoped would soon wane, but said it would allow 'for the creation of more wealth for the country'.

By meeting 'professionals who work from dawn' at the market, he wanted to send 'a message of gratitude to all those who keep the country running', he added.

A stormy two-week debate in the National Assembly on the draft bill ended on Friday without even reaching a discussion on its contentious Article 7 on raising the retirement age.

The bill is next to be examined in the upper-house Senate from February 28. Polling has shown that around 70 percent of respondents oppose the pension reform.

AFP

READY FOR CHALLENGE

India confident ahead of likely semi-final against Australia in T20 World Cup, says captain Kaur

Gqeberha, South Africa - Indian captain Harmanpreet Kaur said on Monday she looked forward to a likely Women's T20 World Cup semi-final against defending champions Australia.

India qualified for the last four when they beat Ireland by five runs on a rain-adjusted target in their last group match at St George's Park in Gqeberha.

India joined England as qualifiers from Group Two with both sides having won three matches.

England, however, still have to play Pakistan in Cape Town on Tuesday. Victory would guarantee them top spot but they are likely group winners even if they lose because of a superior net run rate.

Australia have already won Group Two, so are almost



The cricket we played (against Australia) gave us a lot of confidence. We have a fair idea of how we have to go about the next game and we will make our plans accordingly

HARMANPREET KAUR

certain to play India as runners-up in Group One in the semi-finals.

Kaur said India had gained confidence from having played Australia in a series in India last season, despite only winning one game - and that was on a super over.

She pointed out that all teams, including champion sides like

Australia, were under pressure in World Cup games.

"The brand of cricket we played (against Australia) gave us a lot of confidence," said Kaur.

"We have a fair idea of how we have to go about the next game and we will make our plans accordingly."

Smriti Mandhana hit a T20 international career-best 87 as India made 155 for six. Ireland were with 54 for two from 8.2 overs, with Gaby Lewis 32 not out, when rain ended play.

A strong, swirling wind made conditions difficult and Mandhana was dropped four times in the outfield during a 56-ball innings which included nine fours and three sixes.

Teenage prodigy Shafali Verma struggled again at the top of the batting order, making 24 off 29 balls, but Kaur said she remained a key player.

"We always encourage her to express herself. Whenever she clicks we are always into the game. In practice she is batting well. We know how important she is," said Kaur.

Ireland made a disastrous start to their reply when Amy Hunter was run out off the first ball of the innings, attempting a second run after hitting the ball to midwicket.

Four balls later Prendergast was bowled by Renuka Thakur without scoring.

But Lewis and captain Laura Delany, who earlier took three for 33, shared a spirited unbeaten partnership of 53.

AFF

IOC say govts failed to address human rights over 'neutral' athletes

Lausanne, Switzerland - The IOC said on Tuesday the governments who had asked for "clarification" over how Russian and Belarusian athletes would be able to compete as neutral athletes in the Paris 2024 Olympics had not addressed "explicit human rights concerns".

In a letter seen on Monday by AFP, over 30 countries expressed concern about how neutral the athletes could be, particularly given the "strong links and affiliations between Russian athletes and the Russian military".

"We have strong concerns on how feasible it is for Russian and Belarusian Olympic athletes to compete as 'neutrals'... when they are directly funded and supported by their states," read the letter.

It said that "these strong concerns need to be dealt with by the IOC".

However, the IOC in their reply on Tuesday noted "the explicit human rights concerns expressed by two special rapporteurs of the United Nations Human Rights Council have not



IOC president Thomas Bach

been addressed in the statement".

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has said it is exploring a "pathway" to allow Russian and Belarusian competitors to take part in the Paris Games, under a neutral flag - sparking fury from Ukraine.

The letter to the IOC follows a summit earlier this month in London attended by France, Britain, the United States and Canada, among others.

The IOC said in their reply the definition of what constituted a neutral athlete were initially tackled last December.

AFF



Victoria Azarenka

Azarenka calls for fitting venue for women's tennis finals

Dubai, United Arab Emirates - Victoria Azarenka said Monday that she hopes the WTA Finals will find a "deserving" home, after a couple of years of instability after the women's tennis organisation suspended all Chinese tournaments.

The former world number one and two-time Australian Open champion also urged an announcement on this year's venue soon, to allow for better market-

ing of the tour's flagship event.

The season-ending championships feature the top eight singles players and top eight doubles teams. They were initially meant to be staged in China's southern city of Shenzhen every year for 10 years, starting with the 2019 edition.

The deal with Shenzhen was record-breaking and the inaugural 2019 showpiece awarded singles champion Ashleigh Barty

\$4.42 million - which was the highest-ever prize money awarded to a player at any tennis event across both the men's and women's tours.

But the pandemic and the fall-out from the disappearance of Chinese player Peng Shuai - which led to the WTA suspending operations in China - have meant that the tour Finals have not returned to Shenzhen since 2019.

Injured Warner ruled out of India tour as Australia problems grow

Sydney, Australia - Australia opening batsman David Warner will return home from India and miss the last two Tests after an elbow fracture and concussion, Cricket Australia said Tuesday.

It is the second injury blow in two days for struggling Australia, who are 2-0 down in the four-Test series.

Fast bowler Josh Hazlewood was sent home Monday after failing to recover from an Achilles tendon injury.

Warner was hit on the helmet shortly after being struck on the elbow on the opening day of the second Test defeat in Delhi. He was replaced by concussion substitute Matt

Renshaw. Warner, who scored just 26 runs as Australia lost both of the opening two matches, will miss the third and fourth Tests at Indore and Ahmedabad but it is hoped he can return for the subsequent one-day series.

"David Warner has been ruled out of the Test tour of India and will return home," a Cricket Australia statement said. "After further assessment, he will require a period of rehabilitation which will preclude any further involvement in the remainder of the Test series. It is currently anticipated that he will return to India for the three ODIs which follow the Test series."

Australia captain Pat Cummins has also flown home because of a family illness but is expected to return in time for the third Test, which starts on March 1.

It is currently anticipated that he (Warner) will return to India for the three ODIs



David Warner



Dani Alves

Dani Alves must 'remain in custody'

Barcelona, Spain - Former Barcelona and Brazil star Dani Alves will remain in custody pending his trial for allegedly raping a woman as he is considered a high flight risk, the Provincial Court of Barcelona decided Tuesday.

"There is an elevated risk of absconding, linked on the one hand to the high sentence that could be imposed because of the present case, the serious evidence of criminality against him

and large financial resources that would allow him to leave Spain at any time," the court said in a statement.

The court believe taking the 39-year-old's passport would not prevent him from leaving Spain "by air or sea or even by land without documentation."

If he were to return to Brazil, his homeland, the court believe he would not be handed over to Spain as the South American country does not usually extradite its citizens.

The public prosecutor's office opposed his release.

On January 2, a young woman alleged that Alves had raped her in the bathroom of a nightclub in Barcelona at the end of December. The player, who initially denied knowing her, changed his story several times but later said they had consensual relations, according to sources close to the case.

AFF

MISSION EUROPE

Manchester City fighting fires ahead of Champions League tie against Leipzig

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester City's quest to finally conquer Europe resumes on Wednesday when Pep Guardiola's men travel to RB Leipzig, but all is not well for the English champions on or off the field.

City appeared to have laid down a marker in the Premier League title race by beating leaders Arsenal 3-1 away last week, only to then throw away two points by conceding late to draw 1-1 at Nottingham Forest on Saturday.

They are also playing under a cloud after being charged with more than 100 breaches of financial rules by the Premier League, dating back to the 2009/10 season.

Defender Kyle Walker described City's sloppiness in relinquishing top spot in the Premier League at the weekend as "unacceptable".

"Sometimes it's football and sometimes it's emotion," he said. "Every game should be treated the same - like a cup final."

A two-point deficit at the top of the table could turn into five should Arsenal win their game in hand against struggling Everton.

A lack of consistency in City's performances is troubling Guardiola ahead of his side's return to action in the competition they most crave.

City have never won the Champions League, while

Guardiola, who won the trophy twice as manager of Barcelona, has not done so since 2011, his penultimate season at the Camp Nou.

The signing of Erling Haaland was expected to be the final piece in solving City's puzzle in Europe.

The Norwegian has delivered the goals expected of him, with 32 in all competitions. Yet Haaland's arrival is one of the factors used to explain a dip in City's collective standards this season.

The defending champions have dropped 20 points already in 24 games - compared with 21 points in the whole of the 2021/22 campaign.

'Going after it'

Despite Haaland's haul, City had scored more goals as a team at this stage last season.

Defensively they also look more exposed - an issue not helped by Guardiola's willingness to let Joao Cancelo join Bayern Munich on loan, leaving him without a natural left-back.

Nathan Ake, Aymeric Laporte, Rico Lewis and even creative midfielder Bernardo Silva have been shunted out to do a job on the left side of defence in the past two weeks alone.

Guardiola said he was heartened by City's display at Forest despite a lack of killer instinct that cost them two points.

However, he has not been



Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola looks concerned during their English Premier League match against Nottingham Forest on Saturday (AFP)

This title is what the club needs. It's what we athletes need and it's what Guardiola needs here at the club, too. This year, we're going to try. We're going after it

EDERSON



slow to call out his players since the World Cup break for a lack of hunger and desire to remain

Munich coach.

Finding such motivation for the Champions League should not be difficult. Third-choice goalkeeper Scott Carson is the only member of Guardiola's squad to have won the competition previously, when he was at Liverpool.

"We're coming after it," goalkeeper Ederson said of City's quest to win the Champions League.

"I think we're a group of great

quality and that shows how much the club has developed over the last five or six years, with Premier League titles, Carabao (League) Cups, FA Cups, Community Shields.

"So this title is what the club needs. It's what we athletes need and it's what Guardiola needs here at the club, too. This year, we're going to try. We're going after it."

There could also be the extra

incentive of not knowing for sure when City might get another chance to play in the Champions League due to the score of charges on financial breaches earlier this month.

Should City be found guilty, a heavy points penalty or even relegation could be on the cards for a club that has played in Europe's elite competition for 12 straight seasons.

AFP



Inter Milan's Romelu Lukaku celebrates scoring against Udinese on Saturday (AFP)

Lukaku struggling on Inter return as Porto come to town

Milan, Italy - Romelu Lukaku's return to Inter Milan has been far from what he would have hoped it would be but the Belgium striker is showing signs of life as his team prepare for the Champions League visit of Porto.

Hit by a succession of injuries and ridiculed for his part in his country's dismal World Cup campaign, Lukaku has been a peripheral figure in what was supposed to a glorious homecoming season for the 2021 Serie A winner.

The 29-year-old has only played the full 90 minutes once for Inter since being sent back there on loan from Chelsea last summer, seven starts and three goals in all competitions a poor return given all the close season hype.

On Saturday Lukaku scored his first Serie A goal since the opening day of the season, netting a penalty at the second attempt which started Inter towards a 3-1 win.

However it wasn't the most convincing way to get back on the scoresheet as his first go from the spot was struck dreadfully, finally scoring after an Udinese player was caught encroaching in the penalty area.

And as it stands Lukaku is behind veteran Edin Dzeko in the queue to play alongside Lautaro Martinez, the other half of the once great 'Lu-La' partnership who has come back from Argentina's World Cup triumph in fizzling form and has even worn the captain's armband.

Martinez has scored eight

times in all competitions since returning from Qatar and will be coach Simone Inzaghi's major weapon on Wednesday night.

His buoyant post-World Cup mood goes in stark contrast to Lukaku's state of mind in the Gulf, a smashed dugout and a trail of missed chances against Croatia which ended the Red Devils' chances at the group stage the only memories of an awful tournament.

"Croatia was a huge disappointment but I told myself: 'Romelu, you weren't 100 percent, you'd only had two training sessions,'" said Lukaku at the start of the year.

"I was rightly massacred but now I really want to get back out on the pitch."

AFP

Leipzig's 'difference maker' Nkunku back for Man City tie

Berlin, Germany - Bundesliga side RB Leipzig are gearing up to face juggernauts Manchester City in their home Champions League tie on Wednesday, and hoping the return of top goalscorer Christopher Nkunku will make all the difference.

Nkunku made a late cameo in Leipzig's 3-0 win at Wolfsburg on Saturday, setting up a goal for Konrad Laimer after a 98-day absence which saw him miss France's run to the World Cup final in Qatar.

His 21 minutes on the pitch Saturday has him in line for a return to the starting eleven, and manager Marco Rose said it shows how valuable the star



Christopher Nkunku

forward is to Leipzig's hopes.

"You could see how good it was for us that Christopher is

back," Rose said after the victory. "With him on the pitch, we are more unpredictable as a team."

Nkunku suffered a knee injury in November in France's last training session before departing for Qatar, one of a series of injury blows for the team in the tournament run-up.

Despite missing five league matches, Nkunku still sits atop of Leipzig's goalscoring charts this season with 12 - just one less than Bundesliga season leader Niclas Füllkrug.

Nkunku's return is crucial to any hope Leipzig have of springing an unlikely upset on the Champions League favourites and making it past the last 16 for only the second time in club history.

Five-goal thriller fires Watford into playoff places

London, United Kingdom - Ken Sema scored twice as Watford beat West Brom 3-2 to move back into the Championship playoff spots on Monday.

Slaven Bilic's 200th game as a manager in English football was a thriller as the Croatian got the better of the side he took up to the Premier League in 2020.

Sema's opener gave the Hornets a half-time lead, but West Brom hit back early in the second half through Conor Townsend.

Ismaila Sarr quickly restored Watford's lead, but again the Baggies responded with Jed Wallace's equaliser.

Sema had the final say 12 minutes from time when his shot took a deflection off Erik Pieters to beat Josh Griffiths.

'No new talks' on Bellingham extension, says Dortmund's Kehl

Berlin, Germany - Borussia Dortmund sporting director Sebastian Kehl said on Monday he hopes midfielder Jude Bellingham will stay with the side but confirmed there have been no extension talks with the teenager.

Speaking with German tabloid Bild, Kehl revealed Dortmund had not yet received any requests for the English midfielder.

"Jude feels very, very comfortable at Borussia Dortmund. But there are no new talks, let alone any requests for him."

"We need Jude to achieve our goals this season and we're glad he is focused so much on football and has no other issues on his mind at the moment."

Bellingham, who captained the side in their 1-0 win over Chelsea in the Champions League on Wednesday, continues to impress in Dortmund and is rumoured to have attracted the interest of a number of large European clubs.

Kehl, who has previously said



Jude Bellingham

he knew it would be difficult to keep Bellingham, said he hoped the teenager will stay in Dortmund longer.

"Jude still has two years on his contract (until summer 2025) and he is a very important part of this team. Of course, I wish that he will play with Dortmund for longer."

Dortmund have won eight from eight in all competitions in 2023, going equal top on the

Bundesliga table with Bayern Munich and Union Berlin on Sunday.

Kehl told Bild discussions were ongoing regarding contract extensions to co-captains Mats Hummels and Marco Reus, along with in-form midfielder Julian Brandt. Kehl however said midfielder Mo Dahoud's contract, which is currently in its final six months, would not be extended.

AFP

AL HILAL MARCH ON

AFC Champions League holders beat Shabab Al Ahli to enter last eight



Al Hilal's Jang Hyun-soo (C) scores against UAE's Shabab al Ahli in their AFC Champions League round-of-16 match at the Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakrah, near Doha, on Monday (AFP)

Doha, Qatar - Storied Asian outfit Al Hilal stayed well on course to further enhance their credentials after storming into the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League on Monday.

The reigning champions from Saudi Arabia saw off Shabab Al Ahli of the UAE 3-1 in their last-16 tie at Qatar's Al Janoub Stadium, as they chase a possible fifth continental title.

Fresh from their exploits barely a week ago in the FIFA Club World Championship in Morocco where they finished runners-up to Real Madrid, they joined compatriots Al Shabab in

Al Shabab had qualified on Sunday, beating Uzbekistan's FC Nasaf 2-0 after Qatar giants Al Duhail pipped local rivals Al Rayyan 7-6 via penalties, following a 1-1 draw after extra-time.

the last eight - hoping to win the title for the third time in four years.

Al Shabab had qualified on Sunday, beating Uzbekistan's FC Nasaf 2-0 after Qatar giants Al Duhail pipped domestic rivals Al Rayyan 7-6 via penalties, following a 1-1 draw after extra-time.

Nigerian Odion Ighalo set things in motion on Monday for Al Hilal with a clinical 17th minute strike after receiving a fine assist from Moussa Marega.

The match slackened off for a while before Jang Hyun-soo scored with a diving header and Luciano Vietto applied the finish-

ing touch to a deft backheeled pass from Salem al Dawsari to make it made it 3-0 with 10 minutes remaining.

Syrian striker Omar Khribin pulled one back in the 86th minute but that came a bit too late in the day for Al Shabab Al Ahli to mount a serious challenge.

Earlier on Monday, Iran's Foolad Khuzestan scraped into the quarter-finals of courtesy of a cagey 1-0 over Saudi Arabia's Al Faisaly.

Both sides were meeting for the first time ever in the tournament and aiming to make up for

their poor form in their respective domestic leagues where they are struggling to keep pace with their rivals.

While Al Faisaly were relegated from the Saudi Pro League to the First Division after they made the last-16 of the continental tournament, Foolad are in ninth position in the Iran Pro League - a whopping 18 points behind leaders Sepahan.

But with plenty to play for, it was Foolad who made the most of the situation with Sasan Ansari's 64th minute strike proving decisive at the Al Thumama Stadium.

Laporta hits back at 'obsessed' Tebas amid Barcelona referee controversy

Madrid, Spain - Barcelona president Joan Laporta hit back at La Liga chief Javier Tebas on Tuesday amid the controversy over his club's payments to a refereeing executive.

Tebas claimed Monday Laporta should resign if he could not explain Barcelona's reported seven million euros (\$7.46 million) in outgoings between 2001 and 2018 to a company belonging to former refereeing technical committee (CTA) vice-president Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira.

Barcelona initially said Negreira was being paid for reports and advice on referees, which are now compiled internally. Laporta confirmed that before criticising Tebas.

"Some had already warned us that it seemed Tebas was pushing a reputational campaign against Barca and against me," Laporta told reporters at Camp Nou.

"The mask has come off, he continues with his obsession with Barca, with his fear of our club."

Laporta recalled Tebas, when legal adviser to Alaves in 2005, tried to report former Barcelona forward Lionel Messi for playing without the correct documentation.

The Barcelona president also said his club's unwillingness to sign La Liga's deal with CVC and determination to found a European Super League also played a role in his "obsession" with the Catalan club.



Joan Laporta

"His intention is to dominate Barca from a distance, which is what he has been doing in recent years," added Laporta.

"He has realised that he can't do that with me as president. I will not give Mr. Tebas what he'd like by stepping down as president of Barcelona."

"That is for the club's members to decide. Anyone who tries to tarnish the history and image of Barcelona will receive a strong response."

Laporta said an investigation into the payments to former CTA vice-president Negreira was being conducted externally, while the club would also run their own enquiry.

The Barcelona president explained that in his first spell in charge, between 2003 and 2010, the services the club required from Negreira - reports and videos - were invoiced "on the basis of demonstrable services".

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Dustin Johnson and his all-American 4Aces are defending champions

LIV Golf completes lineup ahead of new season opener

Washington, United States - Phil Mickelson, Louis Oosthuizen and Bubba Watson filled out their LIV Golf League teams on Monday with the latest players to join the Saudi-backed series ahead of Friday's season debut.

South African Dean Burmester, New Zealand's Danny Lee, Belgium's Thomas Pieters and American Brendan Steele completed the 48-player field of 12 four-man teams for the opener at Mexico's Mayakoba resort.

LIV's 14-event season includes eight US stops and its lineup includes 13 major winners and four former world number ones.

Two-time major winner Dustin Johnson and his all-American 4Aces are defending team champions with Peter Uihlein, Pat Perez and Patrick Reed.

World number 35 Pieters joins two-time Masters champion Bubba Watson's Rangegoats along with Americans Harold Varner III and Talor Gooch.

Belgian rider Merlier takes UAE Tour opener in photo finish

Paris, France - Soudal-Quickstep's Belgian rider Tim Merlier won the first stage of cycling's UAE Tour on Monday, pipping Lotto Dstny's Caleb Ewan in a sprint finish.

The two riders finished shoulder to shoulder prompting a 10-minute delay as the race organisers pored over the photo finish in a bid to split them.

They opted against calling it a dead heat and gave Merlier, 30, the win by the slimmest of margins. "I was not sure," Merlier said afterwards. "I know I did a good jump in the end, and I knew when I started my sprint that it was a good sprint."

"But Caleb was coming from the wheel and you know he's a dangerous guy if he is in the wheel. In the end it was really close."

Astana Qazaqstan Team's Mark Cavendish was third after a windy ride of 151km on the United Arab Emirates' northern coast. It was a poor day for home side UAE Emirates as their team leader, the newly signed Adam



Tim Merlier celebrates on the podium after winning the first stage of the UAE cycling tour in Al Mirfa on Monday (AFP)

Yates, had his chances of winning slip away in a cross wind.

Instead Merlier's team-mate and compatriot Remco Evenepoel is now hot favourite to win this Tour after his power led an attack that dropped the entire peloton to 51sec.

Yates blamed the desert wind. "We were actually the only guys in front which means we had to

use a little bit more energy fighting for position and fighting the wind. In the end, we didn't have the legs," said Yates after other teams refused to join the bid to catch up.

Evenepoel is both world champion and Vuelta a Espana title holder and is sixth overall, thanks to 51sec plus a bonus after finishing eighth on the day.

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The fisherman's cottage used in the film 'The Banshees of Inisherin', on Keem beach, Achill Island

BANSHEES ISLANDS

REMOTE
'BANSHEES'
(ACHILL) ISLANDS
REAP OSCARS
TOURISM BOOM
AS CURIOUS
TOURISTS VISIT
TO BEHOLD THE
ORIGINAL SETS
OF THE MOVIE



CELLULOID CHARM

Colin Farrell had many people to thank following his best actor win at the Golden Globes for The Banshees of Inisherin. He made a point of mentioning the locals of Achill Island and Inis Mor.

"We were just one big family," the Irish actor told the Beverly Hills awards ceremony last month, before also name-checking his animal co-star in the critically acclaimed dark comedy, Jenny - the miniature donkey.

Two weeks later the movie, filmed on location on the two remote islands off Ireland's west coast, picked up nine Oscar nominations.

"Of course we have fingers crossed for a win," Chris McCarthy, the manager of Achill Tourism, told AFP. "And we'll take any one of the nine nominations. We're not choosy," he quipped. The film also made a clean sweep at the BAFTA awards earlier this week.

Between July and November 2021, Achill Island's dramatic landscape of rugged cliffs, peat bogs, and sandy beaches was transformed.

The island's Purteen Harbour, usually a working fisherman's wharf, became the location for a portside street scene with a 1920s shopfront. And the pub, where much of the film's action



Owner and manager of Achill Coaches, Alan Gielty poses for a photograph on the Purteen harbour, one of the filming locations of the movie

takes place, was built from scratch atop windswept cliffs on Achill's southwest coast.

Atlantic atmosphere

McCarthy said the film's director, Martin McDonagh, wanted the actors to feel the atmosphere of the Atlantic when they opened the door of the pub.

They couldn't create this in the studio, McCarthy explained, standing at the beauty spot as February winds whipped sea spray onto the cliffs.

Filming was an economic boon for Achill, injecting 1.7mn euros (US\$1.8mn) into the area, home to fewer than 3,000 inhabitants.

Now it is looking to capitalise

on a tourism bounce. Every time a clip from the film or an awards speech goes viral online, McCarthy and his team see a surge in bookings.

Mick Lynch, owner of Lynott's Pub on Achill, explained that visitors had already begun inquiring about the film.

Among the souvenirs lin-

ing the pub's walls are what Lynch calls the movie's 'infamous' shears, used by actor Brendan Gleeson's character to chop off his own fingers.

Lynch said

his tiny pub - a dry stone wall structure with a thatched roof built as a jail in the 16th century - is a true-to-life version of the pub created for 'Banshees'.

"If these walls could talk, the stories they'd tell... this is the real thing," he explained. During filming, it served as a watering hole for Gleeson and fellow actor Pat Shortt, who runs the on-screen pub.

Banshees bus tour

US singer Taylor Swift, a fan of the film, has asked for the pub from the movie set to be rebuilt so that she can visit.

"We don't need to," Lynch said. "She can come here."

Alan Gielty, manager of Achill Coaches, has created a guided tour around the movie locations.

"For the last month an awful lot of people are travelling to the island just to see the sights of the movie," he explained. "It's already bringing in a lot of interest from outside and it's going to be very, very busy."

Madeline Condell, who was one of 120 extras in the film, said the island was in the grip of an Oscars buzz.

Condell owns two donkeys that missed out on appearing alongside Jenny. She said there would be more than a few par-

This is a true-to-life version of the pub created for 'Banshees'. If these walls could talk, the stories they'd tell... this is the real thing

MICK LYNCH
Owner of Lynotts pub

ties planned for the night of the March 12 awards.

"We almost feel like we deserve an Oscar, as well, because of the beauty of the area," she said. "It's such a lovely place to visit and anyone that ever does visit always falls in love with the place."

AFP

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BAFTAS ABLAZE

The red carpet for the BAFTA awards was set ablaze with some stunning outfits donned by Hollywood A-listers who lent their lucid aura and oomph to the glittering gala honouring the best national and foreign films of 2022 at the Royal Festival Hall within London's Southbank Centre. From Jodie Turner-Smith, Florence Pugh and Julianne Moore to homegrown celebs including Frankie Bridge and Geri Horner, the stars served up a fashion frenzy on the red carpet. The hallmark of the event was the presence of Prince William and Princess Kate, who returned to the BAFTA red carpet for the first time since pre-pandemic.