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Our Correspondent

"We shouldn't measure the performance of the private sector in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic conditions, low demand and other reasons that led to the exodus of about 300,000 workers from their jobs. Of them, around 7,500 were Omanis."

H E DR SAID AL SAQRI



The development of the governorates is one of the priorities and strategic objectives of the tenth five-year plan. An amount of RO20mn has been allocated to each governorate to be disbursed during the years of the plan.



Security personnel walk past a banner featuring an image of Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan near Parliament House in Islamabad on Sunday (AFP)

No Pakistan prime minister has ever completed a full term, and Khan was facing the biggest challenge to his rule since being elected in 2018, with opponents accusing him of economic mismanagement and bungling foreign policy. On Sunday,

IMRAN KHAN

"This day will be remembered as a black day in Pakistan's constitutional history," said Shehbaz Sharif, tipped to replace Khan if the no-confidence motion had succeeded.

AFP
See also [page 11](#)

H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MOCIIP), issued a decision

The first article of the decision stipulates replacing the two texts of Articles 5 and 7 of the executive regulations of the Foreign Capital Investment Law, which was issued by Royal Decree 50/2019 and executive regula-



H E Qais al Yousuf

tions of the Foreign Capital Investment Law issued by Ministerial Resolution 72/2020.

The amended text of Article 7 states that the foreign investor or his representative may entrust

one of the offices licenced by the ministry to examine the investment licence application, and request obtaining approvals, permits, or licences necessary to establish the investment project, to indicate the extent to which they meet all the conditions and requirements of the issued certificates established by law. A ministerial decision shall specify the conditions and procedures for licencing these applications.

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MORE DETAILS

Oman unveils large gypsum, copper and limestone reserves

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Eng Nasser al Maqbali, CEO of Minerals Development Oman (MDO), unveiled several projects undertaken by MDO last week that will boost the capabilities of the mining sector and augment its contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP).

In his interview with Oman Investment Authority's quarterly bulletin *Enjaz and Eejaz*, Maqbali highlighted Mazoon Mining as one of the most promising mining projects. Located in Yanqul in Dhahirah, it is spread over an area of 16 sqkm. It consists of five mines with considerable copper reserves of up to 16mn tonnes and a production capacity of 1.56mn tonnes annually. The project has an estimated cost of around US\$300mn.

MDO is continuing its explorations, and there are some promising initial results of finding copper ore in areas surrounding these mines within block No 10, which is known for its promising mineral potential.

Maqbali also spoke about the Industrial Minerals Project in Shaleem, a project the company began developing in 2017. MDO was granted exploration and development rights after conducting the first geological study in Shaleem, which found large gypsum reserves, and high-purity limestone and dolomite.

This was followed by a preliminary analysis of the market and logistical solutions necessary for the project's



Mazoon Mining project in Dhahirah consists of five mines with considerable copper reserves of up to 16mn tonnes and a production capacity of 1.56mn tonnes annually

ENG NASSER AL MAQBALI

feasibility in 2020.

He added that if it is implemented according to the company's vision, the project will mark a turning point for the mining sector in Oman.

Gypsum exports will undoubtedly witness steady growth, and this project will promote Oman's global position as the largest supplier of gypsum over the next few years. He went on to say that Omani crude gypsum is characterised by its high purity, competitive prices, and

proximity to the consumer markets; it can also be easily exported through Oman's seaports.

Maqbali mentioned that the company is considering several commercial opportunities to develop the salt industry in another important project. There are currently two key projects, one of which is to produce sea salt in Bar Al Hakman, Mahoot. The other is related to the study of salt production from deep, highly saline waters associated with crude oil extraction activities in collaboration with PDO.

He also said that a recent study conducted by MDO, found large reserves of high-purity limestone, up to 15mn tonnes, in its concession area in Wadi Al Jizi. Therefore, a project will be developed this year to produce 1mn tonnes of limestone annually, which will be supplied to steel plants and several customers in the Sohar Port and Free Zone. Moreover, the company hopes to develop a calcination unit in Sohar Free Zone during the project's second phase.

JOINING HANDS TO SAVE LIVES



The Indian Embassy in Muscat launched the Mega Blood Donation Camp, organised in association with Ministry of Health, on Sunday under the auspices of H E Ahmed Mohammed al Humaidi, chairman of Muscat Municipality. The camp will continue at the embassy from 8am to 1pm. The camp at Bousher Blood Bank will start from April 9-15 with a target of collecting at least 1,000 blood units (Supplied photo)

MoE exhibition focuses on learning activities for people with disabilities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education (MoE) organised an exhibition at its premises on the occasion of the World Autism Day, which falls on April 2 every year. Called, 'For You We Create, the event focused on learning activities for people with disabilities.

The exhibition was held under the patronage of H E Majid al Bahri, Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs in the MoE, in the presence of Dr Fathia al Saddi, director general of the Directorate-General of Special Education and Continuing Learning, and specialists from the ministry.

The exhibition included 15



corners of joint educational materials shared by public, private and international schools who work with people with disabilities. The materials included learning models, learning panels,

and educational and electronic bags for the children with learning difficulties, intellectual disability, hearing impairment, and autism spectrum disorder.

The exhibition aimed to high-

light the role and importance of educational materials, and to shed light on the services provided by the Ministry of Education for people with disabilities.

Dr Fathia, said, "This exhibition contributes to the exchange of experiences and information between specialists who work with people with disabilities, and to see the means and methods of teaching. It also focused on presenting the learning materials in an interesting and attractive way to achieve the goals of teaching this particular group of students. The exhibitors presented their ideas and methods on how to produce the learning materials, how to use it, and the results of its use with students with disabilities."

Over 27% increase in discount offers in 2021: MoCIIP data

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 7,175 licenses for promotions and discounts were issued to shopping malls and shops in 2021, an increase of 27.7 per cent compared to 2020 when 5,619 licences were issued, according to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

A statement issued by the ministry said that 2,451 licences were granted for promotional offers, while 4,664 for discounts and 60 for marketing cards.

The ministry added that no advertiser should announce any



promotions or discounts until they obtain the licence from the ministry. 'The request for promotional offers, discounts, marketing cards and advertising flyers can be made through the online portal Invest Easy,' it stated.

OCCI alerts Omani goods importers to follow guidelines

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has urged companies engaged in the import of goods to follow certain guidelines and make proper background checks before starting a business with foreign firms.

A statement issued by OCCI, said, 'The chamber warns the Omani companies of the need to be careful and attentive during commercial transactions with companies outside the sultanate, specially in case of imports.'

OCCI stated that Omani companies should search and inves-

tigate the background details of the companies from e-business websites and find a proper channel of communication with them.

'The companies must first conclude a commercial contract (import contract) and ratify it from the approved authorities before any financial procedures, with the necessity of not transferring any money except after completing the authentication process.'

The Omani firms engaged in imports should coordinate with OCCI to ensure that the company they want to deal with has obtained its membership with the corresponding chamber.

Annual survey of steppe eagles completed

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to preserve wildlife, the Office for Conservation of the Environment (OCE) at the Environment Authority (EA) has concluded its annual survey that monitors steppe eagles in Dhofar governorate.

An official at the EA, said, "The Office for Conservation of the Environment has concluded winter survey to monitor steppe eagles in the wilayat of Thumrait in Dhofar governorate."

"The surveys were conducted by specialists from October 2021 to March 22, 2022. Specialists conducted 84 field visits to the study sites of steppe eagles in the Hakabit area and Al Safa Farm in the Wilayat of Thumrait," said the official.

He added, "Specialists recorded 550 steppe eagles at Al Safa Farm in the Wilayat of Thumrait on January 25, 2022,



The sultanate is considered a natural stopover as a large numbers of steppe eagles visit various locations in Dhofar, which provides adequate food in the winter season

and 142 in Mardam Hakbeet on February 8, 2022."

"The steppe eagle is consid-

ered an endangered bird globally based on the classification of the International Union for Conser-

vation of Nature. The sultanate is considered a natural stopover as a large numbers of these eagles visit various locations in Dhofar, which provides adequate food in the winter season."

'In 2019, we recorded 500 steppe eagles in Dhofar. But they decreased to 80 in 2020,' OCE said, adding the reason for the decrease in numbers is the lack of food including carrion (decaying flesh of dead animals).

In an ongoing research, OCE has recently installed satellite-tracking devices on 13 steppe eagles to obtain important and accurate data and information.

The initiative to study the steppe eagles is one of the projects implemented by the Environmental Conservation Office in the Governorate of Dhofar since 2018 in cooperation with ornithologists from Austria and Germany and with the support of the Anglo-Omani Society in London

INVITATION TO TENDER



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

Tender No. : 22-007
Tender Title : Lease of Multi Function output Devices (Printing and Photocopying Services)
Scope : Sohar Aluminium intends to engage reputable equipment leasing firms in operating leases for photocopy, printing and scanning services as specified in technical Specifications.

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



Invitation to attend the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of AMAN Real Estate Investment Fund ("Fund")

The Fund Management Body of the Fund are pleased to invite the unitholders to attend the Annual General Meeting ("AGM"), which takes place on 18/04/2022, 11 AM to be held via the electronic platform to convene The General Meetings which is accessible through Muscat Clearing and Depository website (HYPERLINK "<http://www.mcd.gov.om>" www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum is not quorate, the meeting shall be re-scheduled to 21/04/2022 at 11:00 AM. To discuss the following Agenda:

To consider and Approve the Chairman's Report for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.
To consider the Audit's Report and to approve the financial statement Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss Account, for the financial year ended on 31 December 2021.
To consider and approve the distribution of cash dividend to the unit holders as per the AGM date with a percentage of 3.58% (an amount of 3.58 baiza per unit), for the financial year ended on 31 December 2021.
To approve sitting fees to the meeting of the Fund Management Body for the year ended and determine the fees for the forthcoming financial year.) Annex 1(
To brief the General Meeting of the related party transaction entered into by the Fund during the financial year ended 31 December 2021.) Annex 2(
To appoint an auditor for the fiscal year that will end on 31 December 2022 and determine their fees.

In accordance with the Fund's articles of association and the regulations for holding General Meetings, using modern technology issued by the authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

A Juristic person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person, to attend the assembly meeting and vote on his behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in the MCDC.

Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days before the date of the Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting, and if the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be cancelled, and he must re-vote again on the day of the meeting.

In case of any inquiries about the above agenda items, please contact Shaima Al Balushi at phone number 24625819 or send an email to s.albalushi@tharaglobal.com

MARKET WATCH

MSX30 4,124.93

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	197.22
Pakistani Rs	479.54
Bangladesh taka	224.17
Philippines peso	133.73
Sri Lankan Rs	773.32

*Rates as on April 03
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Oil prices record 14% drop last week

Oil prices posted massive weekly losses during the week ended April 1 over easing supply worries with the US decision to release 180mn barrels of oil from its strategic reserves.

Brent crude traded at US\$103.41 per barrel at 1200 GMT on Friday, posting a 13.8 per cent decrease from the last Monday session that opened at US\$119.90 a barrel. American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) registered at US\$98.83 per barrel at the same time on Friday, declining 12.5 per cent relative to the opening price of US\$112.92 a barrel on last Monday.

Prices fluctuated in a broad range during the week, with Brent recording an almost 15 per cent decline and WTI a 13.3 per cent loss between their lowest and highest levels.

Oil markets started the week with demand fears after Shanghai, China's most populous city with over 28mn population, was put under a two-part lockdown to ensure potential risk for an outbreak.

At least 200,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil demand is expected to be impacted for the duration of the restrictions.

Oman's economy seen growing 4% in 2022 as recovery picks up

S&P Global Ratings upgraded Oman's sovereign credit ratings to 'BB-' from 'B+'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's economy will grow by four per cent this year supported by higher oil and gas production, continuing reform momentum and a pick up in investment projects, according to global credit ratings agency S&P Global Ratings.

S&P on Friday raised its foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings on Oman to 'BB-' from 'B+', a first ratings upgrade by the agency in over a decade.

It estimates that Oman's real GDP will grow by nearly 4 per cent in 2022, moderating to about 2.2 per cent on average over 2023-2025 period.

'Higher oil prices and production, about 90 per cent double-dose vaccination rates for those 18 years and above, removal of pandemic-related measures, and public investment spending will drive stronger growth this year,' S&P noted in a report released on Sunday.

'While the Omani government intends to broadly continue with its fiscal reform program, we expect it will allocate some of the forecast oil windfalls this year to support economic activity and reduce the impact of past austerity on the population,' the agency added.

S&P expects the sultanate's real GDP will increase 3.9 per cent in 2022, from an estimated 2.1 per cent in 2021, largely due to increasing hydrocarbon production under the OPEC+ agreement that will expire in December 2022. The agency assumes Oman's oil production will increase to 1.135mn barrels per day in 2025, from an estimated 1.040mn barrels per day



While the government intends to broadly continue with its fiscal reform program, we expect it will allocate some of the forecast oil windfalls this year to support economic activity and reduce the impact of past austerity on the population

S&P GLOBAL RATINGS

this year and 0.957mn barrels per day recorded in 2021.

Over the next three years, S&P expects the sultanate's non-oil sector to be the leading driver of growth. It forecasts non-oil growth averaging 2.2 per cent over 2023-2025 period, relative to 1.8 per cent in 2022.

the ratings agency said.

However, S&P Global Ratings' GDP growth forecasts also account for pressure from rising interest rates, and spillover effects from the Russia-Ukraine conflict on food price inflation and global demand.

First surplus since 2014

Following high fiscal and external pressures since 2015 that culminated in 2020 with the double shock from the COVID-19 pandemic and sharp fall in oil prices, S&P now expects Oman's public finances to benefit from higher oil prices and government's ongoing fiscal reforms.

With an estimated sharp increase in oil revenues due to

higher oil prices this year, S&P estimates a fiscal surplus for Oman in 2022, the first since 2014.

The agency expects Oman will achieve a fiscal surplus of 5.7 per cent of GDP this year, from the budgeted deficit of 4.6 per cent of GDP.

'The government's more conservative budget assumptions are based on oil prices at US\$50 per barrel, along with an expectation of stable nominal expenditure. We incorporate a 35 per cent increase in revenue from higher oil receipts and 8 per cent growth in spending,' S&P noted.

In light of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, S&P revised its oil and gas price assumptions in February. The ratings agency now as-

sumes an average Brent oil price of US\$85 per barrel for 2022, falling to US\$70 in 2023 and US\$55 from 2024, compared with US\$60 for 2022 and US\$55 from 2023 in its previous review.

S&P further said while the government intends to limit spending growth, it expects expenses will surpass budget plans mainly because of higher-than-expected payments for gas, subsidies and transfers, and development projects.

The ratings agency forecasts that the government fiscal surplus will narrow to 0.8 per cent of GDP in 2023, and turn to deficits averaging 4.7 per cent of GDP over 2024-2025, largely driven by its oil price assumptions.

Asyad acquires Al Ameen Stores

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Asyad Group has announced the acquisition of 100 per cent stake of Al Ameen Stores and Refrigeration Company, a wholly owned subsidiary of Oman Fisheries Company, as well as its assets in a deal worth RO3.1mn.

The acquisition of Al Ameen Stores and Refrigeration Company is part of Asyad Group's plan for expanding cold chain logistics services in Oman, the group said in a press statement.

By expanding its assets in the cold chain and storage sector,



Asyad Group aims to provide fully integrated supply and logistics services in Oman and upgrade foodstuff preservation and refrigeration specifications which will effectively reduce local production loss and waste rates.

Such enhanced cold storage capabilities will also add value to local products to become export-ready and improve capacities to re-export imported goods by obtaining international quality certifications.

Additionally, this step will transform Oman into a cold chain logistics hub for regional and global markets.

Asyad Group said it hopes to utilize this deal at a time of increasing need for reliable logistics solutions to strengthen priority industries, such as fisheries, food, and pharmaceuticals industries, identified in Oman Vision 2040 as enablers of economic diversification and job creation for Omanis. Providing such solutions will minimize the current 35-45 per cent loss of different types of perishable goods, it added.

Meethaq's Shari'a board holds first meeting in 2022, appoints chairman

Muscat - Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat held its first Shari'a supervisory board meeting for 2022 recently at the bank's head-office. The meeting began with a welcome for the new Shari'a supervisory board members, who include Sheikh Dr Abdullah bin Mubarak al Abri, Sheikh Dr Akram Laldin, Sheikh Dr Abdul Aziz al Qassar, Sheikh Waleed al Qurri and Sheikh Dr Ahmed Rufai.

The board members approved the appointment of Sheikh Dr Abdullah bin Mubarak al Abri as chairman and Sheikh Dr Akram Laldin as deputy chairman of Meethaq's Shari'a super-



Sheikh Dr Abdullah al Abri

visory board, respectively.

In addition, the Shari'a board members also appointed Sheikh Dr Abdullah bin Mubarak al Abri and Sheikh Waleed al Qurri to the executive Shari'a committee

of the board. Other matters discussed by the Meethaq Shari'a supervisory board included the approving of a framework mechanism for seeking Shari'a supervisory board reviews and resolutions, as well as the reviewing of a number of proposals for transactions by the bank.

Meethaq thanked Abri and all the members for their valuable efforts and contributions to developing Islamic banking in the sultanate. The bank noted that regular meetings of the board are very important since it provides sound legal opinion for the transactions, agreements and contracts made across its business

activities.

Meethaq Islamic Banking provides Shari'a-compliant banking services under the supervision of Shariah supervisory board and in line with the regulations for Islamic banks issued by the Central Bank of Oman.

With close to 30 per cent market share of the total Islamic banking assets in Oman, Meethaq once again demonstrated its leadership in the sultanate's Islamic banking sector with its Islamic financing receivables reaching RO1.4bn and customer deposits growing close to RO1.2bn as at December 31, 2021.

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MSX falls on ex-dividend sell-off

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) sharply fell 1.91 per cent on Sunday to close at 4,124.94 points. The decline came after the listed companies finalised their dividend payouts, which typically cause ex-dividend sell-off in the market. The steep decline in the main index was caused by sharp fall in financial sector stocks. Financial index plunged 2.5 per cent. Services index decreased 0.35 per cent while Industrial index inched up 0.06 per cent. MSX Sharia index inched up 0.08 per cent to close at 477.78 points.

Total trading volumes dropped by more than 42.7 per cent to 13.4mn shares on Sunday compared with 23.4mn shares traded on Thursday. Market turnover increased 22.8 per cent to RO5.17mn against RO4.21mn recorded in the previous trading



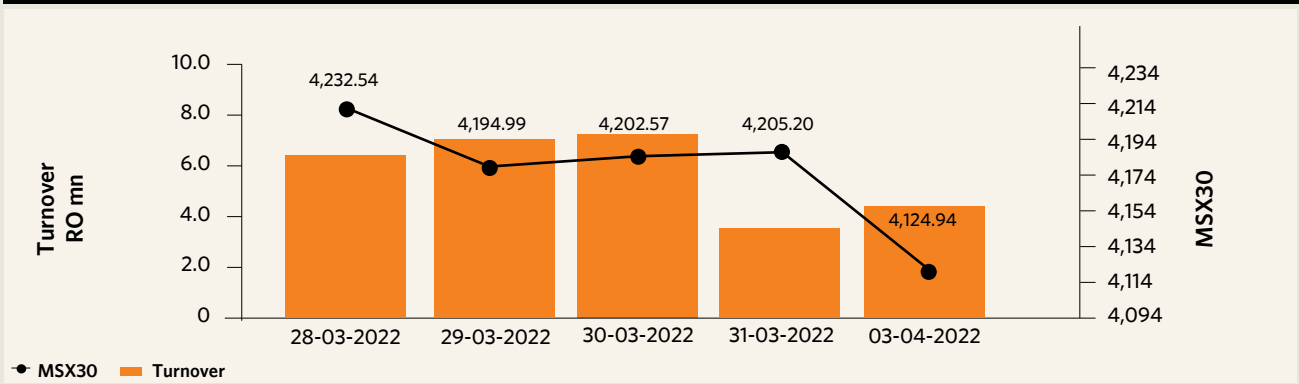
session. Market breadth of the MSX remained negative with ten advancing stocks to 13 decliners. As many as 21 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers of the day were Al Madina Investment (6.98 per cent), Oman Education and Training Investment (3.38 per cent), Oman Fisheries (3.33 peer cent), Al

Anwar Investment (3.26 per cent) and National Aluminium Production (3.19 per cent).

Top losers were Oman Qatar Insurance (-8.45 per cent), National Bank of Oman (-6.83 per cent), Ominvest (-5.29 per cent), Sohar International Bank (-4.35 per cent) and Ahlibank (-3.33 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



Sanctions to shrink Russia's economy by 10% this year

London, UK - The economies of Russia and Ukraine will contract by 10 per cent and 20 per cent respectively this year as the war between the two countries causes "the greatest supply shock" for 50 years, the European development bank, EBRD, has said.

Before Russia invaded its pro-Western neighbour on February 24, the London-based European Bank for Reconstruction and Development had been pencilling in growth of 3.5 per cent for Ukraine and 3.0 per cent for Russia.

The EBRD, issuing emergency forecasts, said it was the first international financial institution to update its guidance since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine last month.

The latest prognoses "assume that a ceasefire is brokered within a couple of months, followed soon after by the start of a major reconstruction effort in Ukraine," it said.

Under such a scenario, Ukraine's gross domestic product should rebound by 23 per cent next year.

But the heavy economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West would mean that it would register zero growth.

"Sanctions on Russia are expected to remain for the foreseeable future, condemning the Russian economy to stagnation in 2023, with negative spillovers for a number of neighbouring countries in eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia," the EBRD said.

"With so much uncertainty, the bank intends to produce a further forecast in the next couple of months, taking into ac-



count further developments."

Belarus - which borders both Ukraine and Russia, and also faces Western sanctions over its role in the conflict - was forecast to shrink by three per cent this year and then stagnate in 2023.

EBRD predicted that its investment zone, excluding Belarus and Russia, would grow by 1.7 per cent this year, less than half of the previous growth forecast of 4.2 per cent in November. Growth is then expected to pick up to five per cent in 2023.

High uncertainty

"Projections are subject to an exceptionally high degree of uncertainty, including major downside risks should hostilities escalate or should exports of gas or other commodities from Russia become restricted."

The world economy faced "the greatest supply shock since at least the early 1970s", it said, pointing out that Russia and Ukraine "supply a disproportionately high share of commodities, including wheat, corn, fertiliser, titanium and nickel."

EBRD chief economist Beata Javorcik said that inflationary

pressures, which were already high before the invasion, "will certainly increase now, which will have a disproportionate effect on many lower income countries where" the bank invests, "as well as on the poorer segments of the population in most countries".

The bank earlier this month unveiled a two-billion-euro (US\$2.2bn) "resilience" package to help citizens, companies and countries affected by the war in Ukraine, including those hosting refugees.

"Europe has also seen the greatest forced displacement of people since the Second World War, and the report examines the potential consequences of this migration," it said. "Skilled workers from Ukraine may provide a boost to some economies in the longer term, particularly in countries with ageing populations," it said.

But "in the short-term, economies are facing fiscal pressures and administrative challenges as they scale up the provision of housing, healthcare and schooling".

AFP

Ukraine war pushes eurozone inflation to new record this year

Brussels, Belgium - Spiralling energy bills and disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine caused consumer prices in the eurozone to surge by a new record of 7.5 per cent, EU statistics agency Eurostat said.

Last month's rise marked a further acceleration in inflation from February, which at 5.9 per cent year-on-year was already a eurozone record, it said.

The surge has been fuelled by a 44.7-per cent hike in energy prices over the year as Europe found itself caught in an oil and gas crunch due to tensions with Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

European Central Bank (ECB) president Christine Lagarde warned Wednesday that a prolonged Ukraine conflict will keep energy prices and the cost of living spiralling, blighting a post-Covid recovery.

Similar leaps in inflation have been seen in the United States where the Federal Reserve is committed to a long series of interest hikes to cool the economy and stem the price hikes.

But the ECB is reluctant for now to take similar measures, convinced that the rise in the cost of living is linked to the war



Snow falls on a board displaying the price of fuel, as motorists queue to fill their vehicles at a petrol station near Chartres, France on Friday (AFP)

as well as lingering disruptions to the global supply chains brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

But given inflation's relentless pace, analysts said Lagarde would soon have no choice but to rethink her policy.

"With euro-zone inflation rising even further above the ECB's forecast, and likely to remain very high for the rest of the year, we think it won't be long before the Bank starts raising interest rates," said Jack Allen-Reynolds

at Capital Economics.

'No painless options'

Of particular concern for policy makers is core inflation, which strips out volatile components such as energy and food. It soared to 3.0 per cent in March, Eurostat said.

This is a full percentage point on top of the ECB's target of two percent and will give armour to critics that argue for interest hikes to face down inflation.

"The inflation data speak for

themselves," said Joachim Nagel, the central bank governor from Germany, Europe's biggest economy that traditionally wants stronger medicine against higher prices.

But economists warn that raising interest rates would put the brakes on the post pandemic recovery, with officials already warning that current forecasts for growth in Europe are certain to take a hit due to the war.

AFP

US Fed may trim balance sheet in May

New York, US - A senior US Federal Reserve official said Saturday the central bank should begin trimming its balance sheet as early as next month, in what would be a major step in its push for monetary tightening.

In a speech at Princeton University, John Williams, a Fed policymaker who is president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, argued that tightening is urgent in the face of "acute" risks posed by soaring inflation - risks exacerbated by the Ukraine war, the coronavirus pandemic and ongoing labour and supply shortages.

"I expect that this process of

reducing the size of the balance sheet can begin as soon as the May FOMC meeting," he said, referring to the Federal Open Market Committee, the Fed's monetary policymaking body, due to meet May 3-4.

As head of the Fed's New York branch, Williams serves as vice chairman of the FOMC and is one of its eight permanent members.

In the early days of COVID-19, with the nation's economy reeling, the Fed launched a program of purchasing bonds and mortgage-backed securities to stabilize financial markets.

In the process, it more than

doubled the size of its balance sheet, which shot up to US\$8.9tn from US\$4.1tn in February 2020.

Last month the Fed stopped making such purchases, marking a first step back toward normal practices.

To now trim its balance sheet, the Fed would principally allow its portfolio to steadily decline, not fully replacing those securities reaching term.

Two weeks ago, the Fed's policy-making committee moved to raise interest rates by a quarter point, placing them in a 0.25 per cent to 0.50 per cent range.

AFP

Will Biden's plan to tap US oil reserves reduce prices?

New York, US - Citing the need to counteract the "Putin price hike" following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, US President Joe Biden has announced a sweeping plan to make unprecedented use of US emergency oil stockpiles.

Under Biden's plan, the United States will release up to a million barrels a day every day for six months from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR).

On Friday, the International Energy Agency announced that a group of 30 other countries will also release crude onto the market from strategic holdings following an emergency meeting in Paris.

Biden's announcement Thursday prompted an immediate slump in oil prices, but the crude market was choppy on Friday, suggesting investor skepticism that the emergency releases will

change the picture.

Below are some of the main questions about the SPR and the likely impact of the policy.

What is Strategic Petroleum Reserve?

Set up in 1975 following the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the SPR is maintained in immense salt caverns along the Gulf of Mexico. The IEA requires members to hold 90 days of import protection, a requirement the United States has traditionally met with SPR and industry stocks.

At its peak, the SPR contained 727mn barrels in December 2009. The level stood at 568mn barrels as of last week, according to government data.

If the United States goes forward with Biden's plan, it would reduce the SPR to levels not seen since the mid-1980s.

How does Biden's plan compare with past uses?

The White House's plan dwarfs previous SPR releases, which included President George H.W. Bush ordering about 17mn barrels released during the first Gulf War in 1991 and a 2011 release by President Barack Obama of 30.6mn barrels due to the disruption of Libyan production.

The announcement marks Biden's third move to tap the SPR.

In November, the United States announced it was putting out 50mn barrels of oil in response to soaring inflation amid pandemic-exacerbated supply chain snarls. Early last month, Washington also joined a 60mn emergency release announced by the IEA to address disruption from the Russian invasion.



Joe Biden

Given the scale of the release, some analysts have said Energy Department officials may have trouble finding buyers for crude, or face infrastructure bottlenecks. A note from JPMorgan Chase predicted the release

would add 850,000 barrels per day, rather than one million.

Bill O'Grady, chief market strategist at Confluence Investment Management, said that the move comes as the long-term need for so much stockpiling looks less acute because of decarbonization efforts to address climate change and as the US shale boom has lessened the need for imports. "I don't think that oil will ever be replaced," O'Grady said.

Will it bring down prices?

Oil prices ended about three per cent lower on Thursday following the official announcement after falling even more on the initial reports about the plan.

"The market reacted immediately after the announcement was made," said Andy Lipow of

Lipow Oil Associates in Houston, who thinks gasoline prices will fall 10 to 15 cents a gallon due to the SPR release.

The move comes as the US president faces long odds in the November midterm elections, as runaway consumer prices weigh threaten to overshadow a strong labor market.

Biden described the policy as meant to "ease the pain" of lofty gas prices, which now stand above US\$4.20 a gallon, up almost 50 per cent from last year.

But now that the announcement has been priced in, "the market will look to the next headline for direction," Lipow said. "It's like a quick fix," said Jim Krane, a fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

The quantity of oil is more than twice the increased output

just offered by the OPEC+ group of exporters, and will "give us some relief," said Krane.

But the extended nature of the SPR plan could blunt some of the longer-term impact if US shale producers defer investments in new drilling, or OPEC opts against shifting from its current austerity posture.

Biden has almost no other levers for lowering oil prices, said Krane, who notes "the US does not have a national oil company that takes orders from the government." Oil prices were already elevated prior to the Ukraine invasion, but Russia's attack prompted crude prices to spike to almost US\$140 a barrel in early March after the United States banned Russian energy imports - not far from their all-time high.

AFP

Bank Muscat organises seminar on marketing for Najahi customers

The Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSME) sector has been playing an important role in the creation of jobs and driving global economic growth and development. Hence, the sector has received keen support from Bank Muscat.

The bank has supported thousands of enterprises with banking facilities over the years, and its Retail Enterprises (Najahi) unit in particular, offers both financial and non-financial support to entrepreneurs as part of the bank's drive to promote sustainability, a press release said.

Recently, Najahi organised a seminar on successful marketing by Ahmed al Mutawa, CEO of Mubader Company, and a business consultant to the MSME sector where he talked about starting and marketing successful businesses, the latest marketing tools and the best businesses you can market. It was attended by Ahmed Faqir al Bulushi, Chief Banking Officer, Bank Muscat and other senior officials at the bank.

Addressing the seminar and thanking the entrepreneurs for their enthusiastic participation, Amjad Iqbal Al Lawati, deputy general manager – Customer Segments, said, "The Government of Oman provides a lot of encouragement and opportunities to the MSME sector. As the leading financial services provider in Oman, Bank Muscat, which is celebrating the 40th anniversary of its launch in 2022, has also been keenly supporting the sector with a number of initiatives.



"The non-financial support offered by Bank Muscat's Najahi

include training sessions and mentoring programmes,

which help young Omani entrepreneurs to guide their business

through some of the most critical phases of growth and development. The bank has always been an enabler of opportunities for budding entrepreneurs so as to bring about sustainable development and financial inclusion in our society. I would also like to thank our MSME customers for their confidence in Bank Muscat and for working hard to ensure the development and progress of Oman."

Bank Muscat set up the Najahi (Retail Enterprises) unit in 2014 as part of a major initiative to support the MSME sector. Over the years, Najahi has been growing from strength to strength in expanding the various products and services to MSMEs. Today, the beneficiaries

of Najahi's products include businesses operating in retail, trading, services, manufacturing and processing, construction, hospitality, travel and tourism, mining and agricultural sectors.

The Najahi products suite includes the value-added Najahi Current Account, POS Terminal, Credit & Debit Card, Internet Banking and Collateral-free Financing. Najahi has received much praise from its customers for the various services and facilities provided since its inception as it has enabled customers to develop and expand their projects, in line with the development goals of economic diversification, job creation and increasing GDP.

Student of ISD wins Lifology fellowship

Bhavika Biju, class XI student of Indian School Darsait has been selected in the under-18 category for the Lifology Global Fellowship - the world's first and largest fellowship programme for school students.

The Lifology Global Fellowship Programme brings together some of the super intellectuals in the world from the United Nations, World Bank, WHO, Harvard University, Stanford University and London School of Economics.

This award is an appreciation for Bhavika's active participation and great contribution to all assignments. Apart from exclusive gifts, she will also receive the following appreciations - Lifology Global Fellowship Badge, Letter of Recommendation (LOR), Certificate of Achievement (Top 1000), Certificate of Appreciation (Fellowship Certificate) and '18 under 18' featuring magazine.

Ten more students from ISD were among the Top 1000 students from the 10,000 aspirants for the Lifology Global Fellowship. They include Rithesh Rajeevan - XI, Manasvi Sudha Praveen - X, Sivasankar Sreedharan - XII, Nalija Ismail - XII, Aditya Chandra Mohan - XII, Navaneet Chandran Krishnalayam - XII, Rabiya Khalid - X, Rhea Elizabeth Varghese - X, Sameha Khan Pathan - X, and Jemimah Shibu Daniel - IX.

The students will be awarded with the Certificate of Achievement, Certificate of Appreciation (Fellowship Certificate) Lifology Global Fellowship Badge and one-hour free career counselling for their notable achievement.



Dubai's Al Farooq Mosque ready for Ramadan worship

All preparations are complete in Al Farooq Omar bin Al Khattab Mosque and Centre (AFMC) in Dubai to receive worshippers and fasting people during the holy month of Ramadan. The facilities and services are available and ready to provide a spiritual ambience filled with tranquility and piety.

Abdul Salam al Marzooqi, general manager, AFMC in Dubai, said, "The Mosque will receive worshippers in a spiritual ambience, while abiding by the protective and preventive measures approved by the Supreme Committee of Emergency, Crisis, and Disaster Management."

The Mosque had received more than 540 thousand worshippers during Ramadan 2021. The Friday prayers were attended by 2000 worshippers weekly during the month of Ramadan last year. It is expected that large numbers of worshippers and visitors would flock to AFMC this year.

AFMC provides the opportunity to follow the Tarweeh and Tahajud prayers throughout the holy month of Ramadan, led by

Sheikh Dr Faris al Mustafa, via online streaming on AFMC platforms on social media - @alfarooqmosquecentre. AFMC will also host religious lectures after the Asr prayers, which will also be broadcasted on social media platforms.

All logistic preparations have been completed for the holy month of Ramadan, including maintenance work, cleaning of carpets and domes, and installation of seats for old people to make things easier for them. In view of the increase in the number of worshippers flocking to the mosque in the last ten days of Ramadan, the outer courtyards have been equipped to accommodate a large number of worshippers.

On the other hand, an Iftar tent was set up to receive more than 1500 fasting people daily, thus providing 45 thousand meals throughout Ramadan. A team from Metropolitan Catering will prepare and serve the meals in compliance with health and safety standards. AFMC will also host an Iftar for non-Muslim communities.

Mercedes offers Ramadan service discounts

To ensure an outstanding driving experience for every journey, Mercedes-Benz Oman is offering special service packages for its Actros trucks this Ramadan.

From April 3 to May 3, truck owners can avail 30% off on A/C Services for Mercedes-Benz Actros MP11 and Actros MP13, now at just RO51 inclusive of VAT, and get 22% off on Actros Economy Services for Mercedes-Benz Actros MP11 and Actros MP13, now at just RO92 inclusive of VAT for 6-cylinder engines and RO96 inclusive of VAT for 8-cylinder engines.

Available at Mercedes-Benz Service Centers in Muscat, Haima, Salalah, and Sohar, the service is designed to maximize usage and minimise stress, a press release said.

Gary Brown, general manager of Commercial Vehicles at



Mercedes-Benz Oman, said, "As our flagship trucks, our customers know that when they

purchase an Actros they are not only getting supreme power, reliability, safety, and economy,

but also peace of mind in knowing they will receive the highest level of service available.

Lulu financial head gets Bahraini golden visa

Adeeb Ahamed, managing director of Lulu Financial Group, has received the Bahraini golden residency visa.

Adeeb Ahamed was awarded the honour by H E Shaikh Khalid bin Abdulla al Khalifa, Deputy Prime Minister of Bahrain, a press release said.

"I am humbled and delighted to receive this honour today. I thank His Majesty King Hamad bin Eisa al Khalifa, His Royal Highness Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of

Bahrain, and the government and people of Bahrain, for bestowing this recognition on me," Ahamed said, after receiving his golden visa.

Launched in February this year, the Golden residency visa for non-Bahrainis is part of the country's economic recovery plan to attract global talent and boost investment to Bahrain.

"The Golden Visa is a benchmark of recognition that will boost Bahrain's image as a business hub, in traditional and new-age sectors," he added.



A'Saffa Foods Top Omani Brand

A'Saffa Foods was recently presented with the 'Top Omani Brands' award in the 'Food & Beverages' category at the 2022 edition of the Alam al-Iktisaad Wal A'mal (AIWA) Top Omani Brands Award.

The awards are presented every year by AIWA, a leading Arabic business magazine published by United Media Services. The nominations were based on a survey conducted in partnership with the Arabian Research Bureau.

This survey was then used to determine which brands enjoyed the highest brand recall amongst their consumers. This award is therefore a clear demonstration of the trust and confidence the public has in A'Saffa Foods and its products, a press release said.

The AIWA Top Omani Brands



Award 2022 ceremony was held at Al Bustan Palace on March 30, under the patronage of H H Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said. Receiving the award at the event on behalf of A'Saffa Foods was the company's CEO, Eng Mohamed Suhail al Shanfari.

On receiving the award, Shanfari said, "We are honoured to have been ranked as the 'Top Omani Brand' in the 'Food & Beverages' category.

The award is not only a testament to our brand's popularity and success, but also demonstrates our commitment to delivering true quality and value to

our customers in Oman. This award further endorses the trust our customers have put in us over the past two decades. As such, we would like to thank them for their continued loyalty to our brand."

Founded in 2001, A'Saffa Foods Processing is a state-of-the-art poultry and meat processing plant with an advanced farm and slaughterhouse in Thumrait, Dhofar. Over the past two decades, the brand has continually strived to live up to the trust its customers across the country and the GCC have placed in the brand and its products. In fact, since its very inception, the company has been committed to producing nothing but the very best poultry products, both in terms of food safety and quality.

Indian embassy organises tree plantation drive

A tree plantation drive was organised by the Embassy of India in association with the Environment Authority on March 31 at Rustaq as part of its Community Service Fortnight - Sewa Utsav.

The Sewa Utsav is being organised under 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' to celebrate 75 glorious years of India's independence in a unique way and serve the local community, a press release said.

Embassy officials, Environment Authority officials, volunteers from Indian Social Club and teachers and students from Indian Schools in Oman participated with great enthusiasm in the tree plantation drive.

All the participants were briefed about the Sewa Utsav which is inspired by the noble spirit of the holy month of Ramadan as well as the core Indian value of serving humanity by embassy officials.

The participants were also briefed on the conservation activities being organised by Environment Authority and the need of environment conservation for sustainable development and averting climate change.

Sabco Sports official sales agent for FIFA packages

Match Hospitality has appointed leading sports agency, Sabco Sports as its sales agent in OMAN for the sale of the Official Hospitality Programme of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Match Hospitality is the global rights holder and the only company appointed by FIFA to exclusively promote and sell, either directly or via a network of sales agents, official commercial hospitality packages for the FIFA World Cup 2022, including guaranteed match tickets.

Match Hospitality has suc-



successfully operated the FIFA Commercial Hospitality Programmes for the previous three editions of the FIFA World Cup

and FIFA Confederations Cup in South Africa, Brazil and Russia, and of the FIFA Women's World Cup in Germany, Canada and, most recently, France.

Jaime Byrom, executive chairman of Match Hospitality, said, "Qatar promises to deliver an amazing tournament that will capitalise on its principal attributes - the close proximity of its eight venues which are all located in or within short driving distance of Doha, and a fascinating region with unique attractions, spectacular state of the art stadiums, and traditional

Arabic hospitality."

Nic Cartwright, managing director, Sabco Sports, added, "Sabco Sports is honoured to act as the non-exclusive officially appointed sales agent for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Official Hospitality Programme in Oman. Our company will bring this territory a lot closer to the most coveted football competition in the world, offering fans a unique opportunity to purchase ticket-inclusive hospitality packages for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022."

OBA holds its AGM

The Oman Banks Association (OBA) held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) for the year 2022 on March 29.

The meeting was virtual and attended by OBA members from banks operating in the Sultanate of Oman.

During the meeting, 2021 achievements and audited financials were presented as well as 2022 work plans and budgets.

External auditors for the current financial year were appointed, a press release said.

The Board of Directors for the term 2022 - 2024 was also appointed under the chairmanship of Abdul Ha-keem Omar al Ojaily.

Oman Banks Association is a non-profit professional association created to represent the banking sector, to promote Omani banking activities, coordinate with the regulators on matters of policy and strategy, and to support banking excellence in Oman.

KO senior member receives community leadership award

Knowledge Oman, the award winning knowledge-sharing platform in the sultanate, has honoured Dr Baby Sam Samuel with the community leadership award for his contribution to the development of the Knowledge Oman initiative.

The award was presented to Dr Sam by the founder of the platform, Tariq Hilal al Barwani, in the presence of its president, Balqees al Hassani, at the recent team gathering function that highlights and celebrates Knowledge Oman contribution to the society.

"We are honoured to recognise and award Dr Sam for his excellent contribution to the platform and ultimately society as a whole. Dr Sam has indeed played a significant role in Knowledge Oman's success since he joined the team 10 years ago as a volunteer member, serving multiple roles, including vice chairman, till recently. Dr Sam is an energetic and passionate social entrepreneur who never fails to deliver excellent results" said Barwani.



Dr Sam had joined Knowledge Oman in 2012 as a volunteer member and engaged with a pool of volunteers to learn about the platform and contribute activities towards the betterment of society.

He was promoted to different ranks until recently in 2020 as its vice chairman, supporting with the growth and development of the organisation.

Dr Samuel is an Executive Leader with more than 22 years of senior management experience across several sectors. He

has served as the Director and Chairman of the Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman, in addition to engaging as advisory /board roles with several higher educational institutions and social impact organisations.

"Knowledge Oman has offered me the opportunity to have ground level understanding of the educational needs of communities and offered me a different perspective about living with purpose. I am fortunate to be part of this society impacting platform," said Dr Sam.

OCI CEO gets sustainability award

Oman Cables Industry (OCI), Oman's leading manufacturer of industrial cables, made its presence felt significantly at the 10th edition of Oman Forum 2022 where its CEO Cinzia Farise received the 'Sustainability Leadership in Manufacturing' award.

While sustainability awards are aimed at honouring exemplary leaders in Oman with extraordinary accomplishments in areas of social, economic and environment sustainability, the award will further drive Oman Cables' sustainable growth which augurs well with Oman Vision 2040 and the national priorities towards a safe, socially responsible and well-preserved environment, with effective and balanced ecosystems and renewable resources, a press release said.

The award ceremony was presided over by H E Dr Rahma Ibrahim al Mahrooqi, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

Cinzia Farise, who is also CEO at Prysmian Group MEAT Region, said, "The award is a recognition of our role in preserving the environment and reducing



human impact on biodiversity which has clearly been detrimental to it. It also shows how committed we are in reinforcing our business model to integrate economic, social and environmental responsibility in all aspects of our activities while creating value for the community and the entire ecosystem.

"At Oman Cables, which is part of the Prysmian Group, we consider multi-culturalism, diver-

sity and inclusion as fundamental pillars of the company and fully support Oman Vision 2040 whose national priorities move towards a safe, socially responsible and well-preserved environment with renewable resources."

During the Oman Forum 2022, Oman Cables senior executives had the opportunity to interact with policy makers and industry leaders in the field of sustainable development and engaged in in-

teractive discussions and knowledge sharing through leadership presentations and engrossing panel discussions.

According to Farise, Oman Cables has been conducting Sustainability Awareness Training to empower all employees within every stage of the process. "The priorities for Oman Cables include product circularity and recycling in order to reduce waste, develop efficiencies and maximise resources and winning 'Sustainability Leadership in Manufacturing' award will give us a further boost to do more as far as sustainability awareness is concerned,"

It is worth mentioning that Oman Cables' partnership with Prysmian Group gives the company an impetus to focus more on increasing sustainability awareness in line with the goal of becoming a leading entity that is dedicated to sustainability because the group's social ambition complements climate change strategy based on the requirements of the Paris Agreement that sets a net zero of emissions generated by its operations.

INFINITI QX80 offers plethora of rewards for Ramadan

INFINITI Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles, is offering a plethora of rewards for customers buying the full-size luxury SUV Infiniti QX80 as part of its special promotion announced to mark the holy month of Ramadan.

The new Infiniti QX80 features added equipment, innovative new technologies and stylish attributes befitting its luxury status. The QX80 is a full-size luxury SUV - the flagship of the Infiniti range. It combines bold proportions and a commanding exterior design with a spacious, high quality cabin with room for seven or eight passengers. Effort-



less performance, advanced drive-assist technologies and taut yet refined dynamics allow for a relaxing and confidence-inspiring drive.

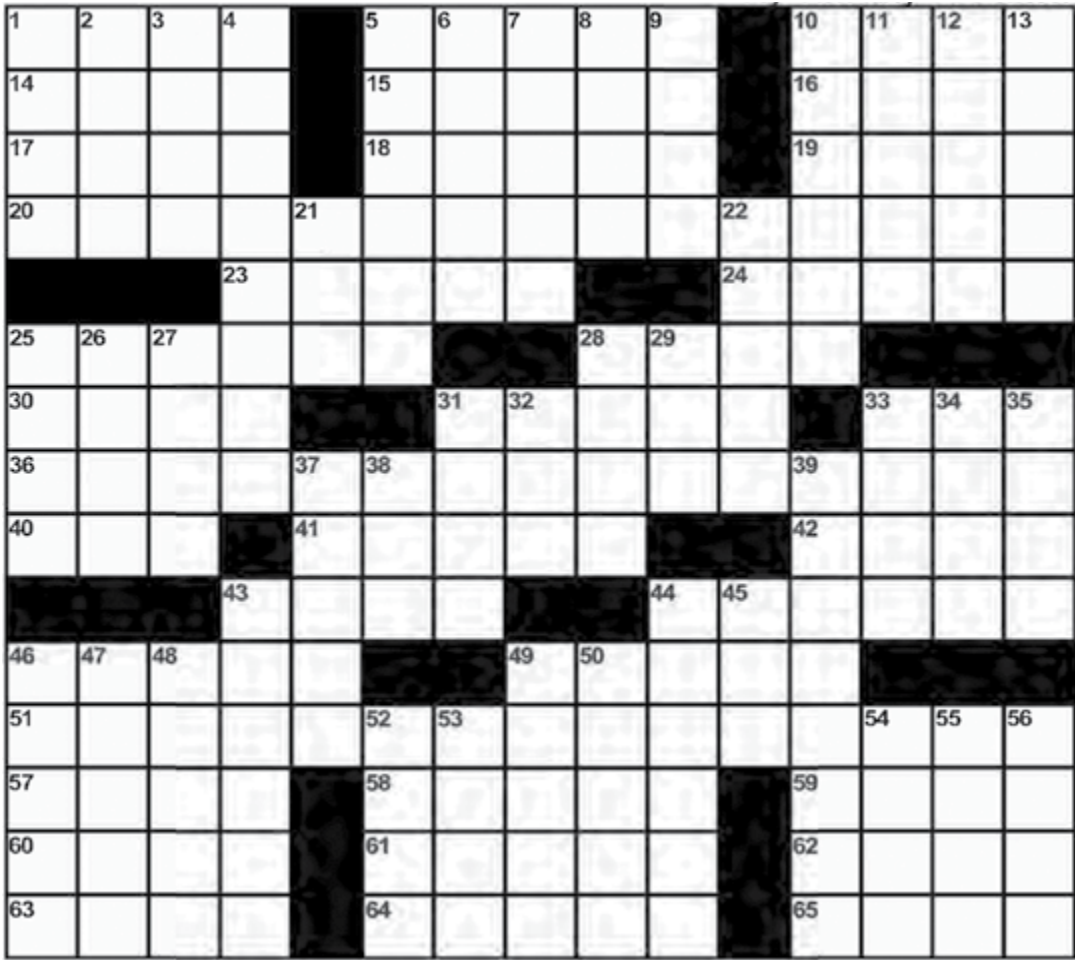
Range of offers on QX0 includes free registration, assured gifts vouchers, periodic vehicle maintenance, manufacturer's warranty, AAA/ road assistance card, digital promotion, Infiniti loyalty programme and reference programme.

The special offer will be available till May 19. The scheme is applicable for all the customers purchasing Infiniti vehicles for personal use only. Vehicles purchased with commercial regis-

tration will not be eligible for the scheme. Vehicles bought for taxi, driving school, ministries, fleet, and rent-a-car usage will not be eligible for this scheme. The scheme is applicable for retail billing only.

A senior spokesperson at Infiniti oman, said, "we are pleased to announce an attractive offer to our flagship QX80 model for our customers in Oman. This is a good time to buy the QX80 which features a range of available drive-assist technologies." All customers purchasing Infiniti QX80 during the scheme period will also be eligible for free first year vehicle registration.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) _ and crafts
5) Blew it
10) Hawaiian tuber
14) Booty
15) Eccentric
16) Eurasia's_ Mountains
17) O. Henry's "The Gift of the _"
18) Fussy director's order
19) Split apart
20) Fractional amount
23) Certain bridge players
24) Type of wrench
25) Attire
28) Stride
30) "_ it the truth!"
31) Word with "case" or "well"
33) Lingerie item
36) Cassette, videotape or CDR, e.g.
40) Expected any second
41) Related maternally
42) Thing on a list
43) Micronesian island
44) City on the Rio Grande
46) Utah lilies

DOWN

1) Money for the poor
2) Wander
3) Forum wear
4) Kind of heel
5) Go by, as time
6) His work had many meanings
7) Lion's calls
8) Beyond grand
9) Fraction of a newton
10) Snapping creature
11) "It's been _ pleasure"
12) Place for testing missiles
13) From days of yore
21) "Well, _-di-dab!"

22) Abalone shell lining
25) It may say "I'm sorry"
26) In_ of (replacing)
27) "_ bitten, twice shy"
28) It may come over a PA
29) Order between "ready" and "fire"
31) "Anna and the King" country
32) Blockbusting producer?
33) Angler's hope
34) Felt bad about
35) Bullets and such, briefly
37) Employ again
38) Fingerprint alternative, to a detective
39) Most in need of a nice bath
43) Stare with amazement
44) Some sci-fi weaponry
45) Astern
46) List of candidates
47) Avid
48) Reveal that one's in pain
49) Lagoon surrounder

50) Gemstone mounting
52) African wading bird
53) Lymph bump
54) Cook on a turntable, in slang
55) Name of a noted canal or lake
56) Absorbs (with "up")

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

It's pretty hard to plan for the future when you don't have a solid understanding of what's happening in the present. Sure, you kind of have an idea of what's going on. You know as much as most people do. But you're a deep, psychologically insightful person, and you have the tools to truly grasp what your current world looks like. If you do this, then you greatly enhance the chances that the plans you make will be relevant and effective.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Today is a great day to try something new. Whether it's a deep-fried candy bar or something a little more healthful, go ahead and take a bite. Or maybe your "new" isn't food related. Are you talking to a new person? Wearing a new shirt? Taking a new route to work? Newly in love? About to try bungee jumping for the first time? Heck, maybe you're doing all of the above. Enjoy the newness.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

While today should be a good day for you and your people, it won't offer any exceptional memories or achievements. It's going to be sometimes easy and sometimes hard. A classic balance of positive and negative energy is controlling your world right now, so you can expect a little bit of everything but no extremes. There will be no satisfaction if your hopes are too high. Just let the day do its thing and you'll be happy.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

What's been happening in your love life lately? A good place to start when you answer that question is with yourself. Whether you're single or solidly committed, how are you feeling? What are your expectations of a relationship? What are your expectations of a life? Do you think people are meant to be together or are fundamentally alone? How do expectations play out in the way you relate to others? Food for thought, eh?

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Don't force it: This is a rule of thumb when putting together things with small metal parts. (If they don't fit together, you are probably doing something wrong, and if you try to force it, they'll break, and then where will you be?) It's also a rule of thumb for your day. Is a co-worker griping? Would you prefer it if they would snap out of their bad mood? Don't force it. Is your computer broken? Don't force it.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

There is giving of yourself and there's giving too much of yourself. At work, try to find the line between the two. After all, you don't feel good if you're not able to throw yourself into what you do. At the same time, you need to make sure that you have enough energy at the end of the day to take care of your needs too. This could be as basic as making sure you have enough energy to work out and make sure you have a good dinner.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Nobody said that love was a bouquet of red roses. They just said that maybe it would be nice if it were. But let's be honest: sometimes it's daisies, sometimes it's marigolds, sometimes it's a thorn bush that stings for hours and hours after you've touched it. Sometimes it's nettles and sometimes it's narcissus. So go out into that great big garden of feelings and gather your rosebuds (and whatever else you find) while ye may.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You've got an eye for detail, and that's precisely what you're going to need right now. Whether you're inspecting a shipment of toy robots for defects or a student's paper for grammatical errors, your eagle eye has never been so sharp. What will you discover? Sometimes, when you look hard enough, you see much more than you're looking for. Maybe you'll glimpse the sense of things or a clue as to what you're really looking for.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You might want to take a look at any old, unnecessary, self-defeating habits that you're still engaging in. What is it you're still doing? Why are you still doing it? How could you try to do something different? Don't castigate yourself if you can't change overnight. Habits form over time, and they're often deceptively comfortable. But give change a shot.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Self-sacrifice is like very strong medicine: Used in the right dosage, under the right circumstances, it can be a very, very powerful healer. But in the wrong dosage, and the wrong situation, it can be deadly. Think about this and how it might relate to you. Are you practicing smart self-sacrifice? Are you not quite sure? It wouldn't hurt to call in a professional or at least a trusted friend who can give you another perspective.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Nobody but nobody likes to suffer, but everybody does suffer sometimes. Sometimes it's even good for you. For example, if you know you have to suffer for your art, your career, your relationship, and it turns out you're willing to do it, then you know that your artor career or relationship is really worth a lot to you. This knowledge can help your determination and make it that much more likely that you will get what you want.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Take care of little details today. Spend some time doing things like balancing accounts, scheduling appointments, and organising your drawers. Completed chores and uncluttered spaces will reduce your stress level to a surprising degree. Plus, when you get all this minor stuff taken care of you make room for major experiences. Preparation is important. It will allow you to accept big opportunities when they arrive unexpectedly.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1.What indicates the legal limit to which a ship may be loaded?

A. Sneaker line
B. Plimsoll line
C. Trainer line
D. Pumps line

2.Which legendary character is the subject of musical settings of his adventures, notably by Purcell, Glück and Mozart?

A. Flick the Little Fire Engine
B. Don Juan
C. The Barber of Seville
D. Barry Manilow

3.Where is the term "brinelling" used?

A. In coastal waters
B. Suspension bridges
C. In cooking, when food is soaked in brine
D. When measuring a surface's hardness

Answers: 1.B 2.B 3.D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

S	S	E	O
M	E	C	N
S	B	Y	G
K	M	A	E

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

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

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

Russia targets Ukrainian port Odessa as UN seeks ceasefire

Kyiv, Ukraine - Explosions rocked the strategic Ukrainian port city of Odessa on Sunday, as a top UN official headed to Moscow to try to secure a 'humanitarian ceasefire' and after evidence emerged of possible civilian killings around Kyiv.

Thick plumes of black smoke rose from several areas on the historic Black Sea port, after air strikes shook the city at about 6am (0300 GMT) but the Ukrainian army said no one was killed.

Russia's defence ministry confirmed the attack, saying 'high-precision sea and air-based missiles destroyed an oil refinery and three storage facilities for fuel and lubricants'.

The ministry claimed the targets were supplying fuel to Ukrainian troops.

Anton Herashchenko, an adviser to the Ukrainian interior minister, said: "Fires were reported in some areas. Some of the missiles were shot down by air defence."

The strikes came with Greece's Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias expected in the city to deliver humanitarian aid to the municipal authorities.

UN chief Antonio Guterres' humanitarian envoy Martin Griffiths was meanwhile seeking a halt in the fighting, which Ukraine estimates has left 20,000 people dead, and forced more than 10 million to flee for their lives.

He will fly on to Kyiv from Moscow. Both Russia and Ukraine have agreed to meet him, Guterres said on Saturday.



People watch as smoke rises after an attack by Russian army in Odessa, on Sunday (AFP)

Mass graves

In the ravaged city of Bucha, just outside the Ukrainian capital, the bodies of nearly 300 civilians were found in mass graves after Russian troops withdrew.

AFP reporters saw at least 20 bodies, all in civilian clothing, strewn across a single street. One had his hands tied behind his back with a white cloth, and his Ukrainian passport left open beside his body.

"All these people were shot," Bucha's mayor Anatoly Fedoruk said, adding that 280 other bodies had been buried in mass graves in the town. "These are the consequences of Russian

occupation."

UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said she was 'appalled by atrocities in Bucha and other towns in Ukraine' and promised the perpetrators would be held to account before an international war crimes tribunal.

The International Criminal Court has already opened a probe into possible war crimes committed in Ukraine, and several Western leaders, including US President Joe Biden, have accused Russia's Vladimir Putin of being a 'war criminal'.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has also alleged that Russian

soldiers planted mines and other booby traps as they withdrew from northern Ukraine.

In a video address on Saturday, he warned returning residents of tripwires and other dangers.

"We are moving forward. Moving carefully and everyone who returns to this area must also be very careful," Zelensky said.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to raise economic pressure on Russia, the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania announced on Saturday that they had stopped all imports of Russian natural gas.

'Verbal agreement'

Pope Francis, on a visit to the Mediterranean island of Malta, issued a thinly veiled attack on Putin for ordering troops into Ukraine, and on Sunday made a plea for refugees fleeing the conflict to be welcomed.

The pontiff has not ruled out a visit to Kyiv.

On talks to end the fighting, Ukrainian negotiator David Arakhania told local television channels that Russia had 'verbally' accepted most of Kyiv's proposals - except on the issue of Crimea, which Moscow annexed in 2014.

AFP



Ukrainians seeking asylum in the United States camp on the Mexican side of the San Ysidro Crossing port in Tijuana, Mexico, on Saturday (AFP)

Nearly 4.2 mn Ukrainians flee Russia's invasion

Geneva, Switzerland - Nearly 4.2mn Ukrainians have fled their country since Russia's invasion began on February 24, with almost 40,000 pouring into neighbouring countries in the past 24 hours, UN numbers show.

The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, said on Sunday that 4,176,401 Ukrainians had fled in just over five weeks, up 38,559 from the figure given a day earlier. Women and children account for 90 per cent of those who have left Ukraine, with men aged 18 to 60 eligible for military call-up and unable to leave.

The UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) said that in addition to Ukrainian refugees, nearly 205,500 non-Ukrainians living, studying or working in the country have also left. Nearly 6.48mn people were meanwhile estimated to be internally displaced within Ukraine as of mid-March, according to IOM.

That puts the total number of people displaced by the conflict at well over 10mn, or around a quarter of Ukraine's total population. Before the Russian invasion, Ukraine had a population of 37mn in the regions under government control, excluding Russia-annexed Crimea and the pro-Russian separatist regions in the east. Here is a breakdown of how many Ukrainian refugees have fled to neighbouring countries, according to UNHCR:

Poland

Nearly six out of 10 Ukrainian refugees - 2,429,265 so far - have crossed into Poland, according to the UN tally.

Polish border guards put the number even higher, saying on Sunday that 2,461,000 people had entered from Ukraine since February 24. The small border city of Przemyśl alone has seen some 800,000 refugees arrive, according to its mayor, with up to 55,000 people arriving each

day at the peak - nearly equivalent to the city's total population.

Many people who go to Ukraine's immediate western neighbours travel on to other states in Europe's Schengen open-borders zone.

Romania

A total of 635,816 Ukrainians have entered the EU member state, including a large number who crossed over from Moldova, wedged between Romania and Ukraine. The vast majority are thought to have gone on to other countries.

Moldova

The Moldovan border is the closest to the major port city of Odessa, which was hit by air strikes on Sunday morning. Some 392,933 Ukrainians have crossed into the non-EU state, one of the poorest in Europe. Most of those who have entered the former Soviet republic of 2.6mn people, sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania, have moved on.

Hungary

A total of 385,783 Ukrainians have entered Hungary.

Russia

Some 350,632 refugees had sought shelter in Russia as of last Tuesday. In addition, 113,000 people crossed into Russia from the separatist-held pro-Russian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine between February 21 and 23.

Slovakia

A total of 298,183 people have crossed Ukraine's shortest border into Slovakia.

Belarus

Another 12,746 refugees had made it north to Russia's close ally Belarus as of last Thursday.

AFP

Serbians vote in polls overshadowed by war

Belgrade, Serbia - Serbians went to the polls on Sunday in elections that will likely see populist President Aleksandar Vucic extend his rule in the Balkan country, as he vows to provide stability amid war raging in Ukraine.

The country of around seven million will elect the president, deputies for the 250-seat parliament and cast votes in several municipal contests.

The latest opinion polls see Vucic's centre-right Serbian Progressive Party maintaining its control over the parliament, while the president is poised to win a second term.

"Personally, I see a stable progress and I voted in accor-



President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic casts his vote at a polling station in Belgrade, during general elections on Sunday (AFP)

dance with this opinion," Milovan Krstic, a 52-year-old government employee, told AFP after casting his vote in Belgrade.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine

has cast a long shadow over a contest that observers had earlier predicted would focus on environmental issues, corruption and rights. Vucic has deftly used

the return of war in Europe along with the coronavirus pandemic to his advantage, promising voters continued stability amid uncertain headwinds.

"We expect a huge victory. That's what we worked for in the past four or five years, and we believe that we will continue with the great efforts and the development of this country," the president said after casting his ballot early on Sunday.

Only a few months ago, the opposition seemed to have gained momentum.

In January, Vucic axed a controversial lithium mine project following mass protests that saw tens of thousands take to the streets. The move was a rare de-

feat for Vucic who has rotated through a range of positions, including prime minister, president and deputy premier along with a stint as the defence chief during a decade in power.

The polls predict that he will win again on Sunday even as the opposition hopes a high turnout could force a run-off.

Analysts, however, say the opposition has little chance of dethroning Vucic or eating away at his coalition in the parliament, which holds a lion's share of the seats. The president has also carefully managed the country's response to the war in Ukraine by officially condemning Russia at the United Nations.

AFP

'Not forgotten': Prisoners prep to vote in French election

Flcury-Merogis, France - When he was sent to prison six months ago, Dylan thought he had lost his civic rights along with his freedom.

So when prison staff woke him up from a nap one day to hand him candidate manifestos for this month's presidential election in France, he was taken aback.

"They knocked at the door, and that's how I found out that I can vote even while in prison," said Dylan whose name has been changed by AFP, along with those of the other prisoners cited in the article.

Dylan is incarcerated in Europe's biggest prison in Flcury-Merogis, south of Paris.

Over recent weeks, staff have been busy helping inmates learn about their right to vote, access information about candidates, fill in the paperwork and join discussion groups about who they would like to see running the country next.

France considers any court decision to disenfranchise convicts to be an additional punishment, which has to be proportional to the severity of the crime.

In several other European countries, prisoners are always allowed to vote, including in Scandinavia, Spain and Ireland.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Britain, which used to ban all prisoners from voting in any election and made some changes - notably allowing people released on temporary licence - to vote in response to a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights.

Of the 777 prisoners in Dylan's D1 cell block, 460 have the right to vote, and 260 have registered.

Now that he knows about his rights, Dylan said he hoped his vote, 'however insignificant', will help influence national politics beyond the 3km-long prison walls surrounding the 3,600 in-



An inmate (right) signs a register of electors after receiving presidential candidates manifestos in his cell from prison guards at the Flcury-Merogis prison some 30km south of Paris, on March 31 (AFP)

mates here.

Another inmate, Amin, leafed through the manifestos, first President Emmanuel Macron's, then that of Socialist

candidate Anne Hidalgo, and finally that of Eric Zemmour, a far-right contestant.

"That allows us to compare them," the 49-year-old said.

"You can read them a few times", whereas on television, his main source of news, "you can watch a programme only once."

'Not to vote blindly'

Amin, a father of four who is to be released in 2025, said the information campaign 'helps us not to vote blindly' and to think of the future, specifically 'the environment, and education'.

According to prison director Franck Linares, a deprivation of civic rights for convicted criminals is 'very rare' in France.

"Inmates remain citizens while in prison, and also after their release," he said.

Helping them vote is part of the prison administration's mission to 'integrate and re-integrate' inmates by ensuring that prison time is 'not wasted', Linares added. Amin was given three options to cast his vote in the presidential voting rounds on April 10 and 24: Vote outside the prison by special permission at a regular ballot box, vote by proxy, or - for the first time in a presidential election - by postal vote.

"We may be locked up, but

this makes us feel like citizens, respected, and not forgotten," Amin said.

Patrick, on his ninth criminal conviction, said he would vote for the first time, at 40.

Zakari, 25, said the idea of voting gave him the feeling of being 'a responsible person'.

Maxime, 24, arrived too late to register for the postal vote, having been imprisoned only four days earlier.

"What about the legislative election?" in June, asked a social worker, sent by the integration and probation service SPIP, during an information gathering.

"Now you've got me stumped. I don't know what that is," replied Maxime.

Hakim, 20, admitted: "Legislative? I've never even heard that word before."

He only came to the meeting to get out of his cell, Hakim said, but quickly got interested in the democratic process.

AFP

Heavy rains, landslides kill 14 in Brazil

The new incidents come six weeks after flash floods and landslides killed 233 people in Petropolis

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - Torrential downpours triggered flash floods and landslides across Brazil's Rio de Janeiro state, killing at least 14 people including eight children, and leaving five missing, authorities said on Saturday.

Two days of heavy rain have battered a broad swathe of the southeastern state's Atlantic coast, the latest in a series of deadly storms in Brazil that experts say are being aggravated by climate change.

More rain is forecast for the region in the coming days.

The victims included a mother and six of her children, who were buried when a landslide swept away their home, officials said.

President Jair Bolsonaro said on Facebook the federal government had sent military aircraft to help the rescue effort and dispatched national disaster response secretary Alexandre Lucas to the state of 17.5mn people. The new incidents come six weeks after flash floods and landslides killed 233 people in the scenic city of Petropolis, the Brazilian empire's 19th-century summer capital, also in Rio state. This time, the areas hit hardest included the tourist town of



Rescue workers are seen at the site of a landslide in which a mother and six of her children were killed, in Paraty, Rio de Janeiro state, on Saturday (AFP)

Paraty, a seaside colonial city known for its picturesque cobblestone streets and colorful

houses.

Officials there said a landslide in the Ponta Negra neighbour-

hood had killed a mother and six of her children, ages two, five, eight, 10, 15 and 17.

A seventh child was rescued alive and taken to the hospital, where he was in stable condi-

tion, they said.

Another four people were injured in the incident.

Six more victims, including at least two children, were killed in the city of Angra dos Reis, where officials declared a 'maximum alert' and state of emergency after landslides devastated the Monsuaba neighbourhood.

Several people were rescued alive, while another five remain missing, they said.

Mayor Fernando Jordao said emergency workers were installing floodlights to continue the search-and-rescue operation through the night if necessary.

"Residents have been working side-by-side with us on the search," the mayor told a press conference.

"We'll continue working hard," he said.

In Mesquita, 40km northwest of Rio de Janeiro city, a 38-year-old man was electrocuted trying to help another person escape the flooding, officials and media reports said.

Record rains

The storms turned streets into rivers on Friday night in several cities including Rio, the state capital, sweeping up cars and triggering landslides - a frequent

tragedy in the rainy season, especially in poor hillside communities. TV channel Globo News carried images of a family evacuating two young children through the floodwaters in a styrofoam cooler in the Rio suburb of Belford Roxo, while residents posted videos on social media of small alligators swimming through flooded streets.

A hospital in the suburb of Nova Iguaçu was badly flooded, turning the corridors of its intensive care unit into streams.

Officials in Angra said the city had received up to 800mm of rain in 48 hours in some areas, 'levels never before registered in the municipality'.

Experts say rainy season downpours in Brazil are being augmented by La Nina - the cyclical cooling of the Pacific Ocean - and by climate change.

Because a hotter atmosphere holds more water, global warming increases the risk and intensity of flooding from extreme rainfall.

In December, storms killed 24 people in the northeastern state of Bahia, and in January, floods and landslides claimed at least 28 lives in southeastern Brazil, mostly in Sao Paulo state.

AFP

Iran says agreement in Vienna nuke talks 'close'

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said on Sunday an agreement is 'close' in paused negotiations to restore the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers.

Iran has been engaged in negotiations to revive the deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China directly, and the United States indirectly.

"We are close to an agreement in the negotiations," Amir-Abdollahian said during a phone conversation with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, according to a statement by the ministry.

Iranian and US delegations in Vienna do not communicate directly, but messages are passed through other participants and the European

Union, the talks' coordinator.

"We have passed on our proposals on the remaining issues to the American side through the EU senior negotiator, and now the ball is in US court," Iran's top diplomat added.

According to the Iranian statement, Guterres stressed the importance of the Vienna talks and expressed hope that the parties would reach an agreement as soon as possible.

Nearly a year of negotiations brought the parties close to renewing the landmark 2015 accord.

But the talks were halted last month, after Russia demanded guarantees that Western sanctions imposed following its invasion of Ukraine would not damage its trade with Iran.

AFP

Lebanese flee crisis seeking jobs in Iraq

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq, once synonymous with conflict and chaos, is becoming a land of opportunity for Lebanese job-seekers fleeing a deep economic crisis back home.

Akram Johari is one of thousands who fled Lebanon's tumbling currency and skyrocketing poverty rates.

Last year, he packed his bags and boarded a plane from Beirut to Baghdad, using social media to search for opportunities.

"I didn't have enough time to look for a job in the Gulf," the 42-year-old said, explaining why he eschewed the more traditional path for those seeking economic opportunities in the region.

With its relative proximity and visas on arrival for Lebanese, the Iraqi capital seemed a good option. "I had to take quick action, and so I came to Baghdad and began searching for work on Instagram," Johari said, speaking in a restaurant he has run for about a month.

Lebanon is grappling with an



Lebanese ophthalmologist George Cherfan (left) speaks to Michael Cherfan at Beirut Eye and ENT specialist hospital in Baghdad, on March 2 (AFP)

unprecedented financial crisis that the World Bank says is of a scale usually associated with war. Beirut's crisis, driven by years of endemic corruption, has seen Lebanon's currency lose more than 90 per cent of its value against the dollar.

Thousands flock to Iraq

More than 20,000 Lebanese citizens arrived in Iraq between

June 2021 and February 2022, according to the Iraqi authorities.

Lebanon's ambassador in Baghdad, Ali Habhab, said that movement from Lebanon to Iraq 'has recently multiplied'.

There are more than 900 Lebanese businesses now operating in Iraq, the majority of them in the restaurant trade, tourism and health, Habhab said.

In particular, there have been 'dozens of Lebanese doctors who

offer their services' in Iraqi hospitals, he said.

Iraq's decades of conflict - from the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, to the US-led invasion of 2003 and subsequent sectarian conflict, and on to the rise of the Islamic State group in 2014 - means that Baghdad might appear to be an unlikely magnet for those seeking to build a new life.

But since the country declared victory over IS in 2017, Iraq has slowly begun to recover its stability. Today, streets in Baghdad that once witnessed atrocities are buzzing with shops lining main thoroughfares and cafes open late into the night.

According to Iraqi economic expert Ali al-Rawi, many Lebanese companies came to Iraq because they 'know the investment environment well', while many foreign companies from other countries 'fear investing' because of its violent past.

"There is a lot of space for Lebanese enterprises in the Iraqi economy," he said.

Lebanese firms flourish

Lebanon was once a prime destination for medical tourism, as Iraqis flocked to better equipped medical centres in Beirut and other cities.

But, as with other sectors, Lebanon's economic crisis has hit healthcare.

The Beirut Eye & ENT Specialist Hospital was once popular with Iraqi patients, but an official at the hospital, Michael Cherfan, said that 'many doctors had left Lebanon'.

The hospital responded to the crisis in the way many Lebanese have - by opening a branch in Baghdad, sparing Iraqis the trip to Beirut.

"Our doctors come on a rotating basis," Cherfan said.

"Every week, one or two doctors come and do consultations and surgeries, earn some money and then return to Lebanon, which helps offset some of their losses."

AFP

Stung by crippling drought, Morocco's bees face disaster

Inzerki, Maroc - Morocco's village of Inzerki is proud to claim it has the world's oldest and largest collective beehive, but instead of buzzing with springtime activity, the colonies have collapsed amid crippling drought.

Beekeeper Brahim Chatoui says he has lost almost a third of his hives in just two months - and he is not alone.

"At this time of year, this area would normally be buzzing with bees," said Chatoui, sweating under a blazing springtime sun. "Today, they're dying at a terrifying rate."

The North African kingdom has seen a dramatic spike in mass die-offs of the critical pollinators, a phenomenon called 'colony collapse disorder'.

Worldwide, experts say such sudden mass deaths of bees are often linked to the destruction of nature and the rampant use of pesticides.

But authorities in Morocco say these collapses are caused by the worst drought to hit the

country in 40 years, which has decimated the plants on which bees rely for food.

'Unprecedented' spike

The crisis is so acute that the government released 130mn dirhams (US\$13mn), to support beekeepers and investigate the cause of the bee deaths.

Morocco's National Food Safety Office, which carried out the investigation, ruled out disease as a reason.

Instead, it blamed the 'unprecedented' spike in hive collapses on an intense drought driven by climate change.

Inzerki's unique collective beehive sits on a sunny hillside in the heart of the Arganae Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO-protected 2.5mn-hectare region, some 415km southwest of the capital Rabat.

The complex is striking: A five-storeyed structure of wooden struts and dry mud stretch along a hillside, each



This file photo shows a beekeeper working at the Inzerki Apiary in the village of Inzerki, 82km north of Agadir, in the Souss-Massa region in Morocco on February 26, 2020 (AFP)

compartment home to a cylindrical wicker hive, covered with a mix of earth and cow dung.

Experts say it is the oldest traditional, collective beehive in the world, dating back to 1850, but today it is under threat amid a

changing climate.

"This year we hope for rain, because I have lost 40 hives so far," Chataoui said.

Bee expert Antonin Adam, who has studied the insects in southwestern Morocco, also

blamed the collapse on the drought.

But he added the problem may have been exacerbated by 'the bees' vulnerability to diseases, nomadic pastoral practices, intensive agriculture and

the country's desire to increase its honey production'.

That desire is clearly visible in agriculture ministry figures.

Honey output has risen by 69 per cent in a decade, from 4.7 tonnes in 2009 to almost eight tonnes in 2019, generating revenues of over €100mn.

But it is not only Inzerki's apiary that is in trouble.

Mohamed Choudani, of the UAM beekeepers union, said the crisis was hitting bee populations across the country.

Last summer, Morocco's 36,000 beekeepers were managing some 910,000 hives, up by 60 per cent since 2009, according to official figures.

But Choudani said that since last August, 100,000 colonies had been lost in the central region of Beni Mellal-Khenifra alone. Bees and other pollinators are vital for the reproduction of more than three-quarters of food crops and flowering plants.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) say

bees play an 'essential role... in keeping people and the planet healthy', with the UN saying they 'serve as sentinels for emergent environmental risks, signalling the health of local ecosystems'.

For the villagers of Inzerki, the collapse of hives is an ecological and economic disaster - but also a crisis for their unique heritage.

Chatoui, the beekeeper, said many Inzerki residents can't afford to revive the hives they have lost. "Some families have decided just to give up on beekeeping completely," he said.

The hives at Inzerki are in trouble. Parts of the structure, recently listed as a national heritage site, are sagging.

Geographer Hassan Benalayat says the neglect is due to several factors on top of climate change, including the arrival of modern agriculture and a general exodus from the countryside.

Around 80 families in the village once kept bees. Today there are less than 20.

AFP

Pakistan to go to the polls after PM Khan foils sacking attempt

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan will go to the polls to elect a new government within three months after Prime Minister Imran Khan foiled an attempt to boot him from office on Sunday by getting the president to dissolve the national assembly.

On a day of high drama, the assembly deputy speaker refused to accept a motion of no confidence in the government, as Khan appeared on TV to say there had been 'foreign interference' in Pakistan's democratic institutions.

"I have sent advice to the president to dissolve the assemblies. We will go to the public and hold elections, and let the nation decide," he said.

The presidency - a largely ceremonial office - acceded hours later. No premier of Pakistan has ever completed a full term, and Khan has been facing the biggest challenge to his rule since being elected in 2018, with opponents accusing him of economic mismanagement and bungling foreign policy.

On Sunday parliament was due to debate a no-confidence motion that looked certain to succeed, but the deputy speaker - a Khan loyalist - refused to accept it, causing uproar in the chamber.

The move appeared to blindside the opposition, who had confidently predicted they had enough votes to boot Khan from office.

'Spark anarchy'

"This day will be remembered as a black day in Pakistan's constitutional history," said Shehbaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), who had been tipped to replace Khan if the vote had succeeded.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) effectively lost its majority in the 342-member



Activists of ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) shout slogans during a protest in front of the National Assembly in Islamabad on Sunday (AFP)

On a day of high drama, the deputy speaker refused to accept a motion of no confidence in the government, as Khan appeared on TV to say there had been foreign interference in Pakistan's democratic institutions

assembly last week when a coalition partner said its seven lawmakers would vote with the opposition.

More than a dozen PTI members had also indicated they would cross the floor.

Khan has accused the opposition of conspiring with 'foreign powers' to remove him because he will not take the West's side on global issues against Russia and China.

Earlier this week he accused the United States of meddling in Pakistan's affairs.

Local media had reported that Khan received a briefing letter from Islamabad's ambassador to Washington recording a senior US official saying they felt relations would be better if Khan left office.

In Washington last week State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters there was 'no truth' to the allegations, but Khan insisted on Sunday it was 'a move to change the regime', and accused the opposition of betrayal.

"This betrayal was taking

place in front of the entire nation... traitors were sitting and planning this conspiracy," he added.

Opposition gathers

The opposition is headed by the PML-N and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) - two usually feuding dynastic groups that dominated national politics for decades until Khan forged a coalition against them.

Khan was elected after promising to sweep away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism, but has struggled to maintain support with inflation skyrocketing, a feeble rupee and crippling debt.

Some analysts said Khan had also lost the crucial support of the military - claims both sides deny - but it is unlikely he would have pulled off Sunday's ma-

noeuvre without its knowledge, if not blessing.

There have been four military coups - and at least as many unsuccessful ones - since independence in 1947, and the country has spent more than three decades under army rule.

"The best option in this situation are fresh elections to enable the new government to handle economic, political and external problems faced by the country," said Talat Masood, a general turned political analyst.

Khan, an ex-international cricket star who in 1992 captained Pakistan to their only World Cup win, had hinted on Saturday he still had a card to play. "I have a plan for tomorrow, you should not be worried about it. I will show them and will defeat them in the assembly."

AFP



Army soldiers stand guard at a checkpoint, after authorities imposed a weekend nationwide curfew, in Colombo on Sunday (AFP)

Protesters defy weekend curfew in Sri Lanka

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Armed troops in Sri Lanka blocked a Sunday opposition march that defied a weekend curfew to protest the island nation's worsening economic crisis, after authorities imposed a social media blackout to contain public dissent. The South Asian nation is facing severe shortages of food, fuel and other essentials, along with record inflation and crippling power cuts, in its most painful downturn since independence from Britain in 1948.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa imposed a state of emergency on Friday, the day after a crowd attempted to storm his home in the capital Colombo, and a nationwide curfew is in effect until Monday morning.

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Sri Lanka's main opposition alliance, denounced a social media blackout aimed at quelling intensifying public demonstrations, and said it was time for the government to resign.

Troops armed with automatic assault rifles moved to stop a protest by opposition lawmakers and hundreds of their supporters attempting to march to the capital's Independence Square.

The road was barricaded a few hundred metres from the home of opposition leader Sajith Premadasa and the crowd engaged in a tense stand-off with

security forces for nearly two hours before dispersing peacefully. "President Rajapaksa better realise that the tide has already turned on his autocratic rule," SJB lawmaker Harsha de Silva told AFP at the rally.

Fellow SJB legislator Eran Wickramaratne condemned the state of emergency declaration and the presence of troops on city streets.

"We can't allow a military takeover," he said. "They should know we are still a democracy."

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp were among the platforms shut down on Sunday on the orders of defence authorities, internet service providers told their subscribers.

Private media outlets reported that the chief of Sri Lanka's internet regulator resigned after the order went into effect.

The streets of the capital stayed largely empty on Sunday, apart from the opposition protest and long lines of vehicles queued for fuel at service stations.

Mass protests had been called on social media before the ban went into effect, and organisers have since postponed the rallies until after the curfew is lifted on Monday. Small crowds defied the curfew on Saturday night to hold peaceful demonstrations.

AFP

China reports 13,000 coronavirus cases, most since first wave peak

Shanghai, China - China reported 13,000 COVID cases on Sunday, the most since the peak of the first pandemic wave over two years ago, as health officials said they have found a suspected new subtype of the Omicron variant in the Shanghai area.

China's 'zero-COVID' strategy is under extreme pressure as the virus whips across the country.

Until March, China had successfully kept the daily caseload down to double or triple digits, with hard, localised lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions. But cases have surged over recent weeks to thousands each day, especially in the outbreak epicentre of Shanghai, where streets were eerily empty on Sunday as 25mn people stayed in under lockdown orders.

Officials in Suzhou, a city 30 minutes west of Shanghai, have detected a mutation of the Omicron variant not found in local or international databases, state media reported on Sunday.

"This means a new variant of Omicron has been discovered locally," Xinhua said, citing health official Zhang Jun, deputy director of the Suzhou Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

The current outbreak is also testing the patience of the Chinese towards tough restrictions, at a time when much of the world has re-opened.

On Sunday, the 1.5mn residents of Baicheng in northeast China joined the ranks of tens of millions of other Chinese who



Workers wearing protective gear walk on a street during the second stage of a COVID-19 lockdown in Jing'an district in Shanghai on Sunday (AFP)

have endured some form of lockdown over the last month, disrupting work and damaging the economy.

China recorded 13,146 cases on Sunday, the National Health Commission said in a statement, with 'no new deaths' reported.

It is the country's highest daily infection tally since mid-February 2020. Nearly 70 per cent of the national caseload was found in Shanghai, the commission said, after mass testing the metropolis' 25mn residents.

City authorities have conceded they are struggling to contain the outbreak, with thousands now in state quarantine and reports circulating of health workers being stretched.

Vice Premier Sun Chunlan urged 'resolute and swift moves' to snuff out the outbreak after a visit to Shanghai, Xinhua reported on Sunday.

Anger is rising among residents over lockdowns that were initially planned to last just for

four days, but now appear likely to drag on for several more as fresh rounds of mass testing are carried out.

Parents have expressed fears of separation from their children in the event of a positive test, while residents have griped about a lack of fresh food and the ability to walk dogs outside.

China, the country where the coronavirus was first detected in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019, is among the last remaining places following a zero-COVID approach to the pandemic.

The outbreak has taken on an increasingly serious economic dimension, trimming analysts' growth projections as factories close and millions of consumers are ordered indoors.

Shanghai's restrictions threaten to snarl supply chains, with shipping giant Maersk saying some depots in the city remained closed.

AFP

Pope evokes Malta's welcome of St Paul in migrant appeal

Valletta, Malta - Pope Francis visited the grotto on Sunday where St. Paul lived after washing up on Malta, recalling the welcome the Apostle received and urging better treatment of modern day arrivals on the Mediterranean island.

On the final day of his week-end trip to Malta, the 85-year-old pontiff will also hold open-air mass before visiting a migrant centre that will soon host refugees from the Ukraine war.

According to Christian tradition, Paul was shipwrecked on Malta in 60 AD while en route to Rome, and performed several miracles in his three months there. Following in the footsteps of former popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Francis visited the holy grotto in Rabat, lighting a candle and saying a prayer.

He recalled how Paul and his fellow travellers were welcomed, even though 'no one knew their names, their place of birth or their social status'.

He called on God to 'help us to recognise from afar those in need, struggling amidst the waves of the sea, dashed against the reefs of unknown shores' and grant that 'our compassion be more than empty words'.

The pope, who last summer underwent colon surgery and cancelled an event in February due to acute knee pain, appeared to have trouble walking during the visit, where he also met the sick and disabled at the con-



Pope Francis blesses attendees as he arrives in the popemobile car to celebrate mass outside the St. Publius parish church at Piazzale dei Granai in Floriana, Valletta, Malta, on Sunday (AFP)

nected Basilica of St. Paul.

Safe harbour

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has overshadowed the pope's first trip to Catholic-majority Malta, a voyage delayed two years by coronavirus. Addressing politicians and diplomats on Saturday, he warned that 'some potentate, sadly caught up in anachronistic claims of nationalist interests, is provoking and fomenting conflicts' in a thinly veiled accusation against Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Asked by a reporter about a possible trip to Kyiv, he said a visit to Ukraine's capital was 'on the table'. The war has caused the worst refugee crisis in Europe

since World War II, which feeds into a key theme of Francis' nine-year papacy - the need to welcome those fleeing war, poverty or the effects of climate change.

Malta is on the frontline of the route from North Africa into Europe and thousands of people who risked the crossing in overcrowded boats have ended up here. But charity groups have accused Malta of turning a blind eye to desperate people in its waters, and the pope on Saturday reminded the archipelago of its status as a 'safe harbour', while adding that other countries must also step in.

"The growing migration emergency - here we can think of the refugees from war-torn Ukraine

- calls for a broad-based and shared response," he said.

After visiting the grotto, the pope headed to Floriana, near the capital Valletta, where he was set to conduct mass for a 10,000-strong crowd of followers.

Awaiting him among the crowd was 67-year-old Anna Balzan from the nearby city of Qormi and her extended family. Over her shoulders was draped a Vatican flag she purchased during John Paul II's visit in 1990.

Later on Sunday, Francis will return to the theme of migrants by visiting the John XXIII Peace Lab, which is preparing for the arrival of Ukrainian refugees.

AFP

OXYTOCIN

CUDDLE CHEMICAL

Scientists who spent years spraying oxytocin up the noses of lions found the big cats became much friendlier with their neighbours and less prone to roaring at strangers when dosed up on the so-called 'love hormone'. The results, published in the journal iScience recently, could have major benefits for conservation efforts as unfamiliar prides are increasingly forced by urban sprawl to live together in reserves.

"I've always loved lions," neuroscientist and first author Jessica Burkhart told AFP, explaining she became involved in the research because she had grown tired of examining the animals' brains in the lab and wanted to study them in real life.

Cats, in general, have a reputation for independence, but lions buck that trend - living socially in prides as they win and defend prized territories on the African savanna.

"If you think about male lions, for example, they will leave the pride when they're a couple of years old and they will meet up with other male lions they don't know and they're not related to, and they will form lifelong bonds," said Burkhart.

These types of behaviours indicated that lions - unlike solitary cheetahs or leopards - are biologically programmed to be social in some situations, making them an interesting test species for oxytocin intervention.

Wellbeing and happiness

Across mammals, oxytocin is the chief molecule strengthening social bonds. Sometimes called the 'cuddle chemical', it surges inside the brain of a mother when she gazes into her newborn's eyes, promoting feelings of wellbeing and happiness - while causing the baby to want to latch on to its mother's breast.

Similar effects have been documented in other species, as well as between dogs and their human owners.

Therapists even suggest that couples experiencing problems can benefit from increased eye contact, which releases oxytocin.

Working on a wildlife reserve in Dinokeng, South Africa in the summers of 2018 and 2019, Burkhart and colleagues from the University of Minnesota ran a test using hunks of raw meat to lure lions to a fence.

The hormone had to be sprayed directly up the nose, using a device that looks like an antique perfume bottle, so it would travel straight to the brain.

After the treatment, the 23 lions given oxytocin became more tolerant of lions in their space. This was measured by seeing how close a lion who has possession of a desired object, in this case a toy, will let others approach it.

"After the lions were treated with oxytocin, and we gave them their favourite pumpkin toy to play with, we saw the average distance between them drop from about seven metres with no treatment to about 3.5 metres after oxytocin was administered," said Burkhart.

Lions didn't roar back when played recorded roars of unfamiliar intruders - unlike those in a control group who either weren't sprayed with anything, or were sprayed with a saline solution.

Conservation benefits

The lowered hostility towards strangers was a particularly encouraging finding, said Burkhart, because oxytocin is known to have a dark side in humans; while it promotes positive feelings to those within a group, it can increase rivalry against outsiders.

The treatment could be helpful in a number of scenarios, she said. First, it could help bond unfamiliar lions rescued from abusive situations, such as from circuses or zoos in war zones, who are then placed in sanctuaries.

Second, as cities in Africa sprawl and encroach upon lions' territory, conservationists are forced to transport the cats to fenced refuges where unfamiliar prides are housed together - and oxytocin might help prevent conflict.

It could also help relocations to the wild, helping lions "become more inclined to their new social environment so they're more curious and less fearful, leading to more successful bonding," said Burkhart.

One fear is that unscrupulous operators - in the vein of infamous 'Tiger King' Joe Exotic - might try to use the chemical to help run zoos that promote cub petting, heavily criticised by animal welfare advocates.

"The truth is, people are corrupt...but hopefully, in this case it'll help more than it'll ever hurt," said Burkhart.

AFP

The 'love hormone' oxytocin turns fierce lions into fond cats, allowing for more social interaction within a pride

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SINGAPORE REOPENS BORDERS FOR FULLY VACCINATED INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS AFTER A TWO-YEAR COVID-19 CLOSURE



Travellers queue for self check-in before departure at Changi International Airport in Singapore

I was a ‘bit stressed’ at the prospect of doing a lot of paperwork to travel again but in the end found the process really easy

DIANA MATHIAS

Singapore fully reopened its borders to all vaccinated visitors Friday after a two-year coronavirus closure, with arrivals saying it felt ‘wonderful’ to travel again without onerous restrictions.

The aviation hub, a key gateway for people arriving in Asia, joins other countries in the region that have recently dropped travel curbs as they shift to living with COVID-19.

Previously, only travellers from a handful of places could enter Singapore without quarantining, but from Friday, all vaccinated arrivals just need a negative COVID-19 test.

The city-state’s Changi Airport buzzed with activity as passengers streamed out of the arrival area, while hundreds were lining up in the departure zone to make trips outside Singapore.

“It’s wonderful,” Aldo Pizzini, a 63-year-old Italian businessman who had flown in from Milan, told AFP. “I took the first opportunity to fly today, (now) that much of the restrictions are lifted... We are coming back to normality.”

Diana Mathias, who is from French Guiana, and lives in Abu Dhabi, was visiting Singapore for a holiday with her mother. “I feel really happy because it’s a long time since I flew,” she said.

The 38-year-old said she was a

‘bit stressed’ at the prospect of doing a lot of paperwork to travel again but in the end found the process really easy.

Under the new Vaccinated Travel Framework, the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) will allow all fully vaccinated travellers from any country or region to enter Singapore quarantine-free, as long as they have not visited any countries or regions on the MoH’s Restricted Category in the past seven days. However, there are currently no countries or regions on the Restricted Category.

CAAS has also eased cross-border measures to make air travel more convenient for travellers under the Vaccinated Travel Framework. Fully vaccinated travellers henceforth do not require any entry approvals to enter Singapore. This means that travellers will no longer be required to apply for a Vaccinated Travel Pass (VTP) or Air Travel Pass (ATP) for entry into Singapore as was the case till March 31.

The existing SG Arrival Card (SGAC) will, however, be necessary for all travellers to Singapore and can be completed easily. There will be three sections on the SGAC - personal particulars, vaccination status and health declaration which must be completed before taking up travel.

AFP

BORDERS WITH MALAYSIA REOPEN

Borders also reopened fully in neighbouring Malaysia on Friday, and thousands of cars and motorcycles flooded across a one-kilometre causeway that separates it from Singapore.

The causeway, one of the world’s busiest land borders, had already partially reopened last year although some curbs were still in place. Previously, tourists were barred from entering Malaysia, but vaccinated travellers can now do so with only a negative COVID-19 test.

Bo Lingam - group CEO of leading regional carrier AirAsia, which is based in Malaysia - predicted a ‘surge’ in people flying. The reopening of borders is “a joy for me and our

AirAsia staff who had to face a lot of hardship during the pandemic,” he told AFP. “From today, it is all about flying the blue skies and an end to our planes sitting on the tarmac.”

Just minutes before the reopening, vehicles honked as the first few motorcyclists entered the departure lanes at Woodlands Checkpoint. Many cheered and waved their hands as they approached the barricades, drivers waited in the queue, many waving at other motorists.

Immigration and Checkpoints Authority’s (ICA) senior assistant commissioner Chua Tuan Meng said the reopening of the land border marked ‘a significant milestone towards living with COVID-19.’



Benzema, Felix shine as Real and Atletico win

Real Madrid beat Celta Vigo to get back to winning ways, Atletico ease past Alaves

Madrid, Spain - Karim Benzema and Joao Felix ensured Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid claimed morale-boosting victories in La Liga on Saturday before facing the Premier League's heavyweights next week in the Champions League quarter-finals.

Benzema missed one penalty but scored two as Real Madrid defeated Celta Vigo 2-1 to get back to winning ways ahead of Wednesday's crunch meeting with Chelsea.

And Atletico Madrid sailed past Alaves 4-1 before their trip to Pep Guardiola's Manchester City on Tuesday, the in-form Felix scoring twice, with Luis Suarez adding a brace of his own after coming on as a substitute.

Felix now has seven goals in his last eight games for Atletico and the 22-year-old is likely to be key if Diego Simeone's men are to spring a surprise against City and reach the semi-finals.

Madrid's victory at Balaidos will calm any nerves in La Liga's title race too, allowing the leaders to draw a line under their thrashing at the hands of a resurgent Barcelona before the international break.

And, despite an imperfect performance, the win should restore confidence ahead of the first leg away at Chelsea, with Thomas Tuchel's side now recovering from a humiliation of their own, after they were earlier thumped 4-1 at home by Brentford.

Chelsea, who outplayed Real Madrid over two semi-final legs last year, will be a much sterner test than Celta and Carlo Ancelotti's side will almost certainly not have the benefit of being awarded three penalties at Stamford Bridge.

"I don't know if we deserved to win, I had to make two big



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema celebrates after converting a penalty during their Spanish League match against Celta Vigo on Saturday (AFP)

saves in the first half," said Real "keeper Thibaut Courtois.

"But winning is important. Chelsea lost today at home so they will want to come back strong on Wednesday. We have to give more. We lacked a bit of intensity today and we can't do that because that's one of Chelsea's strengths. We have to be aggressive."

Real Madrid's chances against Chelsea are improved immeasurably by the recovery of Benzema, and also Ferland Mendy, who offers so much more solidity at left back than either Nacho Fernandez or Marcelo.

Benzema marked his return from injury with a brace that

I don't know if we deserved to win, I had to make two big saves in the first half. But winning is important. Chelsea lost at home so they will want to comeback strong on Wednesday.

THIBAUT COURTOIS

takes his goal tally for the season to 39.

Any hopes Barcelona had of causing a collapse may already have been dashed, with Real Madrid now 12 points ahead of Sevilla and 15 in front of the Catalans, who have two games in hand, the first of them against Sevilla on Sunday.

Barca and Sevilla are most

likely now fighting it out for second. Atletico climb to third.

Ancelotti's positive test for Covid-19 last week meant he was unable to take his place on the sideline.

Madrid found the breakthrough in the 19th minute when Eder Militao had his right foot taken away from him by Nolito.

Benzema rolled it right. Matias

Dituro dived left. But Celta were undeterred and shortly after half-time, they pulled level.

Madrid were awarded a second penalty after Rodrygo made sure he tumbled over the planted left leg of Jeison Murillo. Benzema stepped up again but Dituro made the block with his right elbow.

The contest was in the balance, with Madrid straining to reassert their advantage. Celta could barely believe it when, in the 70th minute, Gonzalez blew again for a third spot-kick, penalising Kevin Vazquez for obstructing Mendy, and Benzema found the target.

AFP



West Ham United's English defender Aaron Cresswell celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Everton at the London Stadium (AFP)

West Ham revive top four bid to leave Everton in relegation danger

London, United Kingdom - West Ham climbed back into the race for a top four finish in the Premier League as Jarrod Bowen sealed a 2-1 win against Everton that kept the visitors deep in relegation trouble on Sunday.

David Moyes' side moved up to fifth place thanks to Bowen's second half winner at the London Stadium.

Aaron Cresswell's fine free-kick put West Ham ahead in the first half before Mason Holgate equalised soon after the interval.

Bowen, back after a month out with a foot injury, restored West Ham's lead and Everton were effectively out of the contest when Michael Keane was sent off midway through the second half.

Everton's fifth defeat in their last six league games leaves them languishing just three points above the relegation zone.

Frank Lampard's team have two games in hand on third bottom Watford, but their proud record of playing in the top-flight every season since 1954-55 remains under serious threat.

Lampard publicly questioned his players' character after their FA Cup quarter-final thrashing at Crystal Palace.

They were more committed in their first outing since then, but

there was no improvement in the worst away record in England's four professional divisions this term.

A trip to second bottom Burnley on Wednesday looms as a vital clash in Everton's fight for survival.

Beaten in two of their previous three league matches, West Ham are now just three points behind fourth placed Arsenal, who face Crystal Palace on Monday in the first of their three games in hand on the Hammers.

While West Ham remain outsiders to qualify for the Champions League, they cannot be ruled out of the race.

Everton angst

Lampard suffered a blow before the match had even started when Donny van de Beek was injured in the warm-up.

There was no sign of Everton's luck improving when Richarlison blew a golden opportunity to put them ahead, rounding Hammers keeper Lukasz Fabianski, only to hesitate long enough for Ryan Fredericks to clear.

West Ham made the most of that escape as they took the lead in the 32nd minute when Cresswell curled a superb free-kick into the top corner from 25 yards.

AFP

Bayern rout Freiburg but 12 men on pitch could prove costly

Berlin, Germany - Leon Goretzka scored on his first appearance for four months as Bayern Munich romped to a controversial 4-1 win at Freiburg in a Bundesliga match overshadowed by a substitute mix-up on Saturday.

Four days before their Champions League quarter-final, first leg at Villarreal, Bayern put in a strong performance on the road.

However, there could be consequences for Bayern who briefly had 12 players on the pitch after a mistake following a late double substitution.

"We drew the referee's attention to the fact that Bayern had eleven outfield players on the pitch," Freiburg director Jochen Saier told Sky.

"That was bizarre, I haven't

seen that before."

Freiburg need to lodge a formal complaint for there to be repercussions for Bayern.

Referee Christian Dingert noted the incident - which he described as a "totally confused situation" - in his match report and the official told Sky: "Now the DFB (German Football Association) must decide."

Under league rules, such a breach of the substitutes regulations could see the result being reversed with Freiburg awarded the three points. When Niklas Suele and Marcel Sabitzer, who later scored, both came on in the 86th minute, only one player came off, leaving Bayern with 12 men on the pitch for 17 seconds.

AFP

Napoli see off Atalanta to move level with Milan



Napoli's Eljif Elmas (left) celebrates with team-mate Hirving Lozano after scoring against Atalanta on Sunday. (AFP)

Bergamo, Italy - Napoli moved level with Serie A leaders AC Milan on Sunday thanks to a 3-1 win at Atalanta which put distance between them and champions Inter Milan ahead of their showdown at Juventus.

Hunting a first league title since 1990 when Diego Maradona was still strutting his stuff in Naples, Napoli are six points ahead of third-placed Inter after a third straight win which came without suspended star striker Victor Osimhen.

They prevailed in Bergamo thanks to Lorenzo Insigne's early penalty, a sweet Matteo Politano volley eight minutes before half-time and a stunning breakaway finished by Eljif Elmas just as Atalanta were pushing for a leveller. Luciano Spalletti's side sit side-by-side on 66 points with Milan, who host Bologna on Monday night hoping to re-es-

tablish their lead of three and move even further ahead of either Inter or Juve.

Defeat for Atalanta continued their dismal home record this season and leaves the one-time title hopefuls in seventh, eight points behind Juve in fourth and all-but without hope of a place in the Champions League.

Marten De Roon's 59th-minute header looked briefly to have given Atalanta hope of snatching a draw but instead they fell to their fifth loss of the campaign at the Gewiss Stadium, where they have won only four league fixtures.

They have Fiorentina just a point behind them following their 1-0 win over Tuscan rivals Empoli in Sunday's early match.

Udinese win big

Udinese moved 11 points clear of the relegation zone thanks to a 5-

1 home thumping of Cagliari, who lost their fourth straight match and remain just three points above the bottom three.

Joao Pedro opened the scoring for Cagliari in the 32nd minute with his first goal since January but Rodrigo Becao levelled six minutes later and it was one-way traffic after that.

Beto struck twice within minutes either side of half-time when he strode onto Isaac Success' through ball and clipped a beautiful finish over Cragno, and Beto completed his treble with a close-range header with 17 minutes still to play.

Nahuel Molina made absolutely sure with a peach of a goal just before the hour mark when he strode onto Isaac Success' through ball and clipped a beautiful finish over Cragno, and Beto completed his treble with a close-range header with 17 minutes still to play.

AFP

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Livingstone, Chahar star as Punjab win battle of Kings



BRIEF SCORES:
Punjab Kings 180/8 in 20 overs (Shikhar Dhawan 33 (24) 4 x 4, 1x 6; Liam Livingstone 60 (32) 5x4, 5x6; Chris Jordan 23(2) beat Chennai Super Kings 126 all out in 18 overs (Shivam Dube 57 (30) 6 x 4, 4 x 6, MS Dhoni 23 (28) 1x4,1x6; Rahul Chahar 25(3) by 54 runs

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



SUNRISERS HYDERABAD VS LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS

Spin-deficient Sunrisers look to pick up their game against Holder-bolstered Super Giants

Navi Mumbai, India - IPL 2021 featured a highly competitive league stage in which seven of the eight teams nursed realistic hopes of making the playoffs deep into the season. The eighth team, Sunrisers Hyderabad, won just three of their 14 games.

It's still early days in IPL 2022, but Sunrisers are looking a little like the odd team out once again, though it's mostly because they have played just the one game so far while everyone else has played at least two. And that one game, against Rajasthan Royals, was a heavy defeat in which little went right, their bowlers taking a hammering while creating chances off no-balls, and their top order collapsing in a steep chase.

It was the kind of game that can make a team look worse than it actually is. If you treat slumping to 9 for 3 as the kind of thing that can happen to any team on a bad day, there were actually positives that emerged for Sunrisers with the bat, chiefly



Jason Holder has completed his quarantine after arriving in India and trained with his Super Giants teammates on Sunday

the displays of Aiden Markram and Washington Sundar in the middle and lower order. If those two can perform those roles consistently through the season, and if the rest of their line-up performs close to expectations, Sunrisers potentially have a stronger and deeper batting unit than they have had over their last three or four seasons.

The faster bowlers did okay against Royals too, but the spinners struggled. Washington is a defensive bowler best used in tandem with a proper wicket-taker; he was picked as the lead spinner on his Sunrisers debut, and his three overs and sixth bowler Abhishek Sharma's one went for a combined 62 runs.

With the rest of Sunrisers'

Holder has completed his quarantine after arriving in India following the conclusion of West Indies' Test series against England

squad containing no obvious solution, spin is likely to remain a problem area through the season.

Lucknow Super Giants, whom they will face on Monday, won't make their life any easier. They are coming off a successful chase of 211 against Chennai Super Kings, which brought them their first points as an IPL team after a close-run defeat to fellow newcomers Gujarat Titans.

That chase showcased a batting line-up of excellent left-right balance and depth, which is now set to be bolstered further by the

arrival of Jason Holder.

Faced with this line-up and their own deficiencies in the spin department, early breakthroughs could be key to Sunrisers' fortunes.

Holder has completed his quarantine after arriving in India following the conclusion of West Indies' Test series against England, and trained with his Super Giants teammates on Sunday. The allrounder is likely to slot straight into the XI against his old franchise.

Dushmantha Chameera took heavy punishment from Super Kings on Thursday, but Super Giants will likely keep faith in him, since his pace and zip are a valuable commodity in general - as he showed against Titans - but also for a more specific reason. Chameera has met Nicholas Pooran three times in T20 cricket - all in West Indies-Sri Lanka games last year - and dismissed him three times in just six balls.

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