



► NEWS BRIEF

OMAN CONDOLES
PAKISTAN ON MOSQUE
BLAST THAT KILLED 100

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman has expressed its condolences to the government and people of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, as well as families of the victims of a suicide bombing that targeted a mosque in the city of Peshawar and killed 100 people.

It also wished the injured a speedy recovery. In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, Oman iterated its firm stance in condemning all forms of violence and terrorism.

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IPO-bound Abraj, EDO sign deal for oil and gas services

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Rayan al Sulaimani on dressing Queen Bey

Cases referred to Public Prosecution up 14.5%

Total cases	32,277
Felonies	1,378
Referred to courts	19,558
Suspects	40,113
Murder cases	13

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The number of criminal cases received by the Public Prosecution rose to 32,277 in 2022, an increase of 14.5 per cent compared to 2021. Of these, cases of bounced cheques topped the list, while 13 murders were reported in 2022.

Presiding over an annual press conference, H E Nasr bin Khamis al Sawai, Public Prosecutor, said, "Bounced cheques topped the criminal cases of 2022, increasing by 14.9 per cent."

This was followed by cases of violating the Residence Law, the Labour Law, cases related to narcotics and psychotropic substances, information technology crimes, violations of the Consumer Protection Law, violations of human freedom and dignity, cases of theft and extortion of money, fraud, and traffic violations.

About the murders witnessed in Oman last year, H E Sawai said, "A working group has been



Though the number of murders in 2021 and 2022 remained constant at 13, the murders are deeply concerning, particularly the use of knives

DR AHMED BIN SAEED AL SHUKAILI

formed by the Ministry of Social Development, in cooperation with the Public Prosecution, to study each murder case separately, and work is under way."

Though the number of murders in 2021 and 2022 remained constant at 13, Dr Ahmed bin Saeed al Shukaili, Assistant Public Prosecutor, pointed out that the murders are deeply concerning, particularly the use of knives or 'white arms' in these crimes.

The Public Prosecution is liaising with the authorities concerned to investigate the causes.

H E Sawai informed that 30,543 cases of juvenile delinquency were reported last year, 14.7 per cent higher than 2021, while the number of felonies rose 9.8 per cent to 1,378.

The number of cases reported to the Public Funds and Money Laundering Department dropped to 43 last year, and RO12,418,971

was recovered.

Muscat governorate recorded 13,155 criminal cases - 40.8 per cent of the total reported and the highest in the country - while Musandam recorded the lowest number of cases - 188 or 0.6 per cent of the total.

The Public Prosecutor said that the body achieved a completion rate of 97 per cent of the cases referred to it in 2022. It referred 19,558 cases to designated courts and reserved 11,687 cases.

The number of registered suspects rose to 40,113 - 15 per cent higher than 2021 - and expatriate suspects constituted 42.3 per cent of the total number of accused persons.

First Middle East semiconductor summit on Feb 22

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat will host the Middle East's first International Semiconductor Executive Summit on February 22 to 23, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) announced on Tuesday.

A statement issued by MTCIT said that a number of CEOs of companies working in the field of semiconductors and electronic chips from across the world, including Aspeed, Applied Materials and Westerwood Global, and several experts and specialists in the field will participate in the summit.

"The summit aims to shed light on the sultanate as an economically and technologically sound destination that attracts investments, besides enhancing efforts to localise technology."

About the summit, H E Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communications and Information Technology in MTCIT, said, "The organisation of this summit is realisation of the directives of the National Programme for Digital Economy and keeps pace with the sultanate's direction to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040 to develop a digital economy."

He added that the summit will attract investments in the communications and information



The summit will attract investments in the communications and information technology sector

H E DR ALI AL SHIDHANI

technology sector, as well as facilitate establishment of projects in the sultanate, which in turn will enhance economic diversification and contribute to enhancing the gross domestic product.

"We invite companies in this sector to participate in the summit and benefit from the experts and working papers presented," said H E Shidhani.

He informed that the sultanate was chosen to hold the summit because of its strategic location and its infrastructure. "The sultanate is moving towards diversifying its economy by promoting industries related to modern technologies."

Airport passengers rise 126%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

International flights at Oman's airports rose to 57,939 till November 2022, an increase of 134.5 per cent compared to 24,710 flights in the same period in 2021.

Data released by the National Centre for Statistics and information (NCSI) shows an increase in the number of international and domestic flights and passengers arriving and departing through the airports of the sultanate until the end November 2022.

The figures show that the number of arrivals at Omani airports recorded an increase of 142 per cent and departures rose 111 per cent, while the total number of passengers - arrivals, departures and transit - rose 126.2 per cent to 8,764,286 in the 11 months of 2022 from 3,874,038 in the same period in 2021.



The number of departing passengers from Muscat International Airport rose 140.3 per cent to 3,218,666 in the 11 months of 2022 from 1,339,185 in the corresponding period of 2021. International arrivals at Muscat airport rose 189 per cent till November 2022 to 3,470,363 from 1,200,527 in the corresponding period of 2021.

The number of departing international flights at Muscat air-

port in the same period in 2022 went up 130.7 per cent to 26,903 from 11,661 in 2021, while the number of international flights arriving rose 131 per cent to 26,890 from 11,642 in 2021.

The statistics also show that Salalah Airport recorded an increase of 73.8 per cent in the number of international and domestic flights to 7,940 till November 2022, carrying 1,30,829 passengers.

Saudi Arabia launches new free stopover visa for 96 hours

Riyadh - Saudi Arabia has announced the launch of a new stopover visa allowing passengers to stay in the country for up to 96 hours.

The free-of-charge visa is open to a wider number of countries than the historic tourism eVisa and is Saudi's latest move to make the destination more accessible.

In Q1 2023, airline capacity into Saudi Arabia is expected to grow by over 65 per cent compared to the same period in 2022 when four of the top ten busiest international routes were to or from Saudi Arabia.

Travellers will also be able to use the stopover visa to per-

form the Umrah ritual. Spiritual travellers can book flights through the Saudi Arabian national carrier SAUDIA and the country's low-cost airline flynas, but must also register for Umrah through the Nusuk platform.

Stopover visa holders will be eligible for a complimentary one-night hotel stay during the stopover when booking through SAUDIA.

To help visitors make the most of their stopover, custom 24, 48, 72 and 96-hour itineraries have been developed to inspire visitors to stroll through Jeddah's Al Balad, or visit the Al Turaif district in Diri-

yah, one of Saudi's six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, a press release stated.

The stopover visa application will be automatically available through the airline booking platforms for all passengers travelling to their final destination on SAUDIA or flynas airlines.

A stopover can be made through any airport in Saudi. For many, the application process can be completed in under three minutes and can be applied for up to 90 days before travel.

The stopover visa will contribute to Saudi's vision of reaching 100mn visits annually by 2030.

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Fun, entertainment at Naseem Garden



Our Correspondent
Muscat

A family outing these days wouldn't be complete without visiting Naseem Garden, considered one of the most important venues of the ongoing Muscat Nights.

A Muscat Municipality official told *Muscat Daily* that events in

the garden are designed in a way that every visitor has something of interest to him or her.

"The consumer exhibition in Naseem Garden is one of the most important attractions for visitors, both Omani families and residents. It presents more than 50 stores of Omani productive families and 80 small and medium enterprises selling all

kinds of clothes, accessories and silverware," the official said.

He informed that the exhibition includes Yemeni, Syrian and Turkish products, such as Arabic spices, natural honey and handicrafts that these countries are famous for.

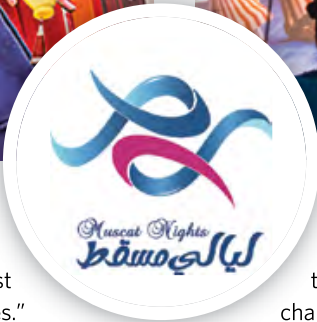
For others, especially children, the garden offers a variety of shows and activities. "I came

with my children to take pictures in the main open theatre where acrobatic performances are held," Ahmed al Hashemi, a visitor at the garden, told *Muscat Daily*.

He added, "I liked the cartoon show called 'Greetings from Madagascar'. The characters are really funny. My children also enjoyed entering the Madagascar

Forest - for free - and taking the most beautiful pictures."

Khalid al Balushi, another citizen who was visiting from Amerat, said, "My children loved the ice cream corner. We also saw a fire show, but the cartoon characters roaming around the garden were one of the key



attractions for my children. They took photos with the characters to remember their time at the event."

However, Balushi felt that the festival is ending too soon. "I hope the authorities extend the festival period to a month next time. Children love the atmosphere of fun and entertainment."

Nasser al Hosni, who came to enjoy the live shows, said, "Naseem Garden has all the activities that all members of a family can enjoy - shopping, fun and entertainment activities, and children's electronic games. My children enjoyed the children's films and Indian films screened in the open-air cinema in the garden."

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Turtle population in Oman on the decline, says ESO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's sea turtle population is on the decline, according to Environment Society of Oman (ESO).

In a statement, ESO said that its work to clear abandoned fishing gear and other debris from important nesting beaches on Masirah Island, ahead of nesting season, is an important part of its annual calendar. 'Since 2017, we have cleared 685 tonnes of debris from these beaches. It's a huge challenge that our team is ready for.'

Every year, the society organises net removal campaigns on Masirah Island. 'Entanglement in abandoned fishing nets is a major threat to nesting adults and hatchlings,' it stated.

The Environment Authority (EA) recently stated that it removed around 70 tonnes of marine debris from turtle beaches in South Sharqiyah in 2022.

The authority organised several campaigns and programmes



to preserve beaches in the governorate, which are famous for turtle nesting. It also continues to introduce new measures to protect sea turtles, which swim to Omani shores every year to nest.

Last November, EA launched the second phase of a project to track turtles via satellites.

The project aims to enhance data to study the nesting behaviour and natural habitat of sea

turtles. Five tracking devices were fitted in turtles in the Ras al Jinz area to monitor threats during their migration and the environmental risks to the creatures and their natural habitat.

The project will track a number of green turtles in Ras al Hadd Reserve and combine local and international efforts to apply the best practices in protecting sea turtles.

MoL conducts job tests, interviews in Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) conducted tests and personal interviews for Omani jobseekers to fill vacancies in various government agencies in Dhofar on Tuesday.

In a statement, MoL said, 'Tests and personal interviews were conducted for job openings in some government agencies in Dhofar on January 31.'

Meanwhile, the ministry, represented by the Directorate Gen-



eral of Labour Welfare, conducted an inspection and arrested 22 expat workers for violating the Labour Law in various parts of the sultanate.

Legal measures have been taken against the violators.

ROP NEWS

Four citizens arrested for stealing electric cables

Muscat - Royal Oman Police has arrested four citizens for stealing electric cables in North Batinah. The Criminal Investigation Department, led

by North Batinah Governorate Police, arrested the four for stealing cables from work sites belonging to electricity distribution companies.

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PDO announces social investment initiatives valued at US\$2.1mn

Muscat - Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has committed to support a host of new projects valued at more than US\$2.1mn, which will benefit communities and boost sustainable development across the sultanate.

The initiatives include commitments in the key areas of health, community infrastructure development as well as enhancing the education sector.

Ten memorandums of collaboration (MoCs) confirming these commitments were signed on Tuesday at an official ceremony held under the auspices of H E Sheikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Undersecretary of Ministry of Social Development.

To enhance the availability of high-quality medical services across Oman, PDO signed an agreement with the Ministry of Health to fund the construction of



(Supplied photo)

an emergency and accidents unit in Maqshan Health Centre.

To encourage the adoption of sports and healthy lifestyles in Oman, PDO is funding the construction of a 2km walkway with planted trees and solar lights in Izki, which will benefit 60,000

people.

In line with the company's commitment to boost the education sector within its concession area, PDO signed agreements to construct two science labs in the schools of Abu Mudhabi and Shumookh in Haima and Duqm

and to fund the construction of a sports hall in Mawred School in Adam. More than 1,000 students in the three schools will benefit from these facilities.

At the signing of the MoCs, Abdul-Amir bin Abdul-Hussein al Ajmi, External Affairs and Value

Creation Director at PDO, said, "We are thrilled to kick off the year by following PDO's long-standing practice of supporting local communities through investments in sustainable development projects. This is just the first of many initiatives we will take up this year to create a better future for our communities."

PDO has also signed two agreements for Maqshan, one to provide funding for the purchase of vehicles for the Environment Authority in the wilayat and another to provide additional funding for three public majlis in the area.

Additionally, PDO signed agreements to support four NGOs - Ihsan Association in South Batinah, Omani Women's Association, Al Noor Association for the Blind in Nizwa, and the Omani Association for the Hearing Impaired.



Maritime festival in Sur from Feb 3

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of South Sharqiyah and a number of government agencies, will organise the Maritime Heritage Festival from February 3 to 19 in Sur.

The festival will be sponsored by Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO) and Oman LNG. In a statement, MHT said, 'The festival aims to introduce and promote Oman's maritime heritage and to stimulate tourism in the governorate.'

The festival will present a number of activities, including events at the Maritime Heritage Village, which will tell the story of the maritime heritage that Sur is famous for. The maritime village will also have a corner dedicated to handicrafts related to maritime heritage, folklore sem-

inars, a café, a theatre for recreational and cultural events and activities, and folk games and performances of marine-related arts.

One of the major attractions of the festival will be a simulation presentation of a traditional sea voyage reflecting the historical journeys of Omani ships to and from the sultanate's ports.

A food carnival allowing visitors to explore famous Omani dishes, with a focus on fresh, locally sourced seafood, will reflect the richness of the marine wealth of Sur.

Other programmes on the festival agenda include activities such as windsurfing, sailing, a fishing competition, a seminar on maritime heritage, a traditional boat race, traditional Omani sports, and kite flying.

The festival will offer tourists opportunities to visit a number of ancient sites in Sur.

Symposium held to support rural women

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, in cooperation with Oman Development Bank, held a symposium to support rural women in Dakhliyah on Tuesday. The symposium was held under the auspices of Mohammed Khamis al Hussein, Member of Majlis A'Shura representing Samail.

Badr bin Abdullah al Siyabi, Director of Directorate General of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in Dakhliyah, said, "The symposium aimed to

The symposium aimed to spread awareness on the importance of products made by rural women

BADR AL SIYABI

spread awareness on the importance of products made by rural women under the Rifi programme."

Rifi is a financing programme for rural women launched in 2021

by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources and Oman Development Bank.

"The symposium also aimed to support and encourage the culture of entrepreneurship among women in rural areas, boost women's capabilities in the production, manufacturing and marketing sectors, and enhance their role in developing the economy of the rural community," Siyabi said.

Rifi targets facilitating around 800 women entrepreneurs. The cost of the programme is more than RO12mn. The bank expects to provide funding of about

RO10mn in the next five years.

The programme aims to enable women who are looking to launch agricultural and livestock projects and to benefit from the incentives and packages provided by the ministry and easy funding from the bank.

The programme also aims to localise advanced agricultural industries, enhance and increase the contribution of rural women's projects to the GDP, increase facilities for rural self-employment, develop the agricultural sector, and facilitate access to finance for women entrepreneurs in agricultural work.

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.30am
Sunrise	6.48am
Duhr	12.25pm
Asr	3.35pm
Maghrib	5.57pm
Isha	7.10pm

SQUH team performs rare surgery

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A pediatric surgery team at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH) has performed a procedure which is the first of its kind in the sultanate.

The team succeeded in transplanting the ureters in a one-year-old girl through a medical endoscope.

Dr Zainab bint Nasser al Balushi, Deputy Director General of SQUH for Medical Affairs and head of the medical team, said the child was suffering from frequent urinary infections and reflux of urine from the ureters. Following investigations, the team discovered a weakness in the left kidney.

The operation took about four hours, and the case was followed up for five days thereafter until the patient was discharged in good health.

The operation is rare; few medical centres perform this type of procedure.

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. 6 /2023

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following bidding :

Serial	Bidding No.	Bidding description	Document fee	Deadline for obtaining bidding docs.	Deadline for inquiry submission	Deadline for Submission
1	AB/02/2023	Investment of Plot Number (90) at Al-Hail Wilyat Al-Seeb	1,500/- OMR	30/04/2023	20/04/2023	01/05/2023

Registered companies with Muscat Municipality which are Specialized in above bid are invited to participate as per the following procedures:

- Company registration with Muscat Municipality have to be valid as per note number one below, to be able to get the bid document.
1. Pay the specified document fee for the requested bid via bank deposit to Muscat Municipality's Bank account as follows:

Bank Muscat	0423010702710024
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- A copy of the transaction's receipt MUST be sent to the following e-mail (MM.PC@mm.gov.om), provided with the company data (name and bid number, delegate name, office phone number, mobile number, email address approved by the company and commercial registration number of the company).
- The tender document will be provided to the company via email.
- 2:00 PM** on the above mentioned dates, is the last timing for obtaining Bidding Documents. Any bid's document request received after the specified time will not be considered, even if the fee of the document is paid.

Submitted offers must be accompanied with a bond mentioned in the tender document valid for a period not less than (90) days issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. Bidding that do not meet the required bond **will not be accepted.**

Documents must be enclosed in a plain closed envelope (without any company information) and drop in the box located in Third floor at Directorate General of Quantity Surveying and Contracts in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsait.

NOTES:

- Companies which are not registered in Muscat Municipality or their registration has been expired shall register through the municipality's website (www.mm.gov.om). For technical support, please contact Muscat Municipality through email (crm@mm.gov.om).
- If the bidders have any inquiries regarding the scope of the work, they have to send their inquiries through the following e-mail (MM.PC@mm.gov.om).
- 10:00 AM** on the above submission mentioned dates, is the last timing for receiving bids. Offers submitted after the above mentioned date & time shall not be accepted for any reason.
- Muscat Municipality has the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

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Pakistan	696.93
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Sri Lanka	955.68

*Rates as on January 31

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

UAE's digital economy seen reaching \$140bn by 2031

Dubai Chamber of Digital Economy, one of three chambers operating under Dubai Chambers, has released a report detailing plans to boost the emirate's digital economy.

The report projects the national digital economy will reach US\$140bn in 2031 from US\$38bn today.

The study highlights the importance of the chamber's efforts and collaboration with stakeholders to establish Dubai as the next digital economy capital of the world. The report outlines Dubai's digital economy startups and the emirate's position as a future digital capital.

The Chamber's plans include attracting 300 digital startups and 100 tech experts to Dubai by 2024, improving laws and policies, organising a conference, promoting digital transformation, and enhancing the business environment to attract global digital firms.

IPO-bound Abraj, EDO sign deal for oil and gas services

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's largest drilling contractor Abraj Energy Services – which plans to go public soon – has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Energy Development Oman (EDO) to develop services related to oil and gas extraction operations.

The partnership will see Abraj provide an expanded range of services to EDO's affiliates, including Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), further strengthening the long-standing relationship between the two entities.

The agreement was signed by Eng Saif Said al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services and Eng Mazin Rashid al Lamki, CEO of EDO, according to an Oman News Agency report.

With the aim to ensure the long-term sustainable security and supply of energy-related services in Oman, the collaboration serves to boost the contribution of national drilling champion Abraj to the country's oilfield services sector, as well as encouraging the implementation of alternative energy solutions.

Abraj – which is an indirectly wholly-owned subsidiary of Oman's global integrated energy group OQ – recently announced its intention to proceed with an initial public offering (IPO) in February and listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange in March.

OQ (the selling shareholder)



The agreement was signed by Eng Saif al Hamhami (right), CEO of Abraj Energy Services and Eng Mazin al Lamki, CEO of EDO (ONA)

intends to offer up to 49 per cent of Abraj's share capital in the IPO. The offer represents the divestment of shares currently held by the selling shareholder. After the IPO, a minimum of 51 per cent shareholding will continue to be indirectly held by OQ.

Abraj's listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange will provide investors with access to one of Oman's leading onshore oil and

gas field services providers, with a wide service offering including drilling, workover and well services.

As per Abraj's latest announcement, the subscription period for its proposed IPO is expected to commence in February, after receiving the required approval from the Capital Market Authority.

Abraj is the leading and largest drilling contractor in

Oman by contracted operating drilling rigs, with 29 per cent market share. The company operates one of the youngest rig fleets in the MENA region with a sizeable rig fleet comprising 25 drilling rigs and 5 workover rigs.

Abraj is a regional pioneer in using integrated hydraulic fracturing services to further the development of unconventional deep tight oil and gas in Oman.



Maha Energy signs operating pact with Mafraq for Block 70

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Upstream oil and gas company Maha Energy, through its wholly-owned subsidiary Maha Energy (Oman) Ltd and Mafraq Energy have entered into a joint operating agreement (JOA) for Block 70 in Oman.

The signature of the JOA, alongside the Omani governmental approval ratified by Royal Decree 74/2022 and other relevant procedures, marks the satisfaction of all conditions precedent required for the conclusion of the assignment of Maha Energy's 35 per cent work interest to Mafraq Energy, as provided in the relevant farmout agreement signed by the parties in August 2022.

Maha Energy and Mafraq Energy will address the post-transfer obligations moving forward. Maha is the Operator of Block 70, with 65 per cent shareholding interest.

The agreements require

Mafraq Energy to reimburse Maha Energy for their prorated share of all past costs, including the signature bonus required under the relevant agreement with the government. Mafraq Energy will also be required to pay its share of all future expenditures on Block 70.

In a press statement, Paulo Mendonça, Maha Energy's CEO said, "We are proud to have finalised yet another major milestone in what is to be a great partnership. Maha is moving forward to commence the testing aiming for fast production of Block 70 and having Mafraq Energy as its local partner with competent and experienced Omani team, bringing knowledge of the local market to the operations."

Talal al Subhi, director of Mafraq Energy, said, "This partnership is a true embodiment of enhancing the In-Country Value content of Block 70. The focus now is to collaborate to kick off the production testing stage."

Orascom appoints Lawati as new CEO of Muriya

Muscat – Orascom Development Holding on Tuesday announced the appointment of Wael al Lawati as the new chief executive officer of Muriya Tourism Development, including the award-winning destinations Jebel Sifah and Hawana Salalah.

In support of Orascom Development's ambition to be a pre-eminent, multi-national developer, Lawati will be responsible for setting the business agenda for the group's Oman destinations, including leading the overall strategy in alignment with Orascom Development's strategy, facilitating delivery against the annual business plans and instilling best practices throughout these destinations.

In addition, he will be an integral member of Orascom Development's executive committee, reporting directly to the group CEO Omar el Hamamsy.

In a press release, Hamamsy said, "I am pleased to welcome



Wael al Lawati

Wael al Lawati as our new CEO of Muriya and leading our destinations in Oman. I am confident that Wael will bring a unique perspective and strong track of delivering results to our team. His passion for the industry and ability to lead a team will open a new chapter of growth for our Oman destinations, Jebel Sifah and Hawana Salalah."

Lawati brings a wealth of experience and proven track record of delivering results in tourism, real estate, and other sectors. As a seasoned Omani national, he

has held several other leadership positions including CEO of Oman Tourism Development Company (OMRAN) and founder of The Wave Muscat (Al Mouj). More recently, he served as chief operating officer for a real estate advisory and spearheaded international growth at DAMAC Properties. Additionally, Lawati was a board member of Muriya between 2008 and 2015.

Commenting on his appointment as CEO of Muriya, Lawati said, "I am excited to be joining the Orascom Development team and leading its Oman portfolio of destinations. Jebel Sifah and Hawana Salalah are among the largest integrated tourism destinations in Oman, committed to benefiting the local community and contributing to the development of Oman. I believe we have an exciting future in front of us as we capture growth opportunities in Oman and deliver value for our customers and partners."

5 startups selected for CBO's Fintech Accelerator powered by Omantel

Muscat – The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the sultanate, have joined hands to deliver a six-month accelerator program dedicated to nurturing and empowering Fintech start-ups.

The accelerator program seeks to support innovative Fintech startups through the challenges of the highly competitive Fintech industry through mentorship, training, networking, and fundraising support.

The program targets promising, high-potential local start-ups with Fintech solutions in debt-based crowdfunding, buy now pay later, microfinancing and ROSCA system, a rotating savings and association system.

The five startups selected for the accelerator are Al-Jumaeiah, an application that helps create, manage and organise different jamaeiahs (groups) on a single



platform; Hal Capital, a Sharia-compliant embedded Fintech offering alternative financing products and services to SMEs and individuals; TasHeel Financial Solutions that provides financial ease to clients through a Buy Now Pay Later solution; Wadiaa, an equity-based crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending solution for start-ups and SMEs; and Zumr Fintech which provides micro financing opportunities by encouraging the habit of saving.

H H Sayyida Ghada al Said, senior manager, Omantel Innovation Labs, said "It has been a

pleasure to work with the Central Bank of Oman to create a valuable Fintech program for the local startup ecosystem that combines the expertise of Omantel and CBO. The partnership leverages our shared vision and strengths to contribute to the growth of Fintech startups in the country and we look forward to doing our part in accelerating these promising start-ups."

Ghada al Kharusi, acting manager at the innovation department of the Central Bank of Oman, said, "Fintech is vital to the future of Oman's financial

sector, and we are committed to supporting Fintech startups in the country. We are delighted to be working with Omantel on this program that we believe will be a catalyst for accelerating Fintech startups in Oman."

In addition to receiving free desk space at the Omantel Innovation Labs, a 1,100 sqm facility in the heart of the Omantel headquarters at Madinat Al Irfan, the selected startups will also gain access to a network of over 100,000 investors, corporates and mentors and will be eligible for perks.

BP cuts oil demand outlook on Ukraine war

London, UK – The worldwide transition away from fossil fuels could be accelerated by the Ukraine-Russia war, British energy giant BP forecast on Monday.

Its assessment in the group's annual energy outlook, comes as oil and gas majors seek to reinvent themselves as greener companies by investing in renewables.

"The increased focus on energy security as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war has the potential to accelerate the energy transition," BP said in its report.

This "as countries seek to increase access to domestically



produced energy, much of which is likely to come from renewables and other non-fossil fuels", it added.

BP forecast worldwide energy consumption to drop 2.3 per cent by 2035 compared with its

forecast a year ago, owing to falls for both oil and gas demand caused additionally by economic weakness.

BP stressed, however, that "oil continues to play a major role in the global energy system for the next 15-20 years".

Under its most optimistic scenario, the firm sees carbon dioxide emissions peaking this decade, and dropping 30 per cent from 2019 levels by 2050.

Reacting to the report, Philip Evans, climate campaigner for Greenpeace UK, welcomed BP's expectations of greater moves towards the use of renewables.

"But the main message of

these scenarios, and all credible energy scenarios, is that the world is not even close to meeting the targets" set out by the Paris Agreement on cutting carbon emissions.

The 2015 Paris Agreement seeks to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and reach net zero emissions by mid-century.

"We urgently need greater intervention and investment from government to catch up with our rapidly changing climate," he told AFP.

Evans said that meant "ruling out new oil and gas production".

AFP

CMA imposes penalty on Aman REIF

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has imposed a penalty on Aman Real Estate Investment Fund (Aman REIF) for breaching the provisions of Article 61 of the Regulation for Real Estate Investment Funds for failure to disclose the resolution of the general meeting via the Muscat Stock Exchange website.

Article 61 of the regulation stipulates that the resolutions of the general meeting must be disclosed via the stock exchange's website before the trading session on the first trading day after the date of the



general meeting.

In a statement, the CMA emphasised that all regulated entities must comply with the regulations to ensure fairness, equality and protection for all the parties dealing in the securities sector.

The market regulator noted that the disclosure is a key prin-

ciple of the securities markets and an important benchmark for measuring the efficiency of the security and the market.

The CMA said it is concerned with providing timely quarterly and material information of the issuers of securities coupled with soundness and accuracy for all the consumers.

The disclosure process through the Muscat Stock Exchange website, as central point for dissemination of issuers' information, provides fairness for the consumers and boosts the level of confidence of investors in the Omani capital market to attract foreign and local capital,' the CMA said.

IMF lifts 2023 global growth forecast

Washington, US – Global growth is set to be higher than expected this year, the IMF said Monday, raising its forecast on surprisingly strong consumption and investment while China's lifting of zero-Covid restrictions provides another boost.

World growth has been bogged down by fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, economic downturns and efforts to rein in spiraling costs of living.

Against this backdrop, the International Monetary Fund expects the global economy to expand 2.9 per cent this year, slowing from 2022 to a rate that remains weak by historical standards.

But "adverse risks have moderated" since last October's forecast, said the IMF in the latest update to its World Economic Outlook report.

"The year ahead will still be challenging... but it could well represent a turning point with growth bottoming out and inflation declining," IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas told reporters.

In particular, the IMF sees Germany and Italy avoiding recessions this year, shifting from earlier predictions, as European growth proved "more resilient than expected" despite shocks from war in Ukraine.

And the fund does not expect global GDP to shrink, with Gourinchas noting "we're well away from any sort of global recession marker."

While the outlook has not worsened this time around, there are still challenges to overcome to reach sustainable recovery, he said.

Surprising resilience

Most advanced economies are expected to slow this year, driving the global growth decline, said the IMF. Yet, many countries have shown surprising resilience.

"The forecast of low growth in 2023 reflects the rise in central



IMF's Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas (left) and Daniel Leigh (right) attend a press briefing for the World Economic Outlook update in Singapore on Tuesday (AFP)

bank rates to fight inflation - especially in advanced economies - as well as the war in Ukraine," the IMF said.

But although US growth is projected to fall to 1.4 per cent in 2023 and euro area growth is set to slump to 0.7 per cent, both figures reflect upward revisions

from last October.

"Economic growth proved surprisingly resilient in the third quarter of last year, with strong labor markets, robust household consumption, and also business investment," said Gourinchas.

Countries adapted better than expected to the energy crisis in

Europe too, he added, with the region seeing lower-than-anticipated gas prices and having enough resources to make shortages unlikely this winter.

Inflation has shown signs of decreasing globally as well, and China's reopening holds the promise of a rapid rebound in the

country's economic activity, Gourinchas said.

The world's second-biggest economy has in the past contributed up to 40 per cent of global growth, IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva previously noted.

This year, its growth is pegged at 5.2 per cent - 0.8 points more than earlier expected - on "rapidly improving mobility" after it abruptly ended its zero-Covid policy in December.

But the United Kingdom saw a significant downgrade to its growth forecast, and is now seen to contract 0.6 per cent this year.

This comes as high energy prices hurt households and businesses, while tighter monetary policy weighs on economic activity.

'Not yet won'

Despite a rosier outlook, the IMF warned of numerous risks on the horizon.

An escalation of war in Ukraine could impact food and

energy prices, and China's recovery might stall on a deepening real estate crisis or severe Covid outbreaks - due to low population immunity and insufficient hospital capacity.

Stubborn inflation could also prompt further tightening by central banks and hold back business activity as borrowing costs rise.

"The fight against inflation is not yet won," Gourinchas said.

Overall inflation may have peaked, but the "core" calculation which strips out the volatile food and energy components remains well above pre-pandemic levels in most economies.

Even as tighter monetary policy starts to cool demand and lower inflation, the IMF warned its "full impact is unlikely to be realized before 2024."

There could be favorable surprises, such as if consumption remains solid or inflation falls without sparking a rise in unemployment.

AFP

Large investors pull Adani's \$2.5bn share sale through after stock rout

Mumbai, India – Adani Group's ambitious share sale exceeded its subscription targets Tuesday in a relief for the Indian conglomerate, which is reeling from allegations of "brazen" corporate fraud that wiped more than US\$65bn off its value.

The success of India's biggest follow-on public offer (FPO) is the first reprieve in a horror week for the sprawling business empire of Gautam Adani - still Asia's richest man despite a bruising US\$36bn hit to his personal fortune.

Large institutional investors swooped in on the offer's final day, even as some of the firm's listed companies were hammered in trade and smaller retail investors steered clear.

"Thank you for the support provided in making the Adani FPO a success during the most unprecedented and challenging times," a public relations representative for the conglomerate said in a statement.

The US\$2.5bn share offer was 112 per cent subscribed by Tuesday afternoon, driven by corporate institutions, foreign funds and other large investors.

But retail investors bid for only 12 per cent of their category, despite additional discounts, impeding Adani's plans to expand his shareholder base and invite "the average, normal Indian mom and



Adani's \$2.5bn share offer was 112% subscribed by Tuesday afternoon, driven by corporate institutions, foreign funds and other large investors. But retail investors bid for only 12% of their category, despite additional discounts

dad as shareholders".

Shares in flagship Adani Enterprises closed 3.35 per cent higher on Tuesday but remained well below the 3,112-3,276 rupees price range set for the FPO, making them cheaper to buy on the open market.

Adani Transmission, Adani Green Energy and Adani Ports closed 3.73, 3.06 and 2.67 per cent higher respectively.

But Adani Total Gas saw another day of dramatic falls with

trading halted for another session after diving 10 per cent in the morning.

The natural gas distribution company - of which France's TotalEnergies owns 37.4 per cent - has lost 45 per cent in market value over the past week.

Adani Power and Adani Wilmar also hit their circuit breakers after falling five per cent each.

Founder Adani, 60, was the world's third-richest person last

week but has now slipped to eighth place on Forbes' real-time global rich list.

The slump in Adani stocks began after US investment group Hindenburg Research last week alleged a "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme over the course of decades".

Adani said it was the victim of a "maliciously mischievous" reputational attack and on Sunday issued a 413-page statement that it said rebutted Hindenburg's claims.

Dubbing Hindenburg the "Madoffs of Manhattan" - a reference to crooked financier Bernie Madoff - the statement said the researchers' allegations were "nothing but a lie".

"This is not merely an unwarranted attack on any specific company but a calculated attack on India, the independence, integrity and quality of Indian institutions, and the growth story and ambition of India," Adani said.

Hindenburg said in response that "India's future is being held back by the Adani Group, which has draped itself in the Indian flag while systematically looting the nation". It added that Adani's response only included about 30 pages focused on issues related to its report.

AFP



German Finance Minister Christian Lindner (right) and EU Economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni address journalists in Berlin on Monday (AFP)

Eurozone dodges recession but gloomy outlook persists

Brussels, Belgium – The eurozone economy showed greater resilience than expected after avoiding a recession in the fourth quarter of 2022, official data showed Tuesday, but the outlook remained gloomy as soaring prices dampen growth.

The single currency area's economy recorded weak-but-positive growth of 0.1 per cent in the final three months of 2022, the EU's statistics agency, Eurostat, said.

The figure is lower than the 0.3 per cent growth recorded in the third quarter of 2022, but better than forecasts of a contraction by economists.

"Good news: the euro area avoided a contraction in the last quarter of 2022," the EU's economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni said on Twitter.

"We continue to face multiple challenges but the outlook for this year looks a little brighter today than in the autumn," he added.

The data will be welcome after fears of a deep recession following Russia's war in Ukraine, which

unleashed sky-high energy prices and stoked inflation to record levels.

But people's purchasing power remains lower than before the war as fuel bills eat into household spending and push European businesses to the brink.

The economy has been helped by a mild winter, reducing the use of gas and electricity, while China's recent reopening and improved supply chains also provided support.

'Incredible resilience'

Economists acknowledged the worst was avoided but warned against celebrating too early.

"The worst scenarios for this winter have been avoided, but the economy remains sluggish" even if it did show "incredible resilience", according to ING's senior eurozone economist, Bert Colijn.

Andrew Kenningham, chief Europe economist at Capital Economics, was more pessimistic, predicting a recession in the first half of the year.

He pointed to the intensifying

effects of the European Central Bank's monetary policy tightening as well as households struggling with the cost of living crisis and "sluggish" external demand.

The ECB is set to continue raising interest rates with a fresh hike on Thursday.

Eurostat also said the single currency area's economy grew by 3.5 per cent in 2022 - higher than China's at 3.0 per cent and the United States at 2.1 per cent.

The figure for the eurozone is better than the European Commission's forecast in November of 3.2 per cent.

The economy of the 27-nation EU as a whole, including the countries using the euro, grew by 3.6 per cent in 2022.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted the EU's single currency area would grow in 2023 by 0.7 per cent.

The IMF said on Monday Germany, Europe's biggest economy, and Italy would avoid recessions this year, as European growth proved "more resilient than expected" despite the war.

AFP

IMF projects India's growth at 6.1% in 2023

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Tuesday projected India's growth to be 6.1 per cent in 2023 from 6.8 per cent in 2022, though the country will remain the fastest-growing large economy in 2023 and 2024.

The international agency on Tuesday released the January update of its World Economic Outlook, according to which the global growth is projected to fall from an estimated 3.4 per cent in 2022 to 2.9 per cent in 2023, then rise to 3.1 per cent in 2024.

The IMF in its note said: "Growth in India is set to decline from 6.8 per cent in 2022 to 6.1 per cent in 2023 before picking up to 6.8 per cent in 2024, with resilient domestic demand despite external headwinds."

According to the report, growth in emerging and developing Asia is expected to rise in 2023 and 2024 to 5.3 per cent



and 5.2 per cent, respectively, after the deeper-than-expected slowdown in 2022 to 4.3 per cent attributable to China's economy.

"Our growth projections actually for India are unchanged from our October Outlook. We have 6.8 per cent growth for this current fiscal year, which runs until March, and then we're expecting some slowdown to 6.1 per cent in

fiscal year 2023. And that is largely driven by external factors," Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, chief economist of IMF, told reporters here.

According to the update, growth in China is projected to rise to 5.2 per cent in 2023, reflecting rapidly improving mobility, and to fall to 4.5 per cent in 2024 before settling at below 4 per cent over the medium term

amid declining business dynamism and slow progress on structural reforms.

The IMF chief economist said, "Overall, I want to point out that emerging market economies on the whole and developing economies seem to be already on their way up. We have a slight increase in growth for the region from 3.9 per cent in 2022 to 4 per cent in 2023."

The January update also said growth in the ASEAN-5 countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) is similarly projected to slow to 4.3 per cent in 2023 and then pick up to 4.7 per cent in 2024.

"Another relevant point here is that if we look at both China and India together, they account for about 50 per cent of world growth in 2023. So a very significant contribution," Gourinchas said.

ANI

IMF approves Bangladesh loan

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund has signed off on a US\$4.7bn support loan package for Bangladesh to help it cope with soaring energy and food costs that have sparked huge protests.

Bangladesh and other South Asian countries dependent on fossil fuel imports were hit hard by sharp cost-of-living increases following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

AFP



SRI LANKAN COMMUNITY SULTANATE OF OMAN

ANNOUNCEMENT

Dear Members of the Sri Lankan Community in the Sultanate of Oman
The Sri Lankan Community Social Club election for the new Board of Directors will be held on 24th February 2023. Election nomination forms can be collected from the General Secretary of the Sri Lankan Community Social Club, Mr. Hishy Thaba.

All nomination forms to be submitted to the General Secretary on or before 17-February 2023 Please contact the General Secretary of SLSCS for further information on **96001652** or Email: **slscsmuscat@gmail.com**

Bank Muscat opens new Green Sports field



Bank Muscat, the leading financial institution in Oman, has announced the opening of the Al Qabas Sports Team's field in the wilayat of Jalan Bani Bu Ali.

The event was held under the patronage of Sheikh Nasser Said Salim al Sinani, Director of Culture, Sports and Youth, South Sharqiyah, in the presence of Sami Mohammed al Kindi, regional manager - South Sharqiyah and Majed Mohammed al Ghailani, head of the Al Qabas Sports Team besides a number of team members.

"Bank Muscat is delighted to inaugurate the Al Qabas Sports Team's Green Sports field, which was implemented by the bank as part of its pioneering role in CSR," Sami al Kindi said. "We appreciate the efforts and would like to congratulate the Al Qabas Sports Team's management for the successful the implementation of this project."

"There is no doubt that the new field and facilities will greatly contribute to the team's overall growth and success as well as bring about greater community bonding. We wish them all success for the future," Kindi added.

Majed al Ghailani from the Al Qabas Sports Team thanked the bank for the completion of the artificial turf system.

Pointing out that the new sports field will now be used to organise different sports, social and cultural activities and events, he affirmed that the team would continue to work hard to develop the capabilities and talents of its members. He also emphasised the team management's keenness to contribute strongly to local sports in Oman.

The bank requested youth sports teams interested to apply for Green Sports assistance this year to note that the bank will be accepting applications for the 2023 edition of Green Sports till February 18.

Bank Muscat's Green Sports programme is one of the leading CSR programmes in Oman, which provides support to local sports teams as part of the bank's efforts to develop sports infrastructure in Omani sports and provide green spaces throughout Oman.

The scope of support under the Green Sports programme include installation of artificial turf or natural grass on sports fields, floodlighting and water-desalination systems.

On the occasion of the programme's tenth anniversary in 2021, the bank increased the number of annual beneficiaries to 20 teams annually.

Tejarah Talks to focus on 'sustainable manufacturing'

The organisers of Tejarah Talks first session of the year have invited the manufacturers from across Oman to attend a discussion on the incorporation of environmentally friendly practices into business operations.

The talks - on 'Sustainable Manufacturing: Smart Manufacturing', scheduled for February 15 (7:30pm) at Zain Auditorium in Omantel's Head Office - will be moderated by H H Sayyid Dr Adham al Said, managing partner of The Firm.

The panel of experts includes Harsha Shetty, CEO, Jindal Shaded; Mazin al Rubaiai, Marketing Manager, Oman Aluminium Rolling Company and Haider al Zaabi, co-founder Mays EV.

Speaking ahead of the event, organiser Maymuna al Adawi, Director, Oman Business Forum & Public Private Partnerships at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion, said, "Today, a growing number of Omani manufacturers are treating sustainability as an important objective in their strategy and operations to increase growth and global competitiveness. In fact, this trend has gone



Maymuna al Adawi,

well beyond companies who have traditionally positioned themselves as green and now includes small as well as medium-sized Omani manufacturers."

According to Adawi, one of the key benefits of sustainable manufacturing is the ability to cut energy usage and waste.

"By implementing sustainable business practices, Omani manufacturers can reduce their carbon footprint, become energy efficient and decrease overhead costs. This not only helps protect the environment but also saves companies money on energy bills."

Noting the commitment to net zero targets of more and

more Omani manufacturers, Adawai said, "Businesses with a robust sustainable record tend to have a stronger corporate brand value, attracting employees and investors and performing better financially through greater focus on innovation, operational efficiency and risk management. Conversely, businesses that fail to act on sustainability issues can potentially risk losing investor interest, as well as alienating consumers and top-notch talent, especially among Oman's younger generations."

"Today's business landscape is increasingly complex and consumer expectations around sustainability will only continue to rise. It is clear that manufacturers who fail to meaningfully incorporate sustainable practices into their operations and supply chains will suffer in the long-run," she added.

Tejarah Talks is organised by Oman Business Forum in association with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion and generously supported by Jindal Shaded, the Ministry of Culture, Sports & Youth, Omantel and OmanFM.

Yahya al Jabri joins Alpen Capital's Advisory Board

Oman's top financial leader Yahya al Jabri has joined the Advisory Board of Alpen Capital following its latest introduction of highly experienced global professionals with diversified business experience to the board.

The advisory board comprising of Jabri, Wim Wienk and Eric Sarasin, intends to provide support and guidance on business development and expansion into new markets.

"We are very pleased to have such industry stalwarts on our advisory board. Over the past few years Alpen Capital has expanded its footprint beyond the GCC and is currently active in several markets in South Asia, Africa and Levant. The rich background of our advisory board members and insights provided by them will only help Alpen Capital further expand and strengthen its foothold in regional as well as international markets," said Rohit Walia, executive chairman and CEO of Alpen Capital.

Having vast experience in global corporate and investment banking, Jabri began his career at Oman International Bank and has held senior and board positions



H E Yahya al Jabri



Eric Sarasin

in several leading businesses and financial institutions in Oman. He was also the chairman of the Special Economic



Wim Wienk

Zone Authority at Duqm from 2011-20 and executive president of the Capital Market Authority from 1999-11. Jabri is currently

the chairman of Alizz Islamic Bank in Oman.

Wim Wienk is an accomplished senior banker with over 44 years of experience. He was the principal officer of the Agribusiness, Food and Water Department at FMO in charge of strategy, market development and structuring in Asia.

He has covered diverse geographies including Latin America, Turkey, South India, China and countries in ASEAN. He has also served in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation. Wim Wienk is currently the chairman of the Advisory Counsel of TAEI Two.

Eric Sarasin has a 30-year track record in Banking at Morgan Stanley, Pictet & Cie, Citibank, and most recently Bank Sarasin (today Bank J Safra Sarasin). At Bank Sarasin he held various senior leadership positions across many business lines, culminating in his role as Group Deputy CEO.

Eric Sarasin is the chairman of The Singularity Group and 004 ECOM GmbH, Member of the Board of 1875 Finance and the Swiss Venture Group.

ISG holds farewell event for Class XII students

Indian School Al Ghubra held a formal farewell for the students of Class XII on January 24, the school said in a press statement.

The ceremony was graced by the presence of the school founder Dr P Mohammed Ali and his wife Rasiyah; Ahmed Rayees, the president of the school management committee, besides the members of the committee and parents.

Principal Papri Ghosh welcomed the distinguished gathering and addressed the students. She thanked Dr Mohammed Ali for founding the institution from which many students have received quality education. She recited a poem to convey to the students the importance of self-belief and added that she believed in their abilities and strengths and was sure that they



would all find their path and lead successful lives.

In his exhortation, Dr Ali spoke about the students building a brand which stands for integrity, honesty and values that are integral to being a good

human being. He advised the students to remain focused on their goals and not misuse the freedom they will find once they step out of the school.

He also emphasised the need to adapt to the changes brought

about by the swiftly evolving technology. He asked the students to give the parents and teachers a standing ovation, to convey their appreciation and gratitude.

In his address, Rayees asked

the students to work hard and be focused yet remain humble no matter how successful they become. He reminded the students to keep in touch with the school and that it is a matter of great pride and joy, to hear of the achievements of the alumni.

The 141 students of the batch were presented with mementoes by the distinguished guests. Seventy-two students who had completed 14 years of schooling in ISG were specially felicitated.

On this momentous occasion Aarathi Sajeev, the head girl, spoke of the many memories made at ISG which they will take with them.

Alan Saji, the head boy spoke of the antics of his batchmates which will remain etched in their memories no matter where life takes them.

Dar Al Atta'a opens kids' writing competition

The Let's Read Team of Dar Al Atta'a announced the launch of its 17th Children's Writing Competition.

The participants are requested to write an original story set in Oman or to re-write a traditional Omani tale in their own words. Each story must be accompanied by a colourful illustration depicting the Omani landscape and characters from the story. Participants can write their story in either English or Arabic.

"We hope that children, aged eight to eighteen, from schools across the country, will participate in the writing competition," said Jane Jaffer, chair-

person of the Let's Read Programme. She thanked the sponsors: Renaissance, The London Speaker Bureau, and KPMG, for their support and sponsorship of this year's competition.

Maythaa al Mandhary, CEO of the Let's Read Team and a judge of the Arabic entries said, "We are looking forward to some great stories from the students this year."

The entries should be a maximum of 500 words long and can be submitted by hand to the Let's Read Charity Bookshop on the third floor of Oman Avenues Mall or sent by email to: letsreadoman@gmail.com and maythaa.1988@gmail.com

National Museum hosts talks organised by GUtech

The National Museum, represented by the Learning Centre, hosted a series of talks, which is part of the event titled 'Hope 2023: Housing, People and the Environment', organised by the German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech).

Held in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, the talks were attended by a group of officials, academics, researchers, students, and those interested in transforming cities to a better and healthier future for all, inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman, a release said.

The talks intended to provide an opportunity for prominent national and international speakers and policy makers to discuss practical tools to transform our cities to be sustainable, resilient, healthy and safe.

The event began with an on-line keynote address by Prof Billie Giles-Corti, a researcher and director of the Healthy and Livable Cities Laboratory at (RMIT) the university, during which she revealed how can cities design policies regulating the built environment to make cities more supportive for active living.



The first talk, presented by Erion Veliaj, the mayor of Tirana in Albania, highlighted the governance challenges of implementing urban regeneration and people centred development in urban areas and focused on the main barriers that appear while creating liveable cities.

The talk was moderated by Joleza Koka from the City Council of Tirana.

The following section of the discussions presented the available methods to improve environmental qualities to transform cities, and monofunctional residential neighbourhoods, in particular, into active and more liveable places. The question this panel addressed was: What are the most effective tools and strategies to upgrade existing monofunctional residential districts and transform them into

more liveable and sustainable urban environments?

The panel of this discussion consisted of Prof Stefan Devoldere, Dean of the Architecture Department of Hasselt University in Belgium and Head of the Stadsatelier; Dr Huda Khalfan al Siyabi, Director of Community Initiatives at the Ministry of Health; Maryam al Sharji, Director of the Real Estate Development Department at Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning; and Fathyia Sultan al Azri, a civil engineer representing Muscat Municipality.

The second talk was moderated by Dr Ruth Mabry, an independent health consultant.

HOPE as an initiative supported by GUtech, Oman, National Museum, Ministry of Health, World Health Organisation, the city of Tirana in Albania, and it seeks to nurture a dialogue between scholars, planners and decision-makers with civil society and industry in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA) to advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda beginning in Oman.

Oman takes part in WHO executive board's panel discussion in Geneva

The Sultanate of Oman is taking part in the 152nd session of the Executive Board (EB) of the World Health Organization (WHO), which began in Geneva, Switzerland, on Monday.

The sultanate's delegation is headed by H E Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health.

During the session, which will continue until February 7, Oman will participate with several interventions as a State Member of the WHO, as well as a representative of the Eastern Mediterranean Region as a member of the EB. The session is reviewing the reports of the WHO Director General, the regional committees and the programme, budget and management committee of the EB.

In addition, the session will touch upon the a number of health issues such as substandard and falsified medical products, draft global strategy on infection prevention and control, and global roadmap on defeating



meningitis by 2030. It is addressing the public health emergency 'response and preparedness', poliomyelitis, wellbeing and health promotion, ending violence against children by promoting health system and multispectral approaches, social determinants of health, and the highest attainable standard of health for persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, issues related to the budget and financial matters, management and governance, EB committees, personnel matters, and report of meetings of expert committees and study groups are highlighting during the meeting.

The WHO celebrated its 75th anniversary on the sidelines of the meeting.

Oman, together with Kenya, was selected among three Member States in the WHO Executive Board to participate in the forward-looking panel discussion on the future of health 25 years from now to keep pace with global and future changes.

The selection of Oman to participate in this panel discussion is due to its significant role and

health achievements during its membership in the WHO Executive Board, such as the adoption of the 'Health as a Bridge for Peace' Initiative and supporting the WHO's efforts aimed at achieving international health security.

Oman, amid the presence of the Member States and the WHO Director-General, a representative from the UNDP, and a speaker from Japan, touched upon the health priority in Oman Vision 2040 and Oman's future health plans over the next period.

The session is addressing several topics, such as the emerging models of the future of society, including the future of health that Member States, the WHO's support to Member States needs to evolve in light of multidimensional change impacting the future of health, including the increasing importance of wellbeing and the acceleration of progress in the research ecosystem, among others.

ISC-Purshottam Kanji Exchange badminton tourney

Indian Social Club in association with Purshottam Kanji Exchange Oman will be conducting their annual open badminton championship on February 3 and 4, a release said.

The tournament will be held at the ISC multipurpose hall as full-day events on Friday and Saturday. Apart from the Indian players, this year participation is expected from various other nationalities including Iran, Philippines, Pakistan, the UK and Oman, the release added.

In the Men's category, there will be open events in Singles and Doubles in addition to the events restricted to members only. The open events will see young talented players from across Oman.

Similarly, Women's category will also have an open event both in Singles and Doubles.

In addition to the above, there will be Veterans, Mixed doubles, Boys and Girls events.

According to organisers, shuttlers are making their mark on ISC courts and this has led to a surge of interest in the sport, taking it from just a game played during holidays to a serious sport at a competitive level.

Cash prizes and trophies will be given away to the winners during grand finale.

The organisers said that the registration for the championship is still open, and requested those who are interested to contact the club at 24701347 or their sports secretary Saji Abraham at 99419007 immediately.



Kempinski Hotel adds electric car as part of sustainability initiatives

As part of Kempinski Hotel Muscat's partnership with Audi, the hotel management recently announced the addition of an all-new electric vehicle for its hospitality transportation services and sustainability initiatives.

The fully electric Audi e-Tron sport back model is equipped with an e-Quattro all-wheel drive system, intelligent technology and advanced charging capabilities that will now be available to

all hotel guests. The Audi e-Tron is unmatched in combining comfort, luxury and durability that the German automobile brand is known for.

The hotel is proud to be the first hotel in Oman to add an electric car to its fleet of vehicles, combining performance and luxury in order to further aid sustainability initiatives in the hospitality sector.

Kempinski Hotel Muscat's

general manager Carsten Wiegandt said, "We remain committed to promoting best practices in sustainability, from community engagement to environmental conservation."

"Leasing an electric vehicle is a step we are proud to take to continue being environmentally friendly for both the community that we operate in and the guests that we welcome every day," Wiegandt added.

Vodafone, Ericsson test standalone 5G

Vodafone in Oman and Ericsson have carried out the first successful test call that will pave the way for the commercial introduction of 5G standalone voice and data services for Vodafone subscribers in the Sultanate.

Oman's first successful Voice over New Radio (VoNR) proof of concept call over a standalone 5G network is part of Vodafone and Ericsson's ongoing project to develop a highly efficient and reliable nationwide standalone network - allowing for high-quality, seamless voice and data services.

Using Ericsson dual-mode 5G Core and Ericsson IP Multimedia Subsystem (IMS) technology, the proof of concept showed the potential of the mobile network to enhance speech quality across the country. It also demonstrated the capability of Vodafone's network to enable 5G-specific voice and communication services for both consumers and enterprises, using an experimental terminal, which will subsequently be replaced by commercial terminals made by Vodafone's partners.

Unlike non-standalone 5G networks, standalone 5G net-



works do not build on existing 4G networks and technology, instead pairing 5G radios with a cloud-native 5G core network - allowing for flexibility and speed to meet current and future customer demands.

"As we continue to push boundaries as an innovation leader in Oman, this successful VoNR proof of concept call is a milestone in our mission to enhance our 5G capabilities and deliver superior user experiences," said Stelios Savvides, Vodafone's Technology Director in Oman.

"High-quality and seamless voice calling will soon become a must-have service for residents across Oman, as Vodafone becomes one of an extremely select group of operators around



the world to deploy a standalone 5G network. These developments are important stepping-stones on the road to the future, providing the capability to support data requirements that can enable all manner of cutting-edge technologies, from real-time virtual reality and augmented reality through to driverless cars and the latest advances in health care, improving quality of life en route.

"Our collaboration with Ericsson is another move towards providing our customers with advanced 5G voice and data services. We look forward to developing this proof of concept further and exploring a range of immersive applications that 5G standalone data and VoNR capabilities will enable for customers

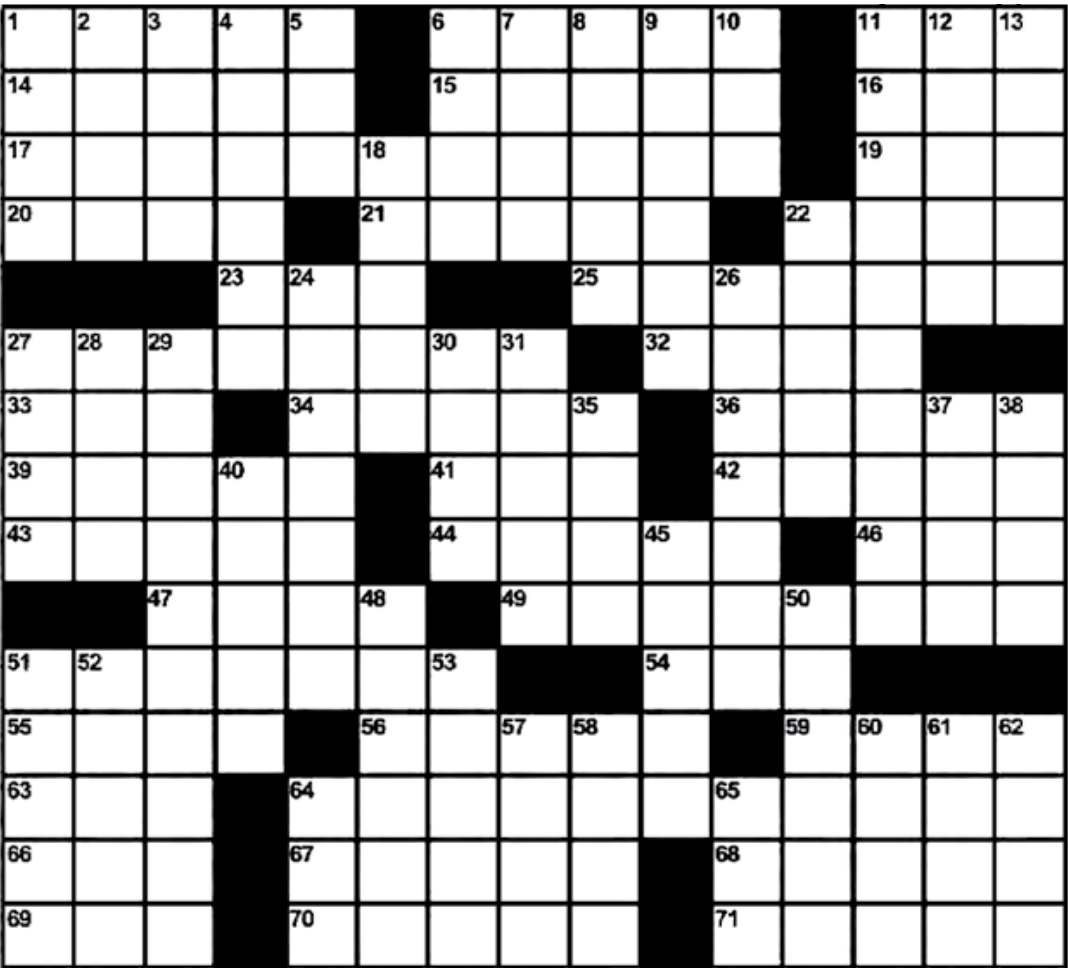
and digital enterprises across the country."

Abdullah al Balushi, Country Manager of Ericsson Oman, said that his company is confident that "this latest VoNR achievement will open doors to new business models and use cases and help Vodafone Oman deliver high-quality voice services and immersive experiences across the country".

Through Vision 2040, he reminded that Oman is embarking on a new phase of growth. "Cellular technology is set to play a huge role in this journey and through our advanced communication technologies we aspire to help Oman realise the advanced digital economy mandated by Vision 2040. We remain committed to fostering collaborations and delivering our top-class 5G capabilities to support digitalisation and innovation across the Sultanate of Oman."

Since its inception in Oman, Vodafone has partnered with Ericsson to introduce innovative cellular services to consumers and enterprises, accelerating the deployment of Industry 4.0 technologies in the country.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Possessed, old-style 42)
Prepare to be knighted
6) Small container for liquids
43) Allow to enter
11) Physique, informally 44)
Finger or toe
14) Draw out 46) Miss-named?
15) Populous province of China 47) Thing on an agenda (Var.) 49) Herb used in Mexican
16) Monopoly abbr. cUt sme
17) Removals 51) Old clean-ing vessel
19) Still in a wrapper 54) Anger
20) Eye-opening problem? 55) Tiny, informally
21) "La Boheme," e.g. 56) Iraqi port
22) Currency no more 59) Supergarb
23) Bossy sound 63) Mar-ried woman in Mex.

25) Grandeur 64) Shoulder injury
27) Book appendix 66) Wriggly fish
32) High school subject 67) Some members of the choir
33) Hilo garland 68) Be-came fainter
34) English exam finale, often 69) "Do" followers on a music
36) Small music ensemble scale
39) Short pants 70) Overly sentimental
41) Conceitdness 71) Trucking allowances

DOWN

1) Chops with an ax
2) Way out of a mine
3) Military obligation
4) Villain's plan
5) Spread, as hay
6) Roughen, as lips
7) Investment firm T _ Price
8) Deprive of weaponry
9) Peace salutation
10) Coast Guard officer

(Abbr.)
11) Ostracism
12) Blatant
13) " _ Defeats Truman" (in-famous headline)
18) Crosses
22) Disclose
24) Ballroom dance
26) Salt, on the briny
27) Pond dweller
28) Expired
29) Heave-hos
30) Brought into play
31) Illusionist's specialty
35) Jellystone Park denizen
37) Common alcoholic bev-erage
38) Fake butter
40) Short and meaningful, as a saying
45) Sacro- _
48) Like some homes
50) Bee's attraction
51) Having better judgment
52) " _ Grows in Brooklyn"
53) One of the senses
57) Pig food

58) Optimistic
60) Man Friday
61) Master of rhymes
62) Concludes
64) Crow kin, briefly
65) Away from the bow

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

It always pays to plan ahead. An upcoming journey or event will be much more enjoyable if you take a little time to make sure you know where you're going, how you're going to get there, and what you'll do once you arrive. It will be fun figuring out the logistics of this outing, and after a few minutes online you'll discover a neat option that you never considered before. If you're traveling with someone else, contact them as soon as you can to share your findings.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your self-esteem could be a tricky thing to negotiate right now. As you build it, you could have a hard time balancing a healthy sense of pride with an appropriate level of humility. Patting yourself on the back is definitely a healthy thing to do, but be careful that you don't ignore the contributions of other people. You climbed a major mountain, yes. But you didn't scale it alone. Gratitude for services rendered is a necessary ingredient for a healthy ego.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

You could be asked to get involved with several different groups of people today. Accept each and every opportunity. You could end up being the crucial voice of reason in one of them! You're comfortable with culture clashes and have a strong ability to relate well to other people. This combination of skills enables you to make sure that everyone understands each other. So speak up. Make sure people listen to what you have to say. It's in their own best interests.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Try not to act surprised when you receive some positive feedback from an unlikely source today. People in power have been noticing you in a new light, and they've been spreading the word about how you're one to watch. Expect a little extra attention to come your way soon, and be prepared for people to start demanding more and more of your free time. This could require more adjustment than you might think. Growing pains are inevitable.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Your words have extra weight today, so be aware that your feedback will be respected and adhered to. Make sure you offer constructive criticism instead of being just plain critical about a coworker's contribution or team member's presentation. Give concrete examples of where they fell short, and don't forget to let them know the ways that they impressed you! Be sure that you communicate to them you know what they're capable of. They'll be glad to hear it.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Change is usually a good thing in your life. It's smart to mix things up and keep yourself on your toes! But today, be very careful that you don't veer too far from your usual routine. Try something new in your fashion or look, but don't go so far into uncharted territory that no one recognizes you! You need to go slowly with any transitions you're making right now. Give other people the time to catch up before you run off in a whole new direction again.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Working with other people could be very interesting and stimulating today. You'll be exposed to more than one new point of view regarding a topic you thought was old hat. Just when you thought you had everything all figured out, there goes that assumption. Radical changes will abound for you soon. This is a time of philosophical growth. You don't even find yourself exploring little-known philosophies and religions just to see what all the fuss is about.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Sometimes it's easier to have fun when you aren't trying so hard to have fun. In other words, relax! If you're bored, don't put too much effort into planning something that will entertain you. Instead, why not just go outside and walk around a park for a while? Engage with the world and soon enough interesting things will come your way organically. You don't have to plan everything. You just have to put yourself in situations where something special is likely to occur.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Today, your high energy will be useful in helping a poorly positioned friend. Just by being around you, this person can get a new lease on life and start seeing things a lot more positively. Your fresh attitude can help other people jump on the happy wagon and think about the brighter things in life. This is a heavy responsibility. Make sure you take it seriously. If you see a frown on a friend's face, make it your number one priority to turn it upside down!

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you're working closely with someone else or moving emotionally closer to a friend, be mindful that you two won't always be on the same wavelength. It's perfectly normal to be off track now and then. An event this afternoon, for example, might send each of you in different directions, but don't worry. You'll both eventually come back to seeing things the same way. You're likely to be more emotional, while they'll be more aloof.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Unguarded communication will be very fruitful today. Expect quite a few sparks to be ignited when people deliver unexpected outbursts! This is a new era of freedom in your life, so embrace it and let the chips fall where they may. Spending too much time trying to prevent problems is keeping you from being able to appreciate the beauty of accidents. Sometimes things just happen for a reason, and it's time for you to learn how to let them!

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Are you getting caught up in someone else's dreams or life goals? To make sure you're not losing sight of what you want out of life, do something today that's just for your own benefit. Focus on the key areas of your life that you want to keep healthy: your physical self, emotions, career, and finances. It might seem like a tall order, but it's really just a way to get you thinking in a more self-centered way. You should be your top priority right now.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The sparkling wine called cava originated in which country?

A. Japan
B. Fiji
C. Spain
D. France

02. The Battle of the Tiger's Mouth in 1809-10 was fought between which two forces?

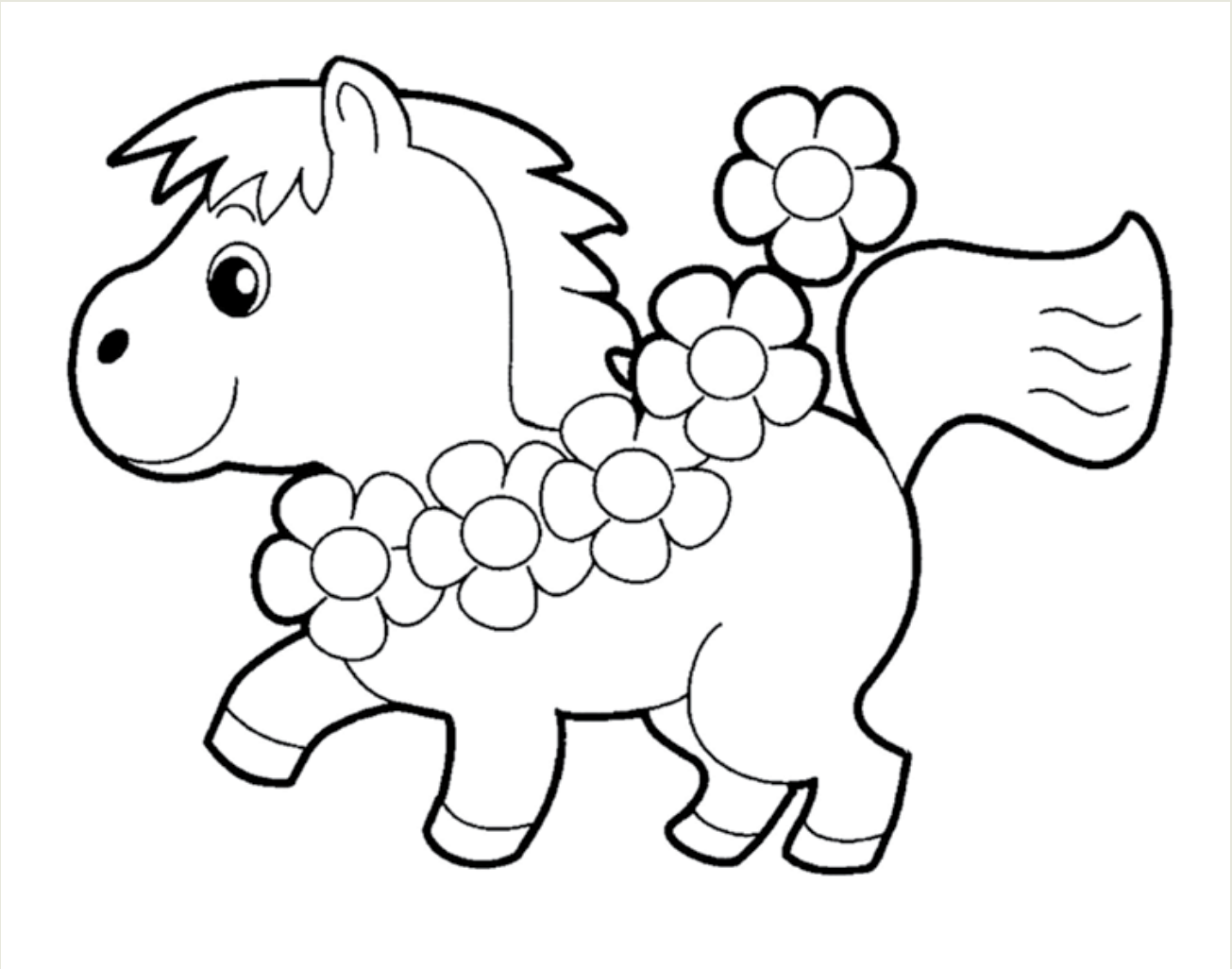
A. Portugal, and Chinese pirates
B. Iraq, and Turkey
C. Greece, and what is now North Macedonia
D. Portugal, and France

03. In which Broadway revue did the song "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want to Do It)" first appear?

A. The Pleasure Seekers
B. Watch Your Step
C. The American Maid
D. The Honeymoon Express

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

S	R	U	S
E	R	E	B
N	O	V	I
R	E	I	Y

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Blinken voices sorrow for Palestinians killed

Washington’s diplomat met Palestinian president in the West Bank city of Ramallah

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed his sorrow on Tuesday for ‘innocent’ Palestinians killed in a spike of violence in the occupied West Bank, after meeting Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Washington’s top diplomat met Abbas in the West Bank city of Ramallah on the final stop on a Middle East tour aimed at curbing the bloodshed, following meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and cabinet minister.

Both sides are reeling from a new wave of violence. A Palestinian shot dead seven people in an Israeli settlement in annexed east Jerusalem on Friday, a day after the deadliest army raid in years in the West Bank claimed 10 Palestinian lives.

This month the conflict has killed 35 Palestinian adults and children as well as the six Israeli civilians, including a child, and one Ukrainian, killed on Friday.

Speaking in Ramallah,



Palestinians hold a banner depicting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a protest against his visit, in Gaza City on Tuesday (AFP)

Blinken expressed his ‘sorrow for the innocent Palestinian civilians who have lost their lives in escalating violence over the last year’.

The year 2022 was the deadliest in the West Bank since the

United Nations started tracking fatalities in the occupied territory in 2005.

“Palestinians and Israelis alike are experiencing growing insecurity, growing fear in their homes, in their communities

and in their places of worship,” said Blinken.

The US envoy’s remarks alongside the Palestinian leader came a day after he met with Netanyahu, when he urged both sides to take ‘urgent steps’ to

calm tensions.

After meeting Palestinian residents in the West Bank, the US top diplomat said he saw a ‘shrinking horizon of hope’ for Palestinians.

Before heading to the West

Bank on Tuesday, Blinken met new Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, who took office as part of the right-wing government Netanyahu formed in December. Gallant praised Blinken for his ‘unwavering

support’ in helping safeguard Israel’s military superiority in the region.

The fatal east Jerusalem shooting was preceded by the Israeli forces’ deadliest operation in the West Bank in years, killing 10 people on Thursday in the densely populated Jenin refugee camp. Israel said its forces targeted Islamic Jihad operatives.

The Israeli military later hit sites in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in response to rocket fire from the Palestinian enclave.

The Islamist group said Blinken’s visit ‘emphasises the absolute support and partnership with the (Israeli) occupation’. Netanyahu’s cabinet has moved to punish ‘the families of terrorists that support terrorism’ with home demolitions and other measures.

His government is also planning to rescind the rights to social security benefits of attackers’ relatives, and steps to make it easier for Israeli citizens to obtain permits to carry firearms.

Blinken had made an initial stop in Egypt, where he met President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, commending ‘Egypt’s important role in promoting stability in the region’.

The diplomats and intelligence services of Egypt - a major recipient of US military aid - are regularly called upon to intercede between Israelis and Palestinians.

AFP

May extend state of emergency, delay polls: Myanmar junta



Myanmar’s military chief Min Aung Hlaing making a speech during a defense and security council meeting in Naypyidaw on Tuesday (AFP)

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar’s junta on Tuesday said the country had ‘not returned to normalcy’ almost two years after its coup, casting doubt over plans for elections and ending a state of emergency.

The Southeast Asian country has been in turmoil since the military toppled democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi’s civilian government, alleging massive fraud during elections her party won in 2020.

A junta-imposed state of emergency is due to expire at the end of January, after which the constitution states that authorities must set in motion plans to hold fresh elections.

The military was widely expected to announce on Wednesday that it would prepare for the polls.

But a junta-stacked National Defence and Security Council met on Tuesday to discuss the state of the nation and concluded it ‘has not returned to normalcy yet’, the military’s information team said in a statement on Tuesday.

Junta opponents, including anti-coup ‘People’s Defence Forces’ (PDF) and a shadow government dominated by lawmakers from Suu Kyi’s party, had tried to seize ‘state power by means of unrest and vio-

lence’ the statement added.

Those ‘who want utter devastation of the state are continuing their activities’, it said.

The ‘necessary announcement will be released’ on Wednesday, it added, without giving details.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has previously said that the elections could only be held when the country was ‘peaceful and stable’.

Under the military-authored 2008 constitution, the president in coordination with the Defence and Security Council can extend a state of emergency for six months upon a request from the head of the military.

Former civilian president and close Suu Kyi ally Win Myint has been detained since the coup and jailed on a clutch of charges by a closed junta court.

Acting President U Myint Swe attended the Tuesday meeting, the military said.

“We still do not know the decision of the meeting,” a military source told AFP, requesting anonymity.

“We have been told to be on standby for possible attacks by PDF in coming days in the regions. We have no black-and-white instruction.”

AFP

Iran jails couple in viral dancing video

Paris, France - An Iranian court has handed jail sentences of over 10 years each to a young couple who danced in front of one of Tehran’s main landmarks in a video seen as a symbol of defiance against the regime, activists said on Tuesday.

Astiyazh Haghighi and her fiancé Amir Mohammad Ahmadi, both in their early 20s, had been arrested in early November after a video went viral of them dancing romantically in front of the Azadi Tower in Tehran.

Haghighi did not wear a headscarf in defiance of the Islamic republic’s strict rules for women, while women are also not allowed to dance in public in

Astiyazh Haghighi and her fiancé Amir Mohammad Ahmadi had been arrested after a video went viral of them dancing in front of the Azadi Tower in Tehran

Iran, let alone with a man.

A revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced them each to 10 years and six months in prison, as well as bans on using the Internet and leaving Iran, the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said.

The couple, who already had a following in Tehran as popular Instagram bloggers, were convicted of ‘encouraging corrup-

tion and public prostitution’ as well as ‘gathering with the intention of disrupting national security’, it added.

HRANA cited sources close to their families as saying they had been deprived of lawyers during the court proceedings while attempts to secure their release on bail have been rejected. It said Haghighi is now in the notorious Qarchak prison for women outside Tehran,

whose conditions are regularly condemned by activists.

Iranian authorities have clamped down severely on all forms of dissent since the death in September of Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for allegedly violating the headscarf rules, sparked protests that have turned into a movement against the regime.

At least 14,000 people have been arrested, according to the United Nations, ranging from prominent celebrities, journalists and lawyers to ordinary people who took to the streets.

The couple’s video had been hailed as a symbol of the freedoms demanded by the protest movement, with Ah-

madi at one moment lifting his partner in the air as her long hair flowed behind.

One of the main icons of the Iranian capital, the gigantic and futuristic Azadi (Freedom) Tower is a place of huge sensitivity. It opened under the rule of the last shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the early 1970s when it was known as the Shahyad (In Memory of the Shah) Tower.

It was renamed after the shah was ousted in 1979 with the creation of the Islamic republic. Its architect, a member of the Bahai faith which is not recognised in today’s Iran, now lives in exile.

AFP

Suspected militants kill 28 in Burkina Faso

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso - Twenty-eight people have died in new attacks by suspected militants in Burkina Faso, including 15 who had been abducted at the weekend, the authorities said on Tuesday.

Fifteen bodies bearing bullet impacts were found on Monday near Linguekoro, a village in the western province of Comoe, regional governor Colonel Jean-Charles Some said in a statement.

They were among 24 people who were aboard two minibuses travelling from Banfora that were stopped in Linguekoro by armed men on Sunday evening, he said.

“The passengers, comprising eight men and 16 women, were told to get off,” he said.

‘Eight women and one man were released and told to walk to Mangodara,’ 30km (18 miles) away, he said.

The two minibuses were then torched and the 15 other passengers taken away.

Separately, 10 police officers, two members of an auxiliary



This file photo shows Burkina Faso soldiers deployed in Ouagadougou on September 30, 2022 (AFP)

force supporting the army, and a civilian died in northern Burkina Faso from a ‘terrorist attack on Monday’ in the locality of Falagountou, which also goes by the spelling of Falangoutou, army headquarters said.

At least five police were wounded and about 10 are missing, while the bodies of about 15

‘terrorists’ were found during a sweep, it said.

Mounting toll

The attacks mark a further escalation in an insurgency that has beset Burkina, one of the world’s poorest and most troubled countries, for more than seven years.

Violence linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group has killed thousands of people and forced around two million more to flee their homes. More than a third of the country lies beyond the control of the government. Since the start of the year, at least 77 people have died.

AFP

Three Al-Qaeda suspects killed in Yemen drone strike: Officials

Dubai, UAE - Three alleged Al-Qaeda militants were killed in a suspected US drone strike in northeastern Yemen on Monday, local government officials said.

The attack was carried out on a car in Marib province, the scene of heavy fighting in 2021 in Yemen’s long-running civil war, the officials said.

“Three Al-Qaeda members were killed in a strike by a drone that is believed to be American,” a government official told AFP on condition of anonymity. “The three were in a car in Wadi Obeida when they were targeted by the suspected US strike that killed them immediately.”

A second Marib government official confirmed the strike on Al-Qaeda militants and the death toll. There was no immediate comment from Washington.

The US considers Al-Qaeda’s Yemen branch among the most dangerous branches of the global militant network.

AFP

US, South Korean defence chiefs vow more drills to counter North

Seoul, South Korea - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met his counterpart in Seoul on Tuesday, pledging to beef up joint drills and security cooperation as South Korea seeks nuclear reassurances in the face of growing North Korean threats.

Seoul is eager to convince its increasingly nervous public of America's so-called extended deterrence commitments, after a year in which North Korea declared itself an 'irreversible' nuclear power and conducted a banned weapons test almost every month.

Austin and South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup agreed to 'expand and bolster the level and scale' of joint military exercises, in light of 'continued provocations' from Pyongyang, including a recent drone incursion, they said in a statement.



US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin shakes hands with South Korea's Defence Minister Lee Jong-sup after a joint press conference in Seoul on Tuesday (AFP)

Military tensions on the Korean peninsula intensified sharply in 2022 as the North conducted a record-breaking number of weapons tests, including firing its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile.

Pyongyang sent five drones across the border on December 26, the first such incident in five years, prompting Seoul to scramble warplanes.

Austin and Lee agreed to 'further expand and strengthen the scale and level of combined exercises and drills this year', Lee said at a media briefing in Seoul.

This was necessary due to 'changes in the security environment, including North Korea's recent attempts to upgrade its nuclear and missile programmes', he said.

The two security allies will conduct a 'tabletop exercise' in February to improve communication on 'deterrence and response options' to Pyongyang's nuclear threats.

"We will do a number of tabletop exercises to ensure that we're seeing things eye to eye," Austin said at the briefing.

Any joint US-South Korean military exercises infuriate Pyongyang, which views them as a rehearsal for an invasion and has often responded with threats and drills of its own.

Austin is visiting Seoul for the third time as defence secretary and met with both Lee and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol.

Yoon suggested this month his country consider acquiring its own nuclear weapons - the first time in decades a sitting South Korean president has floated the idea, reflecting growing domestic concern over the reliability of US security commitments.

AFP

Peru Congress to resume debate on early elections

Lima, Peru - Peru's Congress will resume debate on Tuesday on a bill to bring forward elections, a move aimed at ending weeks of protests that have left dozens dead and brought parts of the country to a standstill.

On Monday, lawmakers failed to reach an agreement on the bill after seven hours of discussions, and proceedings will resume at 11am on Tuesday (1600 GMT), according to the legislature.

"We are sure that there will be a way out. All the democratic blocs are going to debate it taking into account the high sense of urgency," said Prime Minister Alberto Otrola on Monday.

The South American country has been embroiled in a political crisis with near-daily street protests since December 7, when then-president Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

In seven weeks of demonstra-



A session of the plenary is under way in which Peruvian lawmakers are seen voting for early general elections, at the Peruvian Congress in Lima on Monday (AFP)

tions, 48 people - including one police officer - have been killed in clashes between security forces and protesters, according to the Ombudsman's Office.

The unrest is being propelled mainly by poor, rural Indigenous

people from southern Peru who had identified Castillo as one of their own who would fight to end poverty, racism and inequality.

Dozens of roadblocks have been set up by protesters, causing a shortage of food and fuel in

some southern areas as they demand that Castillo's replacement, President Dina Boluarte, step down.

Trade unions and other bodies have called for another major demonstration against Boluarte

in Lima on Tuesday. Last month, lawmakers moved elections due in 2026 to April 2024, but as protests showed no sign of abating, Boluarte has called to hold them this year, which Congress rejected late on Friday.

"Vote for Peru, for the country, by moving the elections up to 2023," the president said in an address to the nation on Sunday.

Lawmakers 'have a chance to win the country's trust', she said.

In last week's vote on moving elections to October, there were 65 votes against and just 45 in favour, with two abstentions.

If reconvened lawmakers again refuse to advance elections, Boluarte has said she will propose a constitutional reform allowing a first voting round to be held in October and a runoff in December. Protesters are demanding immediate elections, the dissolution of Congress and a new constitution.

AFP

Pope Francis visits central Africa, first stop in DR Congo

Vatican City, Holy See - Pope Francis embarked on his fifth visit to Africa on Tuesday, flying to the Democratic Republic of Congo and then South Sudan to plead for peace in the two violence-plagued nations.

The 86-year-old pope boarded the papal plane via elevator before it took off from Rome's Fiumicino Airport at 8:28 local time (7:28 GMT). It is expected to arrive around 3pm local time at Kinshasa's Ndjili airport, where thousands of well-wishers are expected to greet the pontiff.

These lands, situated in the centre of African continent, have suffered greatly

POPE FRANCIS

armed groups operate.

"I greet with affection those beloved peoples who await me," Pope Francis said after his Angelus prayer at St Peter's Square on Sunday.

"These lands, situated in the centre of the great African continent, have suffered greatly from lengthy conflicts."

He lamented 'armed clashes and exploitation' in DR Congo, and said South Sudan, 'wracked by years of war, longs for an end to the constant violence'. Despite its vast mineral wealth, some two-thirds of DRC's population live on less than US\$2.15 a day, while violence plagues the eastern provinces.

The Tutsi-led armed group M23, which Kinshasa alleges is backed by neighbouring Rwanda, has been conquering large swaths of territory in North Kivu province. The region has also seen a wave of deadly attacks blamed on the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a group the Islamic State claims as an affiliate, including a bomb blast at a Pentecostal church this month that killed 14 people.

Following a welcome ceremony at the Kinshasa airport, Francis will be received at the presidential palace by President Felix Tshisekedi. The pontiff will then make his first of a dozen speeches during the trip, addressing authorities, the diplomatic corps and representatives of civil society.

AFP

New French protests, strikes target Macron pensions plan

Paris, France - French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday faced a new wave of anger over his plan to reform pensions, with nationwide strikes and protests causing widespread disruption in transport, schools and other public services.

Union-led protesters came out for mass demonstrations for the second time in less than two weeks, hoping to force Macron to drop his plan to raise the age of retirement from 62 to 64, a flagship reform of his second mandate in power.

A police source said the authorities were bracing for up to 1.2mn people to take to the streets across the country.

If confirmed, the number could exceed the 1.1mn who came out on January 19 against the proposed shake-up - already the largest protests since the last major round of pension reform in 2010.

"We hope to be at least that many again," the boss of the hard-left CGT union, Philippe Martinez, told media on Tuesday, adding there would be 250

protest marches.

But Macron has shown no sign of stepping back, insisting on Monday that the reform is 'essential' to 'save our system' of pensions distribution.

Some 11,000 police were mobilised, with 4,000 deployed in Paris where several hundred extremist troublemakers were expected, according to the interior ministry. The first marches kicked off at 10am (0900 GMT), with several prominent opposition politicians taking part.

AFP



French riot police push back protesters as clashes erupt during a rally on a second day of nationwide strikes, in Nantes on Tuesday (AFP)

Boeing to deliver last 747, the plane that democratised flying

New York, US - Boeing is set to officially bid farewell to the original jumbo jet, the 747, as it makes its final commercial delivery of an aircraft that democratised flying and serves US presidents.

Thousands of current and former employees will converge on Tuesday afternoon at Boeing's factory in Everett, Washington, in the Northwestern part of the United States for a final sendoff celebration in parallel with the delivery of a Boeing 747-8 cargo plane to Atlas Air.

The existing fleet of planes are



The last Boeing 747-8 leaves the company's factory in Everett, Washington State, on December 7, 2022 (AFP)

expected to fly for decades more, but in ceasing 747 production more than 50 years after aircraft's first flight, Boeing is closing a chapter in the history of civil aviation.

The plane's size, flying range and efficacy 'made it possible for the middle class to travel outside Europe or the United States at an affordable price, even during the energy shocks of the 1970s', said Michel Merluzeau, director of aerospace and defense analysis at AIR consultancy.

"It opened up the world," Merluzeau said.

Boeing built 1,574 747s in all. But the jet has over time been eclipsed by newer models that fly more efficiently and burn less fuel. Commercial airlines in the United States have not flown the 747 since 2017.

'The queen of the sky'

The 747's origins date to the 1960s, a period when aviation was on the upswing and airports were becoming increasingly busy.

At the urging of Pan American Airways, Boeing began to plan for a jet that could carry signifi-

cantly more passengers.

Engineers initially conceived of a plane with two fuselages, but dropped that idea due to concerns about evacuating passengers from a second level.

Instead of making the plane taller, the 747 was made wider, Michael Lombardi, Boeing's company historian said of a jet that became the first designed with two aisles.

"This airplane will always be recognised as the queen of the sky," Lombardi said at a recent briefing with journalists.

AFP

INDIA

'Need to build self-reliant India by 2047'

President Murmu, in her address, calls upon citizens to focus on their duty to achieve the goal

New Delhi, India - India has entered Amrit Kaal completing its 75 years of Independence and in this citizens have to focus on their duty towards building an 'aatmanirbhar' (self-reliant) India, said President Droupadi Murmu in her pre-budget address to the joint session of Parliament on Tuesday.

"By 2047, we have to build a nation that will be connected to the pride of the past and which will have all the golden chapters of modernity. We have to build an India that will be 'Aatmanirbhar' and capable to fulfill its humanitarian duties," President Murmu said. In her maiden address to the joint sitting of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha in the central hall of Parliament President Murmu said: "India has entered Amrit Kaal completing its 75 years of Independence. Amrit Kaal is a period of 100 years of Independence and making of a developed India. These 25 years is a period for all citizens to focus on duty."

The President described an India without poverty and full of prosperity.



President Droupadi Murmu addresses the joint session of Parliament on the first day of the Budget Session 2023, in New Delhi on Tuesday (ANI)

"That should be an India that will not have poverty, whose middle class will also be prosperous, an India whose youth

and women will stand at the front to show a path to society and the country, an India whose youth stays two steps ahead of

time," she said. President Murmu also lauded India's growing position on the world stage and said that

the country is providing solutions to the world. "Today, India's self-confidence is at its highest and the

world is looking at her from a different perspective. India is providing solutions to the world," the President said.

This is President Murmu's first budget session speech since assuming office in July last year. The President arrived in a ceremonial escort to Parliament to address the joint session at the start of the Budget session

Meanwhile, ahead of the budget presentation on Wednesday, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) high command has formed a committee to take the benefits of the budget among the public and take their feedback.

As per the BJP sources, the Committee formed on January 28, comprises nine party leaders from different states, which will be headed by former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Modi.

The nine members include party leader Vivek Venkataswamy, national general secretary Sunil Bansal, national Kisan Morcha president Raj Kumar Chahar, national Yuva Morcha president MP Tejaswi Surya, Union Government's Chief Financial Affairs Adviser and MLA Ashok Lahiri. ANI

Adani-Hindenburg row: AAP leader demands JPC probe

New Delhi, India - Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Sanjay Singh on Tuesday slammed the Centre after Hindenburg's report raised concerns about the possibility of shares of Adani Group companies declining from their current levels owing to high valuations, and demanded a probe by a Joint Parliamentary Committee.

"Crores of people who have invested their money in LIC are worried today because of Adani's corruption due to which investors of the country lost their Rs 4.50 lakh crore. Adani opened fraud companies and bought shares in his own firms through these fraud companies. Today he owes Rs 2.50 lakh crore. SBI has given huge loans to Adani, PM Modi-ji should come forward and tell how it became possible. We demand for a joint



Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Sanjay Singh (ANI)

parliamentary committee probe to investigate the entire fraud," the AAP leader said while addressing a press conference. Singh also questioned the Centre on being 'silent' over this entire matter.

"As Adani said that Hindenburg's report is an attack on the country, and if that is true, then our PM, security advisors, and the Union Home Minister must come forward and speak on the matter. Where are CBI, ED, and In-

come Tax department? Why our government is silent on this entire matter? We will raise the issue in the Parliament also. The country should know the truth about this financial fraud after its complete investigation," he said.

"We have huge respect for the President, but we demand that this issue should be discussed in the parliament," Singh added.

AAP boycotted President Droupadi Murmu's address to the joint sitting of both houses of Parliament on Tuesday, calling her speech 'a bundle of false promises and false claims by the Narendra Modi Government'. "Hon'ble President's speech is a bundle of false promises and false claims by the Modi Government. In this, there is not a word of her own."

ANI

'Entire world looking at India's Budget'

New Delhi, India - Ahead of the Budget session of Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said that India's budget will attempt to meet the hopes and aspirations of the common citizens amid the unstable global economic situation.

"Our finance minister will present one more budget before the country tomorrow. In today's global circumstances, not only India but the entire world is looking at India's budget," PM Modi said. The Prime Minister firmly exuded confidence that Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will make efforts to meet the aspirations.

"Amid the unstable global economic situation, India's budget will attempt to meet the hopes and aspirations of the common citizens, the ray of hope being seen by the world glows brighter-for this, I firmly believe that Nirmala Sitharaman will make all efforts to meet



PM Narendra Modi addresses the media on the first day of the Budget Session of Parliament, in New Delhi on Tuesday (ANI)

Amid the unstable global economic situation, India's Budget will attempt to meet the hopes and aspirations of common citizens

NARENDRA MODI

those aspirations," PM Modi said while addressing the media.

The Prime Minister cited the 'credible voices from the world

of economy' and said that they have brought a positive message ahead of the session.

"Today, the Budget Session is commencing. Credible voices

from the world of economy, have brought in a positive message, a ray of hope and a beginning of enthusiasm. It is an important event today," he said.

PM Modi said the maiden inaugural address by President Droupadi Murmu to the joint session of both Houses is a matter of pride for the Constitution. "The President's first address to the joint session of Parliament is a matter of pride for our Constitution, and especially for respect of women. The whole world has its eyes on India," he said. "Our Finance Minister is a woman too. She will present one more budget before the country tomorrow," PM Modi added.

The Budget Session will take place in 27 sittings till April 6 with a month-long recess to examine the Budget papers. The first part of the session will conclude on February 13. Parliament will reconvene on March 12 for the second part of the Budget Session.

ANI

Pakistan mosque blast killing 95 was 'revenge against police'

Peshawar, Pakistan - A suicide blast at a mosque inside a police headquarters in Pakistan that killed more than 90 people was a targeted revenge attack, a police chief said on Tuesday.

Between 300 and 400 policemen had gathered for afternoon prayers at the compound's mosque on Monday in the provincial capital Peshawar when an entire wall and most of the roof were blown out, showering rubble on officers.

"We are on the frontline taking action against militants and that is why we were targeted," city police chief Muhammad Ijaz Khan told AFP.

"The purpose was to demoralise us as a force."

Low-level militancy, often targeting security checkpoints, has been steadily rising in the areas near Peshawar that border Afghanistan since the Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021.

The assaults are claimed



Security officials pray at the funeral of a policeman a day after the mosque blast, in Peshawar on Tuesday (AFP)

mostly by the Pakistani Taliban, as well as the local chapter of the Islamic State, but mass casualty attacks remain rare.

The head of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province police force, Moazzam Jah Ansari, told

reporters that a suicide bomber had entered the mosque as a guest, carrying 10-12kg (about 22-26 pounds) of 'explosive material in bits and pieces'.

He added that a militant group that was on-and-off affiliated

with the Pakistani Taliban could be behind the attack.

Authorities are investigating how a major security breach could happen in one of the most tightly controlled areas of the city, housing intelligence and

counter-terrorism bureaus, and next door to the regional secretariat. The nation is already being hobbled by a massive economic downturn and political chaos, ahead of elections due by October.

Search for survivors

Provincial Chief Minister Muhammad Azam Khan confirmed it was a suicide blast, putting the latest death toll at 95, with more than 221 wounded.

Corpses were still being pulled from the wreckage of a collapsed wall and roof, with rescuers using listening devices to try and detect heartbeats beneath the rubble. "I remained trapped under the rubble with a dead body over me for seven hours. I had lost all hope of survival," Wajahat Ali, a 23-year-old police constable whose feet were broken, told AFP from hospital on Tuesday.

Survivor Shahid Ali said the explosion took place seconds after the imam started prayers.

"I saw black smoke rising to the sky. I ran out to save my life," the 47-year-old police officers told AFP.

Dozens of slain police officers have already been buried in several mass prayer ceremonies, with coffins lined up in rows and draped in the Pakistani flag while a guard of honour was performed. "Terrorists want to create fear by targeting those who perform the duty of defending Pakistan," Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said in a statement.

In a statement, the Pakistani Taliban - separate from the Afghan Taliban but with a similar Islamist ideology - denied it was responsible for the latest blast.

Known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, it carried out a years-long wave of horrific violence after emerging in 2007 but recently has attempted to rebrand itself as a less brutal outfit, claiming not to target places of worship. AFP

49 boys drown in Pakistan

Peshawar, Pakistan - Forty-nine children died when their boat capsized in north-west Pakistan, police said on Tuesday after divers spent three days dragging bodies from freezing waters.

The boys aged between seven and 14 were all students of a madrassa and had been taken for a day trip to the scenic Tanda Dam lake on Sunday. "The water of the dam was freezing due to cold weather that impeded the rescue mission. But today the divers were able to dive deep to recover the remaining bodies," said Khateer Ahmad, a senior official with Rescue 1122.

The bodies of a teacher and one skipper were also pulled from the water.

AFP



Phil Mickelson

Mickelson ‘at peace’ even without PGA, Ryder Cup

Los Angeles, United States - Phil Mickelson says he will be “at peace” if he never plays in a PGA Tour event or Ryder Cup again, nearly one year after his explosive remarks about the Saudi-funded LIV golf series triggered an uproar.

In an interview with Sports Illustrated published on Monday, the six-time major winner said he was not bothered about the possibility of being frozen out of PGA Tour events for good.

Mickelson was suspended by the PGA Tour last year after being one of the earliest big names to defect to the controversial LIV circuit.

Mickelson said in June last

year he hoped to play on the PGA Tour again.

However in his remarks to Sports Illustrated, the veteran said he was now indifferent to

Another major would be a unique, special moment. That’s really where I want to thrive. And sure, it would mean a lot to win some LIV events because of the role I’ve played

PHIL MICKELSON

playing on the circuit again.

“If I were never to play another PGA Tour event, I’m totally at peace with it,” Mickelson said.

The American said that while

he believes pending litigation against the PGA Tour may allow him to legally return to the circuit, he planned to “scale down” his number of events while pri-

are going to leave a mark are the majors. That creates a life memory. If I win another Tour event, who cares? It’s not like it’s going to do anything for how I look at my career.

“Another major would be a unique, special moment. That’s really where I want to thrive. And sure, it would mean a lot to win some LIV events because of the role I’ve played as it’s been created.”

Mickelson, once seen as a virtual certainty to be a US Ryder Cup captain at some point, also said he would be fine not being part of the biennial team tournament again. “I’ve loved being part of the Ryder Cup as a player 12

times and as a vice-captain once,” Mickelson said.

“I’ve had more great experiences than probably anybody. If I’m not a part of it, I’m at peace with that as well.”

Mickelson meanwhile agreed there could be an uneasy atmosphere at the Champions Dinner at the Masters in April, where staunch critics of LIV Golf including Tiger Woods will dine alongside some of the upstart circuit’s biggest names.

Asked if he anticipated awkwardness or unpleasantness at the dinner, Mickelson added: “There very well could be, but not on my part. I’m very comfortable with where I’m at.”

No ATP action against Zverev after 'insufficient evidence' of abuse



Alexander Zverev

London, United Kingdom - Former world number two Alexander Zverev will face no disciplinary action from the ATP after an independent investigation found “insufficient evidence” to substantiate allegations of domestic abuse, it was announced Tuesday.

The German player became the subject of an ATP-commissioned probe in October 2021 following allegations made by his former girlfriend, Olya Sharypova. Zverev had denied all of the allegations.

both Sharypova and Zverev, and 24 other individuals including family and friends, players, and other parties involved with the ATP tour.

It also reviewed submissions by both Sharypova and Zverev, including text messages, audio files, and photos.

Following a 15-month process, LFG submitted its full report to the ATP, which said

But the ATP said in a statement: “A major independent investigation into Alexander Zverev has found insufficient evidence to substantiate published allegations of abuse. As a result, no disciplinary action will be taken by ATP.”

The ATP, the governing body for the men’s professional tour, said while the primary focus of the investigation related to alleged abuses at the ATP Masters 1000 event in Shanghai in 2019, its scope also included purported misconduct in other locations, including Monaco, New York and Geneva, as referenced in public reporting.

An inquiry led by the Lake Forest Group (LFG), a third-party investigator, conducted what the statement said were “extensive interviews” with

Zevrev became the subject of an ATP-commissioned probe following allegations made by his former girlfriend, Olya Sharypova.

Farah says 2023 London Marathon will be his last

London, United Kingdom - British athletics great Mo Farah has said this year’s London Marathon will likely be his last as he contemplates the end of a brilliant career.

The 40-year-old is best known for his success on the track winning gold in the 5,000 and 10,000 metres at both the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games, as well as several world titles across both distances. And while his marathon

career has reached nothing like the same heights, Farah is keen to run in London again after missing last year’s edition even though he will be 40 by the time of the April 23 race

“It’s been an amazing career and taking part in the London Marathon is a very big deal,” he said in a statement issued by event organisers. “I was gutted not to race last year and I just want to give it one more shot.

“It depends on my body. I just



Mo Farah

want to get to the start line and see what I can manage. I’m just taking one race at a time.”

He added: “I’m not a spring chicken any more. You can’t keep coming back in the right shape and, for me, I’d love to be able to finish it at home.”

Farah has ruled out competing at the 2024 Olympics in Paris, but may yet try to finish his time as a British international at this year’s World Championships in Budapest.

Banchero sparks Magic over Sixers, Doncic 53 routs Pistons

Los Angeles, United States - Paolo Banchero led a second-half fightback as the Orlando Magic overturned a 21-point deficit to upset the Philadelphia 76ers 119-109 on Monday.

Banchero, the number one pick in last year’s draft, scored 29 points from 11-of-22 shooting, with nine rebounds and three assists to give Orlando another notable win after last week’s defeat of league-leading Boston.

In other games across the NBA on Monday, Luka Doncic returned from injury with a 53-point bang as the Dallas Mavericks routed the Detroit Pistons 111-105, while Stephen Curry dropped 38 points for Golden State as the Warriors downed the Oklahoma City Thunder 128-120.

In Portland, Damian Lillard’s



Paolo Banchero of Orlando Magic dunks during the fourth quarter against Philadelphia 76ers in their NBA match at Wells Fargo Center on Monday (AFP)

42 points led the Trail Blazers to a 129-125 win over the Atlanta Hawks. Dejounte Murray finished with 40 points for Atlanta.

In Philadelphia, Magic rookie Banchero was backed with scoring support from German brothers Franz Wagner and Moritz Wagner, who combined for 41 points as Orlando silenced the home crowd with a second-half scoring blitz.

Philadelphia, who dropped to third in the Eastern Conference standings after the loss, led by 21 points midway through the second quarter and appeared poised for a comfortable victory.

But Orlando erupted after the break with a 42-point third quarter to edge into the lead and then closed with a 19-8 run in the fourth to seal the victory.

Moritz Wagner finished with

22 points off the bench while younger brother Franz added 19.

Markelle Fultz had a double-double with 12 points and 10 assists while Wendell Carter Jr. also cracked double-figures with 12 points.

Joel Embiid led the Sixers scoring with 30 points while James Harden and Tobias Harris had 17 points apiece.

“I’m so proud of these young men,” Orlando coach Jamahl Mosley said of his team afterwards.

“The way that first half started - we were hanging our heads a little bit. But we pulled ourselves together at half-time and talked about our belief system and what we’re capable of doing, and we showed up.

“It shows growth and that they’re learning from their expe-

riences -- they find a way to bounce back, find a way to believe in each other.”

Banchero said Mosley had rallied the locker room at half-time.

“He fired us up,” Banchero said. “Just told us we need to play better, play harder, that we’re a very good team we need to act like it.”

Sixers coach Doc Rivers had few complaints after his side’s defeat, describing Orlando as worthy winners.

“I thought from near the end of the first quarter, they played harder, faster, tougher, more physical,” Rivers said. “I think they deserved to win.”

Orlando continue to languish near the bottom of the Eastern Conference, with 20 wins against 31 defeats.

AFP

REAL FAVOURITES

European champions expected to continue the continent’s dominance of Club World Cup

Rabat, Morocco - One of the last Club World Cups in its current format begins on Wednesday in Morocco, where Real Madrid will be favourites to continue Europe’s dominance of the much-maligned FIFA competition.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino announced on the sidelines of the World Cup in Qatar in December that an expanded Club World Cup is planned from 2025.

The bigger competition, which would feature 32 teams, has been a controversial pet project of Infantino’s for some time. A 24-team Club World Cup, involving eight European sides, had been due to take place in China in 2021 only to be put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

World football’s governing body is yet to reveal any further details of the plans, but global players’ union FIFPro has already complained of Infantino making the announcement “unilaterally



Real Madrid are expected to win the Club World Cup despite their recent setbacks in the Spanish league

without seriously consulting...with the players”.

For now, the Club World Cup limps on with just seven teams, including the six continental champions.

After five consecutive editions in the Middle East, it returns to

rocco in 2014.

Real will enter the semi-finals on February 8 and will play in Rabat against either CONCACAF champions Seattle Sounders, Egyptian giants Al Ahly or New Zealand’s Auckland City, the champions of Oceania.

If they win, Carlo Ancelotti’s side will advance to the final on February 11.

Moroccan hopes

The other semi-final will see last year’s Copa Libertadores winners Flamengo take on either Al

giants like Real.

Brazilian clubs have won the Club World Cup four times, most recently through Corinthians in 2012. Wydad will be hoping to become the first African club to triumph.

The host nation is always represented, but Wydad also won last year’s CAF Champions League, and so Al Ahly – the team they beat in the final – have been invited to take part as well.

Valid Regragui led Wydad to that continental title before taking Morocco on a historic run to the World Cup semi-finals in Qatar.

“It’s nice for Morocco – particularly after the World Cup we had – for people to see that there’s football here, there are fans, and there are beautiful stadiums. It’s going to be fantastic for our country,” Regragui told FIFA.com

The competition kicks off on Wednesday when Al Ahly – the record 10-time African champions who have finished third at the last two Club World Cups – play Auckland City in Tangier.

The tournament will see a refereeing first after the International Football Association Board, the sport’s lawmakers, approved a trial that will allow fans in the stadium to hear officials explain decisions taken after VAR reviews.

AFP



West Ham United’s Jarrod Bowen celebrates scoring against Derby County in their English FA Cup fourth-round match at Pride Park Stadium in Derby, central England on Monday (AFP)

West Ham ease past Derby to earn Man Utd clash in FA Cup

London, United Kingdom - David Moyes cannot wait to take on his former club Manchester United in the FA Cup fifth round after goals from Jarrod Bowen and Michail Antonio sealed West Ham’s 2-0 victory at third-tier Derby on Monday.

Bowen put West Ham ahead early in the first half and Antonio doubled the lead soon after the interval in the fourth-round tie.

Moyes’ side will head to Old Trafford in late February as they continue their bid to reach the FA Cup final for the first time since 2006.

It will be Moyes’ latest return to United, who sacked the Scot in 2014 only 10 months after he succeeded Alex Ferguson.

“I’m really looking forward to the game. It’s a really good game for us.” Moyes said.

“Maybe at the moment that’s the game we need because we’ve got players who want to play on the big stage.

“There’s nothing bigger than Old Trafford, so I’m saying to the

players, ‘Come on, let’s go and take it on and challenge them’.”

Avoiding an embarrassing defeat against Derby was essential for the under-fire Moyes, but it is Premier League survival that remains his top priority.

The Hammers are languishing in 16th place in the Premier

League, just one point above the relegation zone.

“This was a difficult game because Derby had gone 16 unbeaten. In the end, we did a pretty professional job on them,” Moyes said.

Moyes made six changes following West Ham’s vital 2-0 victory over Premier League relegation rivals Everton in their most recent match nine days

This was a difficult game because Derby had gone 16 unbeaten. In the end, we did a pretty professional job on them

DAVID MOYES

Non-league Wrexham could face Spurs in FA Cup fifth round

London, United Kingdom - Wrexham will host Tottenham in the FA Cup fifth round if the non-league side can beat Sheffield United in a fourth-round replay.

Fifth-tier Wrexham, who are owned by Hollywood actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, were handed a potential blockbuster tie in Monday’s draw for the last 16.

Wrexham were seconds away from a shock win against Sheffield United on Sunday before the Championship side snatched a 3-3 draw, with Reynolds watching at the Racecourse Ground.

John Egan scored a late equaliser for United and the teams will meet again at Bramall Lane for the right to meet Premier League Tottenham.

Manchester City, 1-0 winners over Arsenal on Friday, travel to second-tier Bristol City, for the first meeting of the sides since the League Cup semi-finals in 2018.

Pep Guardiola’s men won then and are among the favourites for this year’s FA Cup, a trophy they last lifted in the 2018-19 season.

Manchester United will host

West Ham, who won 2-0 at third-tier Derby on Monday.

Stoke entertain Brighton, who knocked out holders Liverpool 2-1 on Sunday.

Leeds will travel to either Fulham or Sunderland, who drew 1-1 at Craven Cottage on Saturday. Leicester City meanwhile, welcome either Blackburn or Birmingham.

AFP

Gattuso leaves Valencia by ‘mutual agreement’

Paris, France - Valencia announced on Monday that coach Gennaro Gattuso was leaving the club.

The club said that the two sides “have decided by mutual agreement to terminate the contractual relationship”.

After losing 1-0 to Valladolid on Sunday, Valencia are 14th in La Liga, one point above the relegation places.

“It is clear that I am responsible for this,” Gattuso said on Sunday after the defeat.

Spanish media said that Gattuso had been frustrated by the lack of transfer activity by the club and met with club’s top management on Monday.

Gattuso, a defensive midfielder who played 73 times for Italy, first became a head coach

in 2013 with Sion in Switzerland.

He managed former club AC Milan for two seasons from 2015 to 2017, coached Napoli from December 2019 to May 2021. His only trophy as a manager is the Coppa Italia in 2020.

He agreed to join Fiorentina in the summer of 2021 but quit before starting his contract after a dispute over the club’s transfer policy. Gattuso took over at Valencia in June, replacing Jose Bordalas who had led the club to a ninth-place finish and the Copa del Rey final.

Valencia said that long-time coach Voro, who has been caretaker or interim boss at the club on six occasions, would be in charge when the squad resumed training on Tuesday.

AFP



Gennaro Gattuso



Weston McKennie

Leeds sign McKennie on loan from Juventus

London, United Kingdom - Leeds signed United States midfielder Weston McKennie on loan from Juventus until the end of the season on Monday.

McKennie moved to the Premier League club for a reported £1 million (\$1.2 million) loan fee. The signing is subject to a work permit.

The 24-year-old has made 41 appearances for the USA and started all four of their World Cup matches in Qatar last year.

McKennie is the third USA international to team up with Leeds’ American boss Jesse Marsch after Tyler Adams and

Brenden Aaronson joined the club in the close season.

McKennie began his career at Schalke, making 91 appearances before becoming the first American to sign for Juventus, initially on loan, in 2020.

He has made 96 appearances in all competitions for Turin club, scoring 13 goals.

McKennie is Leeds’ third January transfer-window signing after the arrivals of Georginio Rutter from Hoffenheim and Max Wober from RB Salzburg.

McKennie could make his Leeds debut at Nottingham Forest this weekend.



Argentina captain Lionel Messi holds the FIFA World Cup Trophy after the Qatar 2022 World Cup final at Lusail Stadium last December (AFP)

‘I would have liked Maradona to hand me the cup’

Lionel Messi says World Cup trophy ‘called out’ to him

Buenos Aires, Argentina - Lionel Messi won the World Cup because the sparkling solid gold trophy picked him to lift it, the Argentine star said in a radio interview aired on Monday.

The 35-year-old inspired his country to World Cup glory last month by scoring two goals and a penalty in the South Americans’ shoot-out triumph over previous holders France following a thrilling 3-3 draw in Qatar.

“The cup called out to me, it told me: come and grab me, now you can touch me,” Messi told the Argentine Urbana Play radio station.

“I saw it sparkling in that beautiful stadium and I didn’t hesitate” to kiss it, he added, referring to

the stunning Lusail Stadium in Doha, where the final was played.

Messi finally lifted the trophy in his fifth and final World Cup tournament, having lost in the 2014 final to Germany.

He also played in three losing Copa America finals before finally clinching that trophy in 2021.

“After so much suffering and lost finals, God kept it for me,”

said Messi of the World Cup.

He thus became the first Argentina captain since Diego Maradona in 1986 to lift the World Cup.

“I would have liked Maradona to hand me the cup, so he could at least see Argentina champions,” Maradona died of a heart attack two years ago.

“From up above he gave me strength, as did so many people

who love me.”

Many people expected Messi to retire, at least from international duty, after the Qatar triumph but he decided to continue so he could take to the field with his teammates as world champions.

However, he admitted that the end was close after a glory-laden career that saw him also win four Champions League titles and 10 La Liga crowns with Barcelona, and a Ligue 1 trophy with Paris Saint-Germain, as well as the Ballon d’Or a record seven times.

“That’s it, there’s nothing left, I’ve achieved everything with the national team, with Barcelona, individually,” he said.

AFP

I saw it sparkling in that beautiful stadium and I didn’t hesitate (to kiss it). After so much suffering and lost finals, God kept it for me

LIONEL MESSI

Le Graet ‘no longer has the legitimacy’ to stay in top post

Paris, France - Noel Le Graet, the scandal-hit president of the French Football Federation under investigation for sexual harassment, “no longer has the necessary legitimacy to run and represent French football”, according to a report into governance failings at the body seen by AFP on Monday.

The report follows an audit of the FFF ordered by France’s Sports Ministry after allegations made against the 81-year-old Le Graet, who was forced to step down earlier this month pending its outcome.

“Considering his conduct towards women, his public comments and the governance failings of the FFF, Mr Le Graet no longer has the necessary legitimacy to run and represent French football,” the report said, adding that the body’s handling of cases of sexist and sexual violence was “neither effective nor efficient”.



Noel Le Graet

Le Graet is currently under investigation by Paris prosecutors for sexual and psychological harassment following accusations against him made by football agent Sonia Soudi.

The report stated that his attitude towards women “can be described at the very least as sexist”, and said that there was

evidence his behaviour was “likely to be considered as criminal”.

He denies any wrongdoing.

Despite already stepping down and being replaced on an interim basis by vice-president Philippe Diallo, Le Graet is still officially recognised as president by world governing body FIFA.

Indian groundsman replaced after ‘shocker’ cricket pitch

New Delhi, India - A cricket stadium in India has replaced its chief groundsman after players and pundits complained about a “shocker” pitch at a recent international against New Zealand, an official said Tuesday.

The low-scoring T20 match saw India reach the modest target of 100 with one ball and six wickets to spare at Lucknow’s Ekana stadium on Sunday.

It witnessed 30 overs of spin without a single six being hit in either innings, a highly unusual tally.

“To be honest, it was a shocker of a wicket,” India skipper Hardik Pandya said.

“I don’t mind difficult wickets. But somewhere down the line the curators or the grounds that we are going to play in should make sure they prepare the pitches earlier,” he said.

Glam Homes edge OCT Ruwi in Oman A Division League

Muscat - Glam Homes brushed past OCT Ruwi by three wickets in the Oman Cricket Domestic League A Division, powered by Khimji Ramdas.

Put in to bat first, OCT made 267/6 in 50 overs thanks mainly to Mohammed Al Balushi’s 95 (114; 12x4,3x6). Nalinda Prasad (3/33) was the key bowler for Glam Homes.

In reply, Glam Homes’ openers Arbaz Qureshi and Pathum W helped them get off to a good start but fine bowling spells from Zubair Al Balushi (2/58) and Nawed Al Balushi (2/44) brought OCT in to the game as Glam Homes were five down for 132 runs in 30 overs.

But Faizan Abdullah (55) and Eameen Habib (51) dominated the OCT Ruwi bowlers to get their team across the line in the 48th over.



Faizan Abdullah , Nalinda Prasad, Eameen Habib and Pathum W of Glam Homes after the win

In the C Division powered by Credit Oman SAOC, Khalsa United CT beat Modern Muscat Mountains by 17 runs.

Khalsa United CT made 172/6 in 20 overs with Sushil

Kadam making 66 (49; 6x4)

In reply Mountains but fell short by 17 runs despite fine efforts from Syed Arfan (54 of 40; 4x4) and Pradeesh Kumar (41 of 36; 4x4).

Al Mouj Golf to Host Prestigious International Series Season Kick-off

Oman’s premier golf course is chosen as one of the region’s finest cementing its reputation as a global sporting attraction

Muscat, 2 February 2023: Oman’s championship golf course, Al Mouj Golf, is set to become the first golf course in the Middle East to host the season opener of 2023’s The International Series, the elevated series of tournaments on the Asian Tour, later this month. The Asian Tour is the only recognized pan-Asian professional golf tour in Asia and will see some of the world’s best players compete for a prize fund of \$2million.

Famous names including Sergio Garcia and Louis Oosthuizen are among the 132-strong line-up of top-level Pros set to play over four days (9th to 12th February) and take on the challenges of the par 72 Greg Norman design course in the first leg of the Middle Eastern swing.

The International Series is set to be staged in 10 different locations globally with each taking place at premier golf clubs carefully selected for the high quality of their course and



amenities and across global locations including Qatar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Set at the ocean’s edge, Al Mouj Golf is the Sultanate’s first links-style course and a World 100 Course with Today’s Golfer placing it in the top

two the region in 2022 and now, as the first ever Oman course to host The International Series Asian Tour, its reputation as a global sporting and leisure attraction has been raised further.

Over ten years, the course has

earned many plaudits for its superb design and for its setting with breathtaking views of the sea and the Hajar mountains. As the nation’s first PGA championship course, it has also hosted a number of other prominent events including the Oman Open.

By attracting Pro and amateur players from across the globe, Al Mouj Golf has had a significant impact on Oman’s growing sport tourism sector, as CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, Nasser bin Masoud Al Sheibani explains: “We are delighted that Al Mouj Golf will host the kick-off event of The International Series. Our superb course will be the ideal setting for this highly prestigious tournament and it once more highlights Oman as a unique venue on the world golf stage.

“More than six million golfers regularly travel to different courses in pursuit of their passion and tournaments such as this showcases our exceptional course to a global audience.

“Tourism is critical as Oman diversifies its economy and the appeal of sports tourism. Al Mouj Muscat is committed to maintaining our global presence by hosting Pro tournament

events, and to implementing innovative ways to deliver lasting value to our community, our stakeholders, and the Sultanate of Oman through sustainable tourism and building on the 4 million visitors we attract annually.”

Al Mouj Golf has now received 23 International Awards and has welcomed 16,000 golfers in addition to hosting 35,000 guests with many more expected as part of this latest competition. The course is a key asset of Al Mouj Muscat, the Sultanate’s leading leisure and lifestyle destination, and a joint venture between Majid Al Futtaim Properties, OMRAN, and Tanmia. As Oman’s first Integrated Tourism Complex Al Mouj Muscat has delivered significant socio-economic impact on job creation, development, foreign direct investment, growth in the number of SMEs as well as across the tourism sector.

LUXURY WATCHES

GENERATION Z FINDS TIME FOR AFFORDABLE SECOND-HAND LUXURY WATCHES, AS MOST OF THE ORIGINALS WERE LIMITED EDITIONS

Swiss watches are in high demand these days, but sales of second-hand timepieces are also booming, driven by Generation Z buyers who want luxury goods but are also sustainability-minded.

The global second-hand watch market is estimated at nearly 20bn Swiss francs (US\$21.7bn) and could reach 35bn francs by 2030, according to a study out in October by the auditing and consulting giant Deloitte.

Historically, the province of collectors scouting for rare watches at auction, the second-hand market is turning increasingly professional with the proliferation of online sales sites that verify authenticity - with even the watch manufacturers themselves getting involved.

"Nowadays, there is a realisation that we need to consume more responsibly," said Fabienne Lupo, the former head of the Foundation High Horology, who organised a second-hand luxury watch salon in Geneva in November.

The event was attended by the online auction giant eBay, the watch sales platform Watchbox, and Swiss brands such as Zenith.



singer John Legend among its investors.

The luxury giant Richemont - which owns Cartier, IWC and Piaget - entered the field as early as 2018, buying the British platform Watchfinder.

Rolex also took the plunge in December, pulling the rug from beneath the counterfeiters by launching a CPO programme with the Swiss retailer Bucherer, which authenticates the watches.

The programme is set up in six countries, including Britain and France, with the aim of extending it to the United States in the future.

Watch your image

"Watch manufacturers typically have been worried about the secondary market as it was closely associated with the grey market, where discounted watches could be found," said Jon Cox, an industry analyst with the Kepler Cheuvreux financial services company. "However, they realise there is a halo effect of having strong secondary prices, enhancing the brand value of the primary watches.

For top-end luxury brands like Richard Mille, where average watch prices exceed 260,000 Swiss francs, second-hand timepieces are even a way of enhancing their image.

"We might have a client who tells us, 'there was a limited edition of 100 watches; it was always my dream to buy one and now I have the money - but you no longer make them and they are almost impossible to find'," said Alexandre Mille, who took over from his father who founded the brand. Mille said his teams can seek out the sought-after timepiece.

TIMEBOUND



Never say new again

Lupo said the craze for second-hand watches could be explained by the consumer choices of Millennials (born between 1980 and the late 1990s) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2010) who are 'very concerned about the future of the planet, and no longer want to buy new'.

There is also the fashion for vintage objects

"that you can't find everywhere," she said.

And furthermore, buying certain Swiss luxury watches new is getting harder, as the booming market means longer waiting lists.

Swiss watch exports hit a new record in 2022, climbing 11.4 per cent year-on-year to 24.8bn Swiss francs, the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry announced Tuesday.

"Then, there is the digitalisation which has accelerated with the pandemic," Lupo told AFP.

The growth in the pre-owned watch market is such that the British online platform Subdial has developed an index tracking the 50 most-traded models.

The average price fell from a record 45,000 Swiss francs in February 2022 to 35,000 francs

in September, which Deloitte called a 'correction' rather than a sign that the market was shrinking.

Sales platforms for certified pre-owned (CPO) watches are multiplying online, with the sector still attracting new entrants, including the US site Bezel, which counts former Disney president Michael Ovitz, comedian Kevin Hart, and

Deloitte's study found that buying a cheaper watch was the main motivation for 44 per cent of respondents. But Cox also noted that second-hand watches were a 'store of wealth', being worn and shown off for years but still retaining value to be resold so another watch can be bought in its place.

AFP

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Indian male - with PG Diploma in Human Resource Management (Canada) and MBA (Finance) - looking for a suitable HR, administrative job. Flexible to adapt to any sector.

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Indian male - with over 13 years of experience, working at the capacity of chief accountant, with ability to handle accounts up to finalisation and lead a team - is looking for a suitable

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ATELIER ZUHRA

Dressing Queen Bey

RAYAN AL SULAIMANI, PROPRIETOR OF ATELIER ZUHRA, IN DUBAI, RECENTLY DESIGNED A STUNNING OUTFIT FOR AMERICAN SINGER-PERFORMER BEYONCE WHO PERFORMED AT THE GRAND OPENING OF ATLANTIS THE ROYAL, DUBAI, A FORTNIGHT AGO, PAVING THE WAY FOR YOUNG OMANI DESIGNERS LIKE HER TO DREAM BIG



Hubert Vaz

On January 21, amid fire-works and glittering fanfare, *Atlantis The Royal* - a 43-storey cantilevered building, featuring 231 luxury apartments, 693 hotel rooms, and 102 suites - all with a view of the Arabian Sea and Palm Island, was thrown open to international guests. The highlight of the evening was an explicit performance by American singer-songwriter-dancer Beyonce who was roped in to perform for a whopping sum of US\$ 24mn. But amid all the stunning display of grandeur and grandiose at an event attended by celebrities and special invitees from around the world, Oman had its finger in the pie in a special way!

The impressive outfit in daffodil yellow worn by Beyonce (fondly known as 'Queen Bey') for the performance, was designed by young Omani designer Rayan al Sulaimani, CEO of Atelier Zuhra in Dubai. The performance by Beyoncé assumed much importance as it was her first full concert in five years, reportedly at a price tag of US\$24mn. The megastar had not staged a full-length concert since an appearance at the Global Citizen Festival in Johannesburg in 2018, but, apparently, could not refuse this 'tempting' offer, Sun newspaper reported. Asked about the special privilege and prestige attached to the task of designing for Queen Bey, Rayan said, "I'm very proud of this huge achievement. I hope, I made my family and my

country proud, as mine is the first Omani brand to dress Queen Bey." Disclosing the client brief, Rayan said, "We were selected to sketch and send a few sketches for a suitable outfit for the performance. Fortunately, one of the sketches was approved. We started working on the piece since November and submitted it just a few hours before the performance, with fittings going on for almost a week before delivery." About the guidelines provided for the design, Rayan said, "We were sent a few pictures to use as a reference for what Beyonce had in mind. So, we created a look that suited her request." Atelier Zuhra has, indeed, a prestigious track record, having designed in the past for a string of international celebrities, including a few from Holly-



I'm fond of 'classy colours' - white, black, grey and nude. I don't have a favourite fabric as every season brings forth something beautiful

RAYAN AL SULAIMANI



wood and Bollywood. "We do have a lot of western clients and we work with everyone around the world. Some of these include Hollywood celebrities like Paris Hilton, Nicky Minaj, Naomi Campbell, Alicia Keys, to mention a few," said Rayan, adding that the outfit created for Beyonce was much loved and appreciated for its design as well as for the fact that it was pulled within a short time. "I have been in this business since 2015 and was involved both, in design and management, of the business," said Rayan who was handed over the prestigious atelier (named after her grandmother) by her mother, a talented designer and businesswoman, who had recognised Rayan's design skills early in life and chose to appoint her as its CEO. Asked about her most favourite designs created till date, Rayan said, "It's difficult to choose a favourite design as every piece is unique in its own way." About global fashion distinctions, she added, "I believe, there isn't any difference between fashion in the East and the West. We can witness a lot of Arab names dressing big celebrities for the red carpet, concerts, film festivals, Oscar's, and many more." As for her next prestigious order, Rayan preferred to be tight-lipped. "We do have a lot of big orders coming up - I can't reveal anything about that - but the best is yet to come," she assured.



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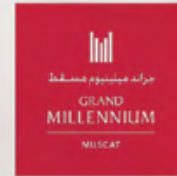
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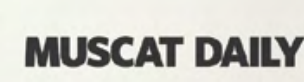
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