



Omani students create device to produce water from air

Our Correspondent Muscat

A smart device designed and created by Omani students has gained attention for its ability to squeeze water out of air. The students claim purity of the water extracted from air has been scientifically proven to be safe for drinking. The student team from the National University of Science and Technology, called Skydrop Company consists of Mona al Kharousi, Hiba al Shuaibiya, Qusay al Jadidi, Safaa Yahya al Naabi, Maad al Harasia, Moadh Saif al Rashdi, Al Mutamin Suban al Balushi and Naglaa bint Habib al Amriya. Describing the rational behind the project, Mona said, "We wanted to create an easy-to-use product for athletes, adventurers

and travellers, who sometimes face challenges related to the availability of drinking water." She added that the device works on user-friendly technology, is low cost and has sustainable environmental characteristics. "It is made of environmentally friendly reinforced plastic and can be charged using electricity or solar energy." According to Mona, the device is small and lightweight and works to convert air into water in an innovative way, producing water from the surrounding moist air. "Water vapour is condensed by cooling and then turned into dew to reach the last stage of the sedimentation process and conversion into pure drinking water." Mona explained that the device will contribute significantly

to solving the problem of environmental pollution from plastic, which has become widespread because of bottled drinking water that are difficult to decompose, in addition to finding an innovative environmental solution to achieve water security. About the challenges the students faced while giving shape to their project, Mona said, "The lack of capital is the toughest challenge for this project in addition to difficulty in sourcing certain parts for it." Skydrop Company is currently working to make a bigger version of the device to deploy in the agricultural sector, especially in the desert. "The team aspires to be a leader in creating modern technologies for the production of potable water that are suitable in different environmental conditions."

11 hospitals under various stages of development: MoH

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) is getting 11 hospitals constructed in various governorates as part of its efforts to develop the health sector in the sultanate. A number of them will be opened this year, the ministry confirmed. Eng Jamal bin Salem al Shanfari, Director General of Projects and Engineering Affairs at MoH, said that the ministry is overseeing development of a number of hospitals in various governorates to strengthen the healthcare system in the country. He informed that the projects include the new Suwaiq Hospital in North Batinah governorate, having a capacity of 307 beds. "Seventy per cent of the work is complete. We hope that it will be ready next year." Shanfari further said that 98 per cent of the structural works for the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah, Dhofar, has been completed and its construction is expected to end by 2025. The Khasab Hospital is coming up in Musandam with a capacity of 164 beds. The construction of this hospital will be complete by next year. "Over 63 per cent of the work



The ministry is overseeing development of a number of hospitals to strengthen the country's healthcare system

JAMAL AL SHANFARI

for the project has been completed," Shanfari informed. Eighty per cent works for the upgradation of the Madha Health Centre in Musandam to a hospital is over. "We expect the hospital to be ready for operation this year," Shanfari said. "Another new hospital - Al Mazyouna Hospital - is coming up in Dhofar, and this will be ready by 2024," he added.



According to Shanfari, designs for three more hospitals viz., Samail Hospital in Dakhiliyah, Al-Namaa Hospital in North Sharqiyah and Al Falah Hospital in South Sharqiya have been finalised. They are currently in the stage of tendering. The Mahout Hospital in Al Wusta is proceeding with the preparatory work. This hospital is expected to come up in 2025.

"Additionally, the construction of a dialysis unit has been completed in the wilayat of Bahla in Dakhiliyah. Construction works are also underway for a number of dialysis units in Sur in South Sharqiyah and Al Khabourah in North Batinah, while the ministry is preparing to call for tenders for a dialysis unit in Barka in South Batinah," said Shanfari.

28 missions from 12 countries took part in various archaeological projects last season

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) on Wednesday held a press conference to shed light on its endeavours in safeguarding and highlighting the archaeological heritage of Oman. The ministry is seeking to establish new visitor centres in and around Diba, Qalhat and Bat Al-Khutm and Al-Ain archaeological sites, it told the press. Focusing on the 'Discoveries and Findings of Archeological Missions' in Oman, the ministry announced some impressive results of the 2022-23 season. Surveys and excavation works conducted during the period covered

more than 68 archaeological sites, which highlight the civilisational role of the sultanate, dating back to the ancient stone ages. All together, 28 archaeological missions from 12 countries took part in various projects under the ministry last season. Oman's archaeological finds and collections are showcased in museums and visitor centres in archaeological parks, it added. Giving a background of Oman's tryst with history and heritage, the ministry referred to the first archaeological mission in Oman, which was led by a Danish team in 1972. The team discovered 430 graves in Wadi Suq cemetery. It also conducted a survey and ex-

cavation at the Bat site, while the Harvard University mission discovered 180 sites in Oman between 1973 and 1976. The Harvard University mission's discoveries include the settlement of Wadi Ibra and Bahla BB-19, BB21 and Arga survey in Wadi Jizzi. The British mission in the years 1971, 1973 and 1978 discovered 79 sites and carried out excavations in Salut, Samad al-Shan and Al-Missar - dating back to the third millennium BC. The ministry was successful in documenting several ancient defence monuments, such as Laziq Castle in Samad Al Shan. Laziq Castle is approximately 3,200 years old.



ANNOUNCEMENT

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

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on/ Before 10:00 am Sunday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
1706/2023/M OH/NIZH-3	Supply Radio Frequency System(R.F) For Nizwa Hospital	10/May/2023	18/Jun/2023	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25.000 Per set

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

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تعلن دائرة الملكية الفكرية عن طلب تسجيل العلامة التجارية المقبولة وفقا لاحكام قانون (نظام) العلامات التجارية لدول مجلس التعاون لدول الخليج العربية الصادر بالمرسوم السلطاني رقم 33 / 2017
طلب تسجيل العلامة التجارية رقم : 152873
الفئة 44 من أجل السلع / الخدمات
خدمات العيادات الطبية
باسم : عيادة خصيب
الجنسية : عمانية
العنوان : سلطنة عمان
تاريخ تقديم الطلب: 23/02/2022

16 in hospital, 2 in ICU in Sohar gas leak incident

Muscat - A team from the Directorate General of Health Services in North Batinah is following up on the condition of those who fell sick following a gas leak in Sohar on Tuesday. The gas leak affected 42 people, among whom 16 are in hospital and two in ICU. The Ministry of Health thanked the Crises & Emergency Committee in North Batinah, all medical and para-medical staff in Sohar Hospital and other health institutions for their quick response to the incident.

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H M receives message from King Salman

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has received a written message from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The message was handed over to Sayyid Asaad bin Tariq, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, when he received in his office Abdullah Saud al Enezi, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the sultanate, on Wednesday.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed bilateral relations and means of enhancing these in various fields.

The meeting was attended by the Secretary General and the two Advisors at the office of Sayyid Asaad.



Farewell to Libyan envoy

On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Sayyid Asaad

bin Tariq al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of

His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office on Wednesday Sana Abu al Qasim Ghoma, Ambassador of Libya to the Sultanate of

Oman, to bid her farewell at the end of her tour of duty.

During the meeting, the ambassador expressed her gratitude to His Majesty the Sultan for the support extended to her during her tour of duty from His Majesty, the Government and the Omani people. She also wished His Majesty good health, happiness and a long life and the sultanate further development and growth under the wise leadership of His Majesty the Sultan.

On his turn, Sayyid Asaad expressed his appreciation for the efforts exerted by the ambassador in serving bilateral relations and wished her success. He also wished the people of Libya further progress and prosperity.

The meeting was attended by the Secretary General and the two Advisors at Sayyid Asaad's office.

ONA

Oman condemns Israel's aggression in Palestine

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate has condemned and denounced the continuous aggression of Israeli occupation forces against Palestinian cities and towns.

Israel's army and Gaza fighters exchanged heavy cross-border fire on Wednesday, with 20 Palestinians killed over two days amid the worst escalation of violence to hit the coastal territory in months.

In a statement, the Foreign Ministry said, 'Oman condemns the use of force in the Gaza Strip and storming of the city of Nablus in the West Bank. This unjustified escalation is a clear violation of international law and Security Council resolutions.'

The ministry added that Oman appeals to the international com-



munity to take deterrent measures against Israel to stop its continued aggression against the Palestinian people, stressing on the firm Omani position towards the Palestinian cause.

It called for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories to the 1967 borders and enabling the Palestinian people to establish their independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

MUSANDAM LIFELINE

Diba-Lima-Khasab road awarded for RO152mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Work on one of the most strategic and vital projects in the sultanate will kick off soon following the awarding of a tender for designing and construction of the Diba-Lima-Khasab road in Musandam.

The Secretariat General of Tender Board awarded tenders for development projects worth RO177.524mn on Tuesday, including one worth RO151.884 for implementation of a single-lane asphalt road between Khasab and Diba which will connect to Lima.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has stated that the 96km road project will contribute significantly to development in the governorate. The project is expected to be completed in 2027.

The project was initially planned over the mountains with as many as nine tunnels, aggregating a total distance of 21km, in addition to 14 bridges, nine major junctions and 11 minor junctions,



The new road will help people who live in the villages in its vicinity to reach their place of work easily, in addition to availing services easily and quickly

NASSER AL HOSNI

ballooning overall cost of construction.

In February 2021, however, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq directed authorities to proceed with implementation of the Diba-Lima-Khasab road project "finding alternative routes".

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, economic analyst Nasser al Hosni said the new road will revive the economy and tourism in the pic-

turesque region. "The road will reduce road accidents that resulted in several deaths, especially on the road connecting Diba to Lima."

He added that it is considered one of the most complex projects ever undertaken in the Gulf region, as the road will run through difficult terrain, including rising mountains and plunging wadis. "The new road will help people

who live in the villages in its vicinity to reach their place of work easily, in addition to availing services easily and quickly. I hope construction of the new road is planned away from wadis to avoid damage during heavy rains," said Hosni.

According to Abdul Aziz al Shehi, a citizen of Khasab, the new road will ease traffic and allow people to move between wilayats easily. "It will trigger economic development and help urban and tourism expansion."

Ahmed Ali al Aqbi, head of the fishing port in Diba, described the new road as a "quantum leap in the provision of logistics" considering the governorate has five fishing ports and the commercial port of Diba.

The fishing port in Diba is the second largest in Oman. The new road will help fishermen transport their catch easily, increasing income and consequently increasing the national income.

"The people of Diba are happy with this news. We thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham for issuing a Royal directive for construction of the road," Aqbi said.

TENDER NOTICE

The Internal Tender Committee of Port of Duqm Company SAOC., hereby announces the following Tender:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of receiving Specifications	Date of Bid Submission	Suppliers	Tender Fee OMR (Inclusive of VAT 5%)	Place of Submission
ITC/T/001/2023	Invest & Operate the Training Centre in Port of Duqm	25 th May 2023	22 nd June 2023	Only Specialized Companies	Free	Port of Duqm Company 3 rd floor

Taking into consideration the following:

All specialized companies that wish to participate in the tender should send a request to tenders@portofduqm.om and attach a copy of the Commercial Registration Certificate and the contact details of the authorized individual (business card) to the address presented below.

From 07:00 – 16:30 (Sunday – Thursday).

Complete Tender documents should be submitted in sealed envelope with red wax with tender number and title and addressed to the "Chairman of Internal Tender Committee". The envelope should not make any reference to the bidder details. All applicants are required to submit the Tender in the 'Tender' box in the main office of Port of Duqm Company at or before 16:00 PM on the assigned date for submission of the Tender. Tenders submitted after the above mentioned date and time shall not be considered.

* The company is not obliged to accept the lowest offer or any other offer without any justifiable reasons.
* The company reserve the right to issue the order either in part or full for the quoted items without any justifiable reasons.
* The company reserve the right to reject the tenders not complying with the tender documentation requirement.
For any clarification, please contact us through tenders@portofduqm.om

Port of Duqm Company S.A.O.C.
PO Box: 2409, PC: 111, Sultanate of Oman,
Almashreq Building, 18 November Street, N. Azaliba
T: (+968) 24342800 | F: (+968) 24587343 | www.portofduqm.om



OIA plans to exit more than five investments in 2023

Sayyid Bilarab chairs startups programme meet

Muscat - H H Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, Honorary President of Programme for Promising Omani Startups, presided over the second meeting of the supervisory committee of the programme for the year 2023 on Wednesday.

The programme aims to support companies that rely on tech-

nology and innovation in Oman, promote startup culture in educational institutions, and enhance community awareness of their importance to the economy.

The programme also seeks to empower those with innovative ideas, support the establishment of startup companies and link

these to business, investment and financing opportunities in order to expand in local and global markets.

The objective of the programme is also to raise Oman's ranking in international indicators related to innovation, technology and ease of doing business.

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MOH No: 658/2023

MARKET WATCH

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FOREX RATES

(ROI equals)

Indian	213.12
Pakistan	754.53
Bangladesh	279.43
Philippines	144.70
Sri Lanka	823.71

*Rates as on May 10

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Shell wins legal case over Nigeria oil spill

Britain's highest court ruled Wednesday it was too late for people in Nigeria's Niger delta region to lodge pollution claims against energy giant Shell after a huge oil spill more than one decade ago. The Supreme Court said in a statement that its five judges "unanimously" rejected an appeal over the 2011 spill, upholding prior rulings that claims were not made before a legal deadline. Nigerian claimants say their shoreline faced a "devastating impact" from a leak at the Bonga oilfield which unleashed 40,000 barrels of crude into the Gulf of Guinea. Shell said the spill was swiftly contained. The claimants had sought Wednesday to overturn rulings from two lower courts, arguing that the oil spill constituted a "continuing nuisance", a legal definition to which the deadline would not apply.

OIA plans to exit more than five investments in 2023

Our Correspondent

Muscat

The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) is planning to exit more than five investments in the energy, aviation, manufacturing, tourism, and information and communication technology (ICT) sectors this year. In an interview published in Oxford Business Group's *Oman 2023 Report*, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, president of OIA, said, "OIA has made significant progress in its divestment plans. The authority is planning to exit more than five investments in different sectors through initial public offerings (IPOs) or direct sale to strategic buyers in 2023. These sectors include energy, aviation, manufacturing, tourism and ICT." Murshidi added that OIA is implementing and executing its divestment plan while considering market conditions to achieve optimal exit transactions and generate revenue. In 2021, OIA exited five of its investments in domestic proj-

ects, two in the logistics sector and three in energy. In addition, two assets were completely divested in 2022. The first was the Pearl Real Estate Investment Fund, which was listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange through an IPO. The second was in the logistics sector and was sold to a strategic buyer through a private sale transaction, according to Murshidi. "The divestment process for two more companies is expected to be finalised in early 2023," he added. Targeting quality FDI According to Murshidi, Oman aims to attract higher levels of foreign direct investment (FDI) by creating appealing investment opportunities with attractive returns and actively communicating with the broader investment community through roadshows, investor conferences, and targeted meetings. Murshidi said in the interview with OBG, "The US, the UK, China, Europe and the GCC are key international markets that



Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi

cilitate access to the market. This would enable a more targeted approach to link foreign investors to domestic opportunities. Impact of rising interest rates When asked about the impact of globally rising interest rates and inflation on Oman's economic diversification plans, Murshidi said, "While rising interest rates in markets across the world have increased borrowing costs globally, we believe that Oman will manage the impacts of this trend well." He said that despite the increase in the Central Bank of Oman's policy rate in line with that set by the US Federal Reserve, the activity of local banks on the interbank market is limited. The Central Bank of Oman last week increased its repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.75 per cent, following the US central bank's decision as Omani rial is pegged to the US dollar. This was Omani central bank's tenth rate hike since March 2022.

"We have not seen higher borrowing costs being passed on to consumers. In addition, the sultanate's credit rating and outlook is improving, which has helped bring down the cost of funding and reduced pressure on banks," Murshidi said. In terms of inflation, Murshidi said there has been a slight increase in food prices; however, the sultanate benefits from the currency's peg to the US dollar, limiting import inflation. "As such, we believe that these factors should allow the country to continue implementing Oman Vision 2040's goals and work towards achieving a more sustainable and diversified economy," he noted. Global research and advisory firm Oxford Business Group published its *Oman 2023 Report* on Wednesday. The report explores Oman's progress towards achieving the long-term goals laid out in its Vision 2040 roadmap, which include diversifying the economy, creating sustainable cities and accelerating privatisation and Omanisation.

GCC economies remain insulated from global 'rocky recovery'

Our Correspondent

Muscat

The GCC region is somewhat insulated from the global 'rocky recovery', supported by oil prices and strong sovereign and corporate balance sheets, the global audit and advisory firm PwC said. Despite the expected global growth slowdown this year, growth in the GCC is expected to be resilient at 3.2 per cent, enabling further reinvestment in advancing National Visions, PwC said in a report on Monday. 'As global economies experience what the IMF has described as a rocky recovery post pandemic, marked by inflation, high interest rates and geopolitical uncertainty, the GCC economies are bouncing back, even in the worst-affected sectors,' PwC said in its Middle East Economy Watch report. This positive outlook is attrib-



The positive outlook for GCC economies is attributed to high oil prices and strong balance sheets at the sovereign and corporate levels

uted to high oil prices and strong balance sheets at the sovereign and corporate levels, as well as continued diversification and economic resilience as countries pursue their National Visions. However, the wider Middle East remains more vulnerable to these global trends, according to PwC. According to the report, the GCC is especially well placed to implement their long-term National Vision transformation plans due to substantial financial resources to direct to their objec-

tives, and the leadership continuity and commitment to see them through. The report noted that Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, for example, is hitting the halfway mark from its announcement in 2016, and has seen an out-performance in some areas, such as its female workforce participation surging to 36 per cent, already ahead of the 2030 target of 30 per cent. The commitment to economic diversification is also paying off: the share of the non-

oil economy is at 59 per cent with non-oil GDP in 2022 being 15 per cent larger in real terms and 28 per cent in nominal terms compared to the pre-vision baseline. Richard Boxshall, partner and chief economist at PwC Middle East, commented, "The GCC as a whole is making good progress towards achieving its countries' National Visions, with areas of common focus including non-oil diversification, improving infrastructure, advancing digitalisation, creating competitive business environments and workforce nationalisation targets for the private-sector." He said, "Most GCC countries are also advancing towards their sustainability objectives, such as investing in solar generation capacity. With COP28 on the horizon, we expect the momentum and reinvestments driving this transformation to increase."

Ibri Industrial City's first phase work 80% complete

Our Correspondent

Muscat

The Ibri Industrial City project, developed by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), is making significant progress with the infrastructure works completion rate in phase one now exceeding 80 per cent. The project aims to develop around 3mn sqm, which includes roadworks, water, sewage, rain-water drainage, and telecom networks, as well as surveillance systems. Furthermore, sustainable alternative energy has been utilised in 303 solar-powered streetlights. Road paving works have also been completed, and work is underway to complete the remaining services to make them fully available to investors in Ibri Industrial City. Eng Nasser al Mabsali, director general of Ibri Industrial City, said that the industrial city is currently home to 28 projects on a total area of 270,000 sqm, with a



Nasser al Mabsali

total investment volume exceeding RO9.7mn. These projects' activities vary between construction materials, oil and gas services, food industries, manufacturing industries, as well as warehousing and service and commercial activities. Some of these localised factories have already commenced production, while others will enter the production and implementation phase in the coming period. Mabsali pointed out that the Ibri Industrial City project has contributed to providing opportu-

nities for small and medium enterprises and job opportunities during 2023. "As new projects and factories begin operations within the industrial city, the number of opportunities available is on the rise," he added. Mabsali also noted that investors have shown keen interest in taking advantage of Madayn's incentives, which have been instrumental in attracting diverse types of investments, including a two-year rental exemption for investors followed by a 50 per cent exemption for the subsequent three years. Madayn has signed an agreement to establish an integrated station spanning 40,000 square meters, which will be implemented in phases and will include a fuel station, a rest area, and a facility that provides services to trucks and cars. The project will serve investors in Ibri Industrial City as well as travelers on the road leading to Saudi Arabia.

Omantel, Telkomsel sign up to GSMA blockchain trials

London, UK – The GSMA announced wholesale roaming trials for its next-generation telco blockchain network – the GSMA eBusiness Network – to demonstrate the benefits of blockchain technology for mobile network operators (MNOs). GSMA is a global organisation unifying the mobile ecosystem to discover, develop and deliver innovation that helps business and society thrive. Blockchain pioneers and roaming partners Omantel and Telkomsel have already signed up to the GSMA eBusiness Network Accelerator programme to monitor inter-operator roaming processes, support roaming agreement negotiations and expedite billing and settlement. The trials will go live in June 2023, according to a press release. Blockchain technology securely automates the complex business processes for wholesale roaming, ensuring that the

interoperation between MNOs is accurate, transparent and verified in the shortest possible time. Omantel and Telkomsel anticipate multiple benefits from using blockchain, including operational efficiency through decreased manual intervention, greater accuracy in charging, reduced billing disputes and rejections and quicker time to market for roaming products and offerings. Talal al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, said, "We want to lead the pack with the implementation of this revolutionary blockchain solution, which will not only automate our systems further, but also help us to optimise costs and become more efficient by reducing margins of error. In addition to the operational benefits that we expect to achieve, we foresee an improvement in customer-experience by way of fewer disputes in invoices and improved roaming services and products. It will also allow us



to partner with more operators to exchange data over blockchain, thereby enabling future technology developments like 5G Standalone Roaming and the Billing and Charging Evolution." "Such initiative reflects our commitment of enriching the experience of our customers to complement our wide interna-

tional roaming footprint over 200 countries with more than 700 partners," he added. As Indonesia's leading digital telco, Telkomsel consistently reaches beyond in unlocking more potential for the country's progress. During MWC23 in Barcelona, Telkomsel joined the GSMA eBusiness Network Accelerator programme with the

hope of opening opportunities for further implementation of blockchain network technology in Indonesia. "By conducting a joint study and exploring blockchain technology, we can optimise our wholesale roaming clearing and settlement processes in the future. Telkomsel will continue to evaluate the results of the blockchain technology trial and bring more inclusive and sustainable access to world-class connectivity in Indonesia," said Wong Soon Nam, chief planning and transformation officer, Telkomsel. Alex Sinclair, chief technology officer at GSMA, said, "Blockchain technology is ideally suited to streamline the wholesale roaming clearing and settlement process. It does this by enabling the automation of business processes that are becoming increasingly complex as we enter an era of connectivity de-

fined by 5G and IoT." He added, "We are asking our members to join the trials so they can realise the benefits of the blockchain, along with their roaming partners, and lay the foundations for Web3, with fully automated contract management, settlement and payments." The roaming application services offered by the GSMA eBusiness Network ensure more transparent and secure roaming operations for MNOs. The applications are built on blockchain-based automated workflows, using smart contracts to create a single-source-of-truth in roaming contract management, data clearing and financial settlement. Under the GSMA eBusiness Network Accelerator programme, MNOs can benefit from mentoring, services and training resources including GSMA Node for easy access to the GSMA eBusiness Network;

GSMA Negotiator, an online negotiation environment for roaming managers to forecast, analyse, negotiate and digitally sign roaming agreements; and GSMA Settlement, an automated settlement environment designed to reduce disputes and expedite the wholesale roaming billing and charging process. The GSMA eBusiness Network is a private-permissioned industry-wide blockchain solution, launched in 2021 to support a wide range of operator business requirements and transform the wholesale roaming clearing and settlement process. It was formed following collaborative research between the GSMA and CK Hutchison Group Telecom, Deutsche Telekom, Orange, Telefonica, Verizon and Vodafone who were the founding members of the Blockchain for Wholesale Roaming (BWR) initiative, convened by the GSMA.

EU launches first tender for joint gas purchases

Brussels, Belgium – The European Union on Wednesday launched its first international tender for joint gas purchases, as the bloc looks to assure its supplies in the face of Russia's war on Ukraine.

The 27-nation bloc is pushing to get the best price it can as it fills it storage ahead of next winter and avoid the record price spikes seen after Moscow launched its invasion last year.

The tender comes as the EU has scrambled to end its reliance on Russian energy in the wake of the war, while Moscow has in turn cut gas deliveries to the bloc.

"This is a historic milestone because for the first time ever, we are leveraging the EU's col-



The 27-nation EU bloc is pushing to get the best gas price it can

lective economic weight to increase our energy security and tackle high gas prices," European Commission vice president Maros Sefcovic said.

For this first tender, which covers deliveries expected be-

tween June 2023 and May 2024, 77 European companies have clubbed together with applications for a total volume of around 11.6bn cubic metres of gas.

International gas suppliers, excluding Russia, are now invited

to respond to this aggregated demand by submitting their bids by May 15.

The best bids will then be passed on to the client companies for commercial discussions until the deal is concluded.

Brussels has said new calls for tender will take place every two months until the end of the year.

The EU has set a target to get gas storage capacity up to 90 per cent full by November as it readies for the winter.

The EU mandates that at least 15 per cent of that amount should come through the joint aggregated demand tenders as it tries to avoid competition between member states pushing up prices.

AFP

US inflation eases but price pressures remain

Washington, US – Consumer inflation in the United States nudged down only slightly in April, the Labor Department said on Wednesday, despite strong efforts to cool the economy and rein in price increases.

The latest number signals that price pressures remain, although it marks a step in the right direction and the smallest annual rise in two years.

The rate remains well above pre-pandemic levels, and analysts are closely eyeing inflation numbers as the Federal Reserve mulls the need for further interest rate hikes and how long to keep policy restrictive.

The consumer price index (CPI), a key inflation gauge, rose 4.9 per cent from a year ago, just a touch lower than March's 5.0 per cent figure.



In this file photo, people shop at a grocery supermarket in Alhambra, California (AFP)

"The index for shelter was the largest contributor to the monthly all items increase, followed by increases in the index for used cars and trucks and the index for gasoline," said the Labor Department in a statement.

On a monthly basis, overall

CPI rose 0.4 per cent in April, picking up from a 0.1 percent rise in March.

Excluding the volatile food and energy segments, consumer inflation rose 0.4 percent in April from a month ago, as it did in March.

AFP



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Board of Directors' Report – 31st March 2023

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board, I take this opportunity to present the financial performance of Oman & Emirates Investment Holding Co SAOG for the three months period ended 31st March 2023.

Financial Results:

The Company (Group & Parent) achieved Net Profits of RO 141,370 and RO 142,754 respectively during the period January to March 2023, compared to (Group & Parent) recorded Net Profits of RO 568,192 and RO 589,270 respectively during January to March 2022. The details are shown below:

Particulars	Equity Holding %	Jan - Jun 2023 RO	Jan - Jun 2022 RO
Profit/(Loss) before share of results of Subsidiaries and Associates		35,367	297,489
FINCORP Al Amal Fund	-	-	-
FINCORP SAOG	51.20%	43,511	292,482
Oman Hotels and Tourism Co. SAOC	31.72%	34,100	17,541
Oman Fiber Optic Co. SAOC	20.97%	29,776	(18,242)
Net Profit/(Loss) - Parent		142,754	589,270
Oman Euro Food Industries Co. SAOG	80.84%	(1,384)	(21,078)
Net Profit/(Loss) - Group		141,370	568,192

Stock Market Indices:

During January to March 2023, MSX and DFM increased by 0.12% and 2.12% respectively, while ADX decreased by 7.65% (January to March 2022: MSX, ADX and DFM increased by 1.83%, 17.20% and 10.35% respectively).

Net Equity, Investments and borrowing:

The Net Equity of the Group and the Parent Company decreased by (3.35%) and (3.19%) respectively during the three month period ended 31st March 2023. The Net Equity of the Group reduced from RO 23.157 Million at 31.12.2022 to RO 22.382 Million at 31.03.2023 (31.03.2022: RO 21.641 Million). The Net Equity of the Parent reduced from RO 24.220 at 31.12.2022 to RO 23.446 Million at 31.03.2023 (31.03.2022: RO 22.532 Million).

The total value of investments of the Group and the Parent Company reduced to RO 32.745 Million and RO 30.778 Million respectively as at 31.03.2023 (31.03.2022: Group - RO 38.465 Million and Parent Company - RO 36.606 Million).

The total borrowing of the Group and the Parent Company reduced to RO 13.219 Million and RO 9.498 Million respectively as at 31.03.2023 (31.03.2022: Group - RO 24.639 Million and Parent Company - RO 16.865 Million).

Future Outlook:

Growth prospects remain strong in the GCC countries as they embrace interest rate hikes moving in tandem with the US Federal Reserve. The combination of strong growth and rising inflation will tighten growth to some extent.

With energy prices driven up, Oman's economy could see a huge boost enabling the government to execute its planned major projects. The extra cash should also improve the business environment and stimulate investments in the Country. The benefits of higher oil prices may not offset the hike in food prices expected with the continuing war in Ukraine, but Oman is likely to counterbalance inflation.

Acknowledgement:

I take this opportunity to convey our gratitude to the Governments of the Sultanate of Oman and United Arab Emirates for their support to our Company, the stock market authorities for their guidance, banks for their cooperation, shareholders for their trust and employees their unwavering efforts.

MOHAMED DARWISH AL KHOORI
Chairman
8th May 2023

Consolidated and separate condensed interim statement of financial position as at 31 March 2023

	Group		Parent Company	
	31 March 2023 (Un-audited)	31 December 2022 (Audited)	31 March 2023 (Un-audited)	31 December 2022 (Audited)
ASSETS				
Cash and bank balances	1,709,069	2,588,582	602,209	964,158
Trade and other receivables	2,116,849	1,487,530	178,651	206,666
Inventories	444,005	456,254	-	-
Investments at fair value through profit and loss	14,689,104	14,641,548	10,746,556	10,883,176
Investment in associates	15,959,263	15,798,771	14,295,504	14,231,630
Investment in subsidiaries	-	-	3,639,545	3,596,035
Financial assets at amortised cost	2,096,636	2,099,271	2,096,636	2,099,271
Investment property	2,919,600	2,950,650	2,649,600	2,680,650
Property, plant and equipment	2,191,553	2,257,421	389,653	414,810
Right-of-use assets	385,565	385,565	-	-
Deferred tax assets	55,272	78,367	-	-
	42,566,916	42,743,959	34,598,354	35,076,396
	42,566,916	42,743,959	34,598,354	35,076,396
TOTAL ASSETS				
EQUITY				
Capital and reserves				
Share capital	12,187,500	12,187,500	12,187,500	12,187,500
Legal reserve	4,991,892	4,991,892	4,062,500	4,062,500
Retained earnings	5,202,767	5,977,493	7,196,461	7,969,803
Total capital and reserves of Parent Company	22,382,159	23,156,885	23,446,461	24,219,803
Non-controlling interest	3,216,877	3,175,730	-	-
TOTAL EQUITY	25,599,036	26,332,615	23,446,461	24,219,803
LIABILITIES				
Lease liabilities	399,715	399,715	-	-
Bank borrowings	74,114	79,890	6,407	11,582
Term loan	1,991,986	2,121,833	1,991,986	2,121,833
Trade and other payables	2,432,969	2,656,906	737,404	1,223,178
Loan from Government	11,153,000	11,153,000	7,500,000	7,500,000
Dividend payable	916,096	-	916,096	-
TOTAL LIABILITIES	16,967,880	16,411,344	11,153,000	10,856,593
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	42,566,916	42,743,959	34,598,354	35,076,396
Net assets per share	0.184	0.190	0.192	0.199

Consolidated and separate condensed interim statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the three-month period ended 31 March 2023

	Group		Parent Company	
	Period from 1 January 2023 to 31 March 2023 (Un-audited)	Period from 1 January 2022 to 31 March 2022 (Un-audited)	Period from 1 January 2023 to 31 March 2023 (Un-audited)	Period from 1 January 2022 to 31 March 2022 (Un-audited)
Interest income	63	-	63	-
Rental income	38,567	25,664	38,567	25,664
Brokerage commission income	49,895	37,535	-	-
Dividends income	424,577	449,532	337,162	350,274
Realised gains /(losses) on sale of investments at fair value through profit or loss	21,866	13,067	8,791	(32,832)
Unrealised (losses)/gains on investments at fair value through profit or loss	(192,979)	729,996	(120,686)	280,216
Share of profit from investment in associates and subsidiaries	160,492	63,231	107,386	291,781
Gross profit on sale of food products	98,161	74,293	-	-
Asset management fees	22,693	24,810	-	-
Other income	17,077	6,334	-	-
Total income	640,412	1,424,462	371,283	915,103
Expenses				
Staff costs	(184,929)	(186,386)	(77,501)	(74,061)
Administrative expenses	(186,768)	(164,490)	(115,227)	(88,275)
Investment related expenses	(2,635)	(4,999)	(2,635)	(4,999)
Total expenses	(374,332)	(355,875)	(195,363)	(167,335)
Operating profit for the period	266,080	1086,587	175,920	747,768
Finance costs	(60,468)	(186,614)	(33,166)	(158,498)
Net profit before tax for the period	205,612	881,973	142,754	589,270
Income tax expense	(23,095)	(39,987)	-	-
Net profit after tax and total comprehensive income for the period	182,517	841,986	142,754	589,270
Net profit after tax attributable to:				
Parent Company	141,370	568,192	142,754	589,270
Non controlling interest	41,147	273,794	-	-
	182,517	841,986	142,754	589,270
Earnings per share - basic and diluted	0.001	0.005	0.001	0.005

Note: The complete Financial Statements of the Company in Arabic or English will be made available to any shareholder on request.

Towell Auto launches Geely's 'revolutionary' vehicles in Oman

Geely Motors and Towell Auto Centre (TAC) have come together to deliver a remarkable achievement in the form of a whole range of new vehicles - the all-new CoolRay, the all-new Emgrand, the all-new Okavango and the all-new Azakarra.

The exclusive car launch event, held on Tuesday at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Muscat, Oman, witnessed imaginations reaching infinite levels with the unveiling of these vehicles.

The theme of the event was 'Infinite Imaginations', which symbolises Geely's commitment to pushing boundaries and exploring endless possibilities with forward-looking technologies and systemic advantages that Oman is about to witness.

On behalf of Towell Auto Centre and distinguished guests from Geely Motors, Riyadh Ali Sultan, General Manager of Towell Auto Centre, welcomed everyone to the event and expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to showcase Geely's innovative and technologically advanced cars in Oman.

Geely and TAC are proud to bring the all-new CoolRay, the all-new Emgrand, the all-new Okavango and the all-new Azakarra are the latest additions to Geely's lineup of exceptional automobiles. These vehicles are designed to offer the ultimate driving experience, combining cutting-edge technology, advanced safety features, and unparalleled comfort.

The all-new Emgrand, a sedan that is set to redefine the driving experience, and the all-new Coolray, the first overseas SUV born from the BMA platform, both were unveiled at the event.

The all-new Okavango is a seven-seater vehicle that offers ample space for families, creating uncompromised memories. With its advanced safety features, advance technologies, modern design, combined with exceptional performance, makes it a top choice for families looking for a reliable and stylish vehicle. The all-new Azakarra is a premium SUV that combines power and elegance, with a spacious and luxurious interior, outstanding performance, and exceptional safety features.



Geely's new range of vehicles models embody bold styling, high quality, superior performance, and smart interiors. The launch event also marked the debut of Geely's new visual identity, which is embodied in products as well as their new logo. The new logo inherits and extends the visual DNA of the Geely brand, signifying the brand's evolution and readiness to serve the Omani market with exceptional automobiles. The launch event was at-

tended by several dignitaries and guests. The speech of G U Xiaen (Alex), Deputy General Manager of Geely Auto Middle East, was screened during the event where he highlighted the collaboration between Geely and TAC and how it is a coming together of two visionary organisations to deliver the best-in-class automobile experience to people in the Sultanate of Oman. "Together, we are pushing the boundaries of smart mobility solutions, setting new benchmarks

for the future of transportation, all to be available in Oman," he said. He further expressed Geely's excitement about bringing their new visual identity and logo to Oman. "The new logo shows a more 'creative, vigorous, and imaginative' Geely Auto. The new Geely, with its creativity, creates a product experience that exceeds users' expectations. It explores more possibilities with infinite imagination and transforms imagination into reality through

implementation of forward-looking technologies," he said. Riyadh Ali Sultan, General Manager of Towell Auto Centre (TAC), said, "We are confident that these all-new Geely cars will offer exceptional experiences that you will love. We invite you to witness the realisation of Geely's infinite imaginations and join us in exploring the boundless possibilities of the future of mobility." The spokesperson for TAC then invited everyone to join

them in having a first look at the cars and exploring the boundless possibilities of the future of mobility with Geely. The launch event was a huge success, leaving attendees in awe as they marvelled at the stunning new cars on display. It was a celebration of Geely and TAC's shared vision of creating smart life through technology that redefines the driving experience with infinite imaginations. They expressed their gratitude to all their partners, customers, and employees who have supported them throughout the journey. The launch event concluded with a sense of optimism and excitement about the future of smart mobility solutions in Oman.

With the launch of the new revolutionary range of vehicle such as the all-new CoolRay, the all-new Emgrand, the all-new Okavango and the all-new Azakarra, Geely and TAC have set a new benchmark for the automobile industry in Oman. This Season is the perfect opportunity for car enthusiasts to become proud owners of a Geely car in Oman with the 'Season to Explore' offer which brings in a range of benefits. In Oman, Geely vehicles are brought you by Towell Auto Centre LLC. To buy a car in Oman or book a test drive and get unbelievable offers, one may visit the nearest Geely Oman showroom or visit www.geely-oman.com

DGHS-Muscat holds forum on scientific research, health data

The Directorate General of Health Services of Muscat governorate (DGHS-Muscat), represented by the Planning & Studies Department, on Wednesday organised a forum for scientific research and health data indicators in the lecture hall of Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. The forum was opened under the patronage of H E Dr Fatma bint Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health for Administrative, Financial & Planning Affairs, in the presence of Dr Thamara bint Saeed al Ghafri, DGHS-Muscat Director General and a number of officials in the Ministry and the Directorate. At the beginning of the forum, Dr Fatima bin Ahmed al Hinai, Director of the Planning and Studies Department, pointed out that this Forum aims to present scientific research published in interna-

tional journals that won awards at the local and regional levels. She added that this research will contribute to developing the therapeutic intervention and services to the community. Moreover, the Forum reviewed various health data indicators in health institutions, which include the number of patients and visitors, the quality of treatment services provided to them, the nature of diseases, health projects, and others that depend on setting strategic plans for health development. Dr Saeed al Hisani, head of the Studies and Research Section, said that the number of scientific research that were reviewed and approved by the Proposals Monitoring Committee at the DGHS-Muscat amounted to eight researches out of 161 focused on infectious diseases, care primary health, and mental illness.

Khimji Ramdas opens Läderach store at Mall of Oman

In bringing premium Swiss chocolatier Läderach's fresh, artisanal chocolate experience to chocolate aficionados in the sultanate, leading business conglomerate Khimji Ramdas (KR) and Khoory and Sons, have opened the doors of a luxury chocolate store at the Mall of Oman. The grand opening of the boutique witnessed the presence of H E Thomas Oertle, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to Oman, along with members of the Läderach and Khimji Ramdas families. With every aspect of its interior design embodying the Läderach aesthetic and exuding the core values of Swiss chocolate, the store is located on the left side of Entrance B, on Level 3, at the Mall of Oman. A treat for all five senses, the boutique features a dedicated 'FrischSchoggi' (fresh chocolate) counter, where chocolate lovers can select from multiple varieties of Läderach's iconic hand-broken chocolate bark. The store is also home to an assortment of decadent delights, ranging from hand-crafted 'pra-



lines and truffles', 'tartufi' (Italian-inspired sweet truffles), 'snacking' (chocolate snacks), to the 'tablet' (pure chocolate bars); all of which are prepared as per the highest standards of confectionery-making. That's not all, the boutique is equipped with a unique customization station that enables guests to create chocolate boxes for every occasion, personal or professional. Speaking on the sidelines of the boutique's opening, Anil Khimji, Director, Khimji Ramdas Group said, "Khimji Ramdas recognizes that today's customers are not just looking for world-

class brands, but also seeking unforgettable, premium experiences. Therefore, we are pleased to have opened Läderach store in the heart of the biggest mall in Oman. Läderach, as we all know is dedicated to introducing innovative ideas that offer unparalleled chocolate indulgence; the new boutique characterizes this, and showcases our joint commitment to providing customers with a personalized and distinctive experience." The exquisite taste of Läderach chocolate originates from both the rainforests and the Swiss Alps; with Cocoa, Läder-

ach's most important raw material, traveling from Ghana and South America to the Läderach factory in Glarus (Switzerland). It is noteworthy that right from the cocoa bean to the shop counter, Läderach oversees the entire production process, with all their chocolates being crafted in Switzerland. By adopting this comprehensive approach, the Swiss chocolatier ensures the premium and sustainable quality of its cocoa, which is then used to create tenderly smooth melting swiss-chocolate creations. Johannes Läderach, CEO of

the Läderach Group, said, "Customers in Oman share our passion for freshness, taste and quality. It is hence our priority to bring to them the delight of freshly-made premium swiss-chocolate, where the quality of each ingredient and the manufacturing process itself is meticulously scrutinized. "Since our approach is infused with creativity, we aspire to constantly surprise customers in Oman, as we do with customers world-over, and provide them with a luxury chocolate experience that can be savored with all their senses."

THAI ELECTIONS

Thais expected to deliver heavy poll blow to military parties

Bangkok, Thailand - Thailand votes on Sunday in an election expected to deliver a rejection of former coup leader Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, with the opposition led by exiled billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra's daughter tipped to win the most seats.

Polls suggest voters will hand in a damning verdict on nearly a decade of military-backed rule that has brought economic stagnation and what rights groups say is a worrying crackdown on basic freedoms.

The election is the first since youth-led pro-democracy protests upended the kingdom's politics nearly three years ago with unprecedented calls for reforms to the powers of ultra-wealthy King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Leading the polls is the Pheu Thai party fronted by 36-year-old Paetongtarn Shinawatra, youngest daughter of former PM Thaksin, who was ousted in a 2006 coup.

The junta-scripted constitution, however, gives the Senate, handpicked by the military, a major say in choosing the prime minister - potentially blocking Pheu Thai's route to power.

Former army chief Prayut



A woman rides her bicycle past a campaign poster for Thai Prime Minister and United Thai Nation Party's candidate Prayut Chan-O-Cha along a street in Bangkok on Wednesday (AFP)

seized power in a 2014 coup, ousting Paetongtarn's aunt Yingluck, before becoming prime minister at the head of a complex multi-party coalition following a controversial 2019 election.

The 69-year-old has pitched himself as the candidate with the experience required for the job, but is lagging badly in the polls, blamed for a sputtering

economy and feeble recovery from the pandemic, which battered the kingdom's crucial tourism sector.

"Look at our country - do you think our economy is good after four years?" office worker Wan Sirichai, 50, told AFP in Bangkok.

"They don't use quality people to rule the country, but they used nepotism to benefit their own close friends. I just want

smart people to come in and change the country."

Voters braved blistering heat on Sunday to cast early ballots a week ahead of the main voting day, with the Election Commission putting turnout at 90 per cent.

Analysts said the high early turnout pointed to a strong desire for change among the 52mn-strong electorate.

'Atmosphere of fear'

The election pitches a youthful opposition against the conservative royalist-military Bangkok establishment represented by Prayut's United Thai Nation party and the Palang Pracharath Party, which led the outgoing governing coalition.

Under Prayut's government, lese majeste prosecutions have rocketed, contributing to what Human Rights Watch has called an 'atmosphere of fear' around the election. More than 200 people have faced royal defamation charges in the wake of the 2020 street protests, which included calls for changes to the previously untouchable monarchy.

With household debt running high and growth feeble, much campaigning has focused on the economy, which is Southeast Asia's second-largest. There is little new on offer in terms of policies, however, with most parties engaging in a bidding war on populist welfare promises.

Pheu Thai has pledged to give 10,000 baht (US\$300) in a digital wallet to every citizen over 16 years old, while others have pledged to hike the minimum wage and give cash grants to farmers.

AFP

The PM candidates

Bangkok, Thailand - From a long-serving politician better known as the 'Rolex general' to a fresh-faced challenger, here are some of the candidates vying to be Thailand's next prime minister after Sunday's election:

Prayut Chan-o-Cha

Incumbent Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha is running for re-election heading up his newly formed United Thai Nation Party.

One of the masterminds of Thailand's 2014 military coup, Prayut retained power in a controversial 2019 vote.

The 69-year-old is one of the kingdom's longest-serving prime ministers, but can only remain in the post until 2025, according to a constitutional court ruling.

Prawit Wongsuwan

Palang Pracharath Party leader Prawit Wongsuwan is known for his love of luxury watches and skills as a quiet backroom political operator.

Born into a military family in the 1940s, he was a career soldier rising through the ranks to army chief from 2004 to 2005. A consummate player behind the scenes, he was appointed to the National Legislative As-

sembly after the 2006 coup, then in 2008 he was defence minister under the establishment Democrat party.

Pita Limjaroenrat

A fresh-faced 42-year-old, the father-of-one is considered a political heartthrob in a sea of ageing politicians.

He was parachuted into the leadership in 2020 after a court dissolved Move Forward's predecessor Future Forward Party and banned founder and auto parts tycoon Thanathorn Juangroengruangkit from running for office for a decade.

Before being elected a lawmaker in 2019, Harvard-educated Pita was an entrepreneur.

Anutin Charnvirakul

Health minister and Bhumjaithai party leader Anutin Charnvirakul has become the unlikely face of Thailand's weed movement after decriminalising the plant in 2022.

The 56-year-old, educated at Hofstra University in New York, hails from one of Thailand's wealthiest families. A keen amateur pilot, he has claimed to have flown organs for donation.

AFP

Thaksin's daughter carries Shinawatra torch in the election

Bangkok, Thailand - Less than a fortnight after giving birth to her second child, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the scion of Thailand's most famous political dynasty, has a date with destiny.

As Thailand goes to the polls on Sunday, the 36-year-old hopes to deliver victory for the opposition Pheu Thai party - the latest incarnation of the movement founded by her billionaire father Thaksin Shinawatra.

Paetongtarn swiftly returned to campaigning after giving birth to her son on May 1, albeit only by video link so far, as she seeks

to become Thailand's youngest-ever prime minister.

A political newcomer who until last year helped run the hotel arm of the ultra-rich family's business empire, Paetongtarn is now the face of their latest battle against the military establishment that ousted her father and aunt from power.

Paetongtarn was a near-constant presence on the campaign trail before the birth of her son on May 1, cheerfully glad-handing supporters at rallies in searing heat despite being heavily pregnant.



Paetongtarn Shinawatra looks on during an election rally at the Thunder Dome Stadium in Nonthaburi, north of the capital Bangkok (AFP)

Two days after giving birth she presented her son to the media, hailing him as her 'secret power', and vowing to get back to the campaign trail.

On Friday she addressed hundreds of supporters in Bangkok by video link, urging them to bring Pheu Thai a landslide victory to thwart the military establishment's attempts to keep the party from power.

Energy, youth

Paetongtarn, known in Thailand by her nickname Ung Ing, is the third child of Thaksin, a police-

man turned billionaire telecoms tycoon who won two elections in the early 2000s before being ousted in a coup in 2006.

She grew up in Bangkok and studied hotel management in Britain, then in 2019 married commercial pilot Pidok Sook-sawas with two glitzy receptions in the Thai capital and Hong Kong. The couple now have two children.

She shares her jet-setting lifestyle with half a million followers on Instagram, and her youth and energy put her in stark contrast to her main mili-

tary-allied rivals - two strait-laced former army chiefs.

Often decked out in designer labels - or the party's signature bright red - she has energised the Pheu Thai base, taking the Shinawatra brand to a new generation while endearing herself to older Thaksin supporters with regular expressions of filial devotion on social media.

Her charisma on the campaign trail has surprised some who had written her off as little more than a figurehead with the right name.

AFP

15 children drown in Nigeria boat accident

Kano, Nigeria - Fifteen children drowned and 25 others were missing when their overloaded boat capsized in a river in northwest Nigeria, a local official said on Wednesday.

The children were on their way from Dundaji village in Sokoto State to collect firewood in the bush on Tuesday on the other side of Shagari river when their boat sank, Aliyu Abubakar, local administrator of Shagari district, said. "We woke up to a tragedy yesterday morning, where a boat carrying children capsized mid-river," Abubakar told AFP.

"Fifteen bodies, 13 girls and two boys, were recovered by local rescue teams and buried in the village," said the official, who supervised the rescue operation.

River accidents are frequent in Nigeria, often caused by overloading, poor maintenance, heavy flooding in rainy season and disregard of safety regulations. Divers were working in the Shagari river late on Tuesday searching for more of the children.

In April last year, 29 chil-

dren from nearby Gidan Magana village in Sokoto drowned in the same river when their vessel capsized while they were also on their way to fetch firewood for their families. During massive flooding in rainy season in December, at least 76 people drowned when their boat went down in a swollen river in southeast Anambra State.

In one of the country's worst river disasters in May 2021, only 20 people were rescued and more than 150 went missing when a boat transporting people to market broke apart while travelling between Kebbi and Niger states. Nigeria's waterways authority has tried to ban night-time sailing on rivers to stop accidents, and overloading vessels is a criminal offence, but skippers and crews often flout the rules.

River transport and market trade are common in Nigeria, where roads are often poor. The Niger, West Africa's main river travelling through Guinea to Nigeria's Niger Delta, is a key local trade route.

AFP

'Deeply concerned' about Myanmar violence: ASEAN

Labuan Bajo, Indonesia - Southeast Asian nations said on Wednesday they are 'deeply concerned' about the violence ravaging Myanmar, and condemned a recent attack on a convoy of diplomats delivering humanitarian aid in the country.

Turmoil in junta-ruled Myanmar has dominated talks at this week's Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Indonesia, as the regional bloc faces criticism for its perceived inaction.

ASEAN has led diplomatic attempts to resolve the festering crisis, but its efforts so far have failed to stem the bloodshed unleashed by a military coup in 2021.

"We were deeply concerned with ongoing violence in Myanmar and urged the immediate cessation of all forms of violence and the use of force to create a conducive environment for the safe and timely delivery of humanitarian assistance and inclusive national dialogues," ASEAN leaders said in a statement.

The junta has ignored international criticism and refused to engage with its opponents, which include ousted lawmakers, anti-coup 'People's Defence Forces' and armed ethnic minority groups.

An air strike on a village in a



Indonesian President Joko Widodo speaks during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Labuan Bajo on Wednesday (AFP)

rebel stronghold last month that reportedly killed about 170 people sparked global condemnation and worsened the junta's isolation. Pressure on the regional bloc increased on Sunday after a convoy of vehicles carrying diplomats and officials coordinating ASEAN humanitarian relief in Myanmar came under fire.

Singapore and Indonesia said earlier that staff from their embassies in Myanmar were in the vehicles that came under fire in eastern Shan State but were unharmed. "We condemned the at-

tack and underlined that the perpetrators must be held accountable," ASEAN leaders said in their statement.

Addressing the summit on Wednesday, Indonesian President Joko Widodo said he was 'confident' the 10-member bloc could deal with growing global challenges if its members were united.

"With unity, ASEAN will be able to play a central role in bringing peace and growth," Widodo said through a translator as he opened the leaders' session

of the summit.

'Quiet diplomacy'

Foreign ministers and national leaders meeting on the Indonesian island of Flores are trying to kickstart a five-point plan agreed upon with Myanmar two years ago after mediation attempts to end the violence failed.

Myanmar remains an ASEAN member but has been barred from top-level summits due to the junta's failure to implement the peace plan. Jakarta's chairmanship of the bloc this year had

raised hopes ASEAN could push for a peaceful solution, using its economic weight as well as its diplomatic experience.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said on Friday that her country was using 'quiet diplomacy' to speak with all sides of the Myanmar conflict and spur renewed peace efforts.

But a senior Indonesian minister said on Tuesday that ASEAN was at a 'crossroad' and risked becoming irrelevant if it failed to deal with Myanmar and other regional emergencies.

Indonesia was running out of time to achieve a breakthrough, said Lina Alexandra, an analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta.

After the next leaders summit in September, Alexandra added, Indonesia will hand the bloc's influential chairmanship to communist-ruled Laos, which could bring Myanmar back 'into the fold' and allow the junta to attend ASEAN summits.

"It is time for Indonesia to show that it can do what it should do," she said.

ASEAN's charter principles of consensus and non-interference have hamstrung its ability to stop the violence in Myanmar, which critics say poses an existential threat to the bloc.

AFP

Israel, Palestinian fighters trade deadly fire

20 Palestinians were killed over 2 days amid worst escalation of violence to hit the region in months

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - Israel's army and Gaza fighters traded heavy cross-border fire on Wednesday, with 20 Palestinians killed over two days amid the worst escalation of violence to hit the coastal territory in months. Smoke billowed from the densely-populated coastal enclave after Israel announced it was targeting rocket launch sites of the fighter group Islamic Jihad. Gaza's health ministry said five people were killed, a day after Israeli strikes on the Palestinian territory left 15 dead. Sirens wailed in the Tel Aviv area warning of incoming rocket fire, an AFP journalist reported, and in communities close to the border according to the army. An AFP journalist in Gaza saw dozens of projectiles fired, while in a joint statement Palestinian fighter factions said 'hundreds of rockets' were launched. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel is 'ready for the possibility of an expanded campaign and harsh strikes against Gaza', in a meeting with local leaders near the coastal territory. Israel's Magen David Adom emergency service said it had received no immediate reports of casualties. Israel's Iron Dome air defence system intercepted rockets above the coastal city of Ashkelon and elsewhere in the south, AFP photographers witnessed. The latest violence comes a day after Israeli strikes on Gaza killed three top Islamic Jihad fighters and 12 others, including four children, according to a health ministry toll.

'Tension and fear'

Israel's military said Wednesday's strikes included firing on fighters 'who were travelling to a rocket launch site in the city of Khan Yunis' in southern Gaza. Islamic Jihad had vowed on Tuesday to retaliate, with Israel warning its residents near the border to stay near bomb shelters. Ahead of Wednesday's exchange of fire, Gaza's usually bustling shops were closed. People in Gaza 'expect the worst', said resident Monther Abdullah, 50. "Everyone feels anxious and people aren't on the street much. "I definitely feel like there's a war coming, and there's tension and fear, whether here or there." The latest violence comes on



Smoke billows following an Israeli strike on Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on Wednesday (AFP)

the second anniversary of a devastating 11-day war fought between Gaza fighters and Israel. Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif Al-Qanou said on Wednesday 'the strikes of the unified resistance are part of the process of responding to the massacre committed by (Israel)'. Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad are considered terrorist organisations by Israel and the United States. The top fighters were named as Jihad Ghannam, Khalil al-Bah-tini and Tareq Ezzedine, a Gaza-based fighter leader in the West Bank. Earlier on Wednesday, Israeli troops raided the West Bank town of Qabatiya, killing two people whom the army accused of

firing at soldiers. The Palestinian health ministry identified the two men as Ahmed Jamal Tawfiq Assaf, 19, and Rani Walid Ahmed Qatanat, 24. The Israeli military said troops detained one person during the raid when soldiers were shot at from a vehicle. "The soldiers responded with live fire toward the two assailants

'Barbaric' strikes

The Arab League on Wednesday condemned the 'aggressive (and) barbaric Israeli raids on the Gaza Strip, which targeted civilians, children and women in residential neighbourhoods'. The Gaza violence this week is the worst since a three-day escalation in August killed 49 Palestinians, with no Israeli fatalities. Washington called for 'all parties to de-escalate the situation'. While Hamas has fought multiple wars with Israel in recent years, the group stayed on the sidelines of last year's conflict fought between Israel and Islamic Jihad. The latest violence brings to 130 the number of Palestinians killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so far this year. Nineteen Israelis, one Ukrainian and one Italian have been killed over the same period, according to an AFP count based on official sources from the two sides. These figures include combatants as well as civilians, and, on the Israeli side, three members of the country's Arab minority. AFP

I definitely feel like there's a war coming, and there's tension and fear, whether here or there

MONTER ABDULLAH



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad meeting with Saudi's ambassador to Jordan, Nayef bin Bandar Al-Sudairi, in Damascus on Wednesday (AFP)

Syria's Assad receives Saudi invitation to Arab summit

Damascus, Syria - Syrian President Bashar al-Assad received an invitation to next week's Arab summit in Saudi Arabia, the presidency said on Wednesday, the first such invitation since the country's war began. The pan-Arab body had suspended Damascus in November 2011 over its crackdown on protests, which began earlier that year and spiralled into a war that has killed more than 500,000 people, displaced millions and battered the country's infrastructure and industry. On Sunday, the Arab League welcomed back Syria's government, securing Assad's return to the Arab fold after years of isolation. Assad received an invitation from Saudi King Salman 'to participate in the thirty-second Arab League summit, which will be held in Jeddah on May 19', the Syrian presidency said in a statement. Assad said the summit 'will enhance joint Arab action to achieve the aspirations of the Arab peoples', the statement added. Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Jordan, Nayef bin Bandar al-Sudairi, delivered the invitation. The last Arab League summit Assad attended was in 2010 in Libya. The invitation comes a day after Riyadh and Damascus announced that work would resume at their respective diplomatic missions in Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Diplomatic flurry
The kingdom cut ties with

Assad's government in 2012 and Riyadh had long openly championed Assad's ouster, backing Syrian rebels in earlier stages of the war. But a flurry of diplomatic activity has been underway since a deadly earthquake struck Syria and Turkey on February 6. A decision in March by former arch-rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, a close ally of Damascus, to resume ties also shifted the political landscape.

The pan-Arab body had suspended Damascus in November 2011 over its crackdown on protests, which began earlier that year

In April, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan met with Assad in Damascus on the first such visit since the war broke out. Regional capitals have gradually been warming to Assad as he has stubbornly held onto power and clawed back lost territory with crucial support from Iran and Russia. In 2018, the United Arab Emirates re-established ties with Syria and has been leading the recent charge to reintegrate Damascus into the Arab fold. AFP

Tunisian policeman kills five in synagogue shooting spree

Djerba, Tunisia - Tunisian authorities were on Wednesday investigating a shooting spree by a police officer that claimed five lives and sparked mass panic during a Jewish pilgrimage at Africa's oldest synagogue. Security forces threw a tight cordon around the site on Djerba island as officials probed whether Tuesday's shootings were a random killing spree or an anti-Semitic terrorist attack. The police officer first killed a colleague and took his ammunition, then went to the Ghriba synagogue and opened fire, sparking terror on the final day of the annual pilgrimage. Wearing his uniform and a bulletproof vest, he shot dead two visitors and injured two more. In the ensuing gun battle, he also wounded six police officers, two of whom later died, hospital sources said. The assailant was then shot dead himself, the interior ministry said, without identifying him. 'Without the rapid interven-tion of the security forces, there would have been wider carnage' because hundreds of people were at the site, said Rene Trabelsi, who was at the synagogue during the shootings, named the visitors killed as Tunisian Aviell Haddad, 30, and his France-based cousin, dual national Benjamin Haddad, 42. The killing spree was Tunisia's first deadly attack on foreigners since 2015, and the first to target the Ghriba pilgrimage since a suicide truck bombing killed 21 people in 2002. "Investigations are continuing in order to shed light on the motives for this cowardly aggression," the interior ministry said, refraining from referring to the shooting as a terrorist attack. France 'condemns this heinous act in the strongest terms', said foreign ministry spokeswoman Anne-Claire Legendre. AFP



Tunisian forces secure an area near the Ghriba synagogue following a shootout on the resort island of Djerba on Wednesday (AFP)

'Iran hangs seven more in execution spree'

Paris, France - Iran executed seven men in two prisons outside Tehran on drugs and rape charges on Wednesday, a rights group said, accelerating what activists describe as a hanging spree over the past two weeks. The United Nations had warned on Tuesday of a 'frighteningly' high number of executions in the country after a rare execution on Monday of two men on blasphemy charges. Three men were executed on drug-related charges in Ghezel Hesar prison in the city of Karaj outside Tehran, the Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) NGO said. It added that four other men were hanged on rape charges in Rajai Shahr prison, also in Karaj. The judiciary's Mizan Online website confirmed the three executions on drug charges, saying the convicts were members of a cocaine distribution cartel. There has been no official confirmation so far of the four executions on rape charges. IHR said the latest hangings mean Iran has seen at least 64 executions in the last 12 days alone. "The killing machine of the government is accelerating - its goal is to intimidate the people and its victims are the weakest people in society," said IHR director Mahmood Amiry Moghaddam. IHR posted footage which it said showed families of the three men executed on drug charges protesting outside Ghezel Hesar prison in a last-ditch bid to stop the hangings. Gunfire was audible in the video and it said police used tear gas and batons to disperse the protest. One family member was hospitalised with severe injuries after being beaten, it added. AFP

'Climate change raising heat risks for workers'

Doha, Qatar - Rising global temperatures are increasing the risk of workers dying or becoming disabled from labouring in extreme heat, an international conference has been told. The conference, held in Qatar as spring temperatures raced towards 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), heard that tens of thousands of workers around the world have died from chronic kidney disease and other illnesses linked with extreme heat over recent decades. "Science tells us that all countries can do more," the International Labour Organisation's regional chief for Arab countries, Ruba Jaradat, told the Occupational Heat Stress conference, which focused on climate change and how rising temperatures threaten workers' health. Last year's World Cup in Qatar drew attention to workers toiling in temperatures that can top 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) during the summer peak in countries across the Gulf. Since 2021, Qatar has banned outdoor working between 10am and 3.30pm from June 1 to September 15. Its reforms have been praised by the UN labour agency, though some experts say more can be done. There is no international standard for temperatures for outdoor working, but climate change has forced new scrutiny. The US administration prom-ised new rules in 2021 after a deadly heatwave and the White House said that 'heat is the nation's leading weather-related killer'. Nothing has been produced yet, however. Europe has also seen devastating heatwaves. But apart from Qatar, Cyprus is one of the rare countries to have restricted working hours, ordering extra breaks and heat protective clothing when temperatures rise above 35 degrees Celsius (95 Fahrenheit). Extreme heat and sun radiation unleash heatstroke, kidney, heart and lung diseases and raise cancer rates, according to researchers. Justin Glaser, head of La Isla Network, an occupational health group, said more than 20,000 sugar workers in Central America had died in a single decade from chronic kidney disease. He pointed to about 25,000 deaths from kidney disease in Sri Lanka.



This file photo shows a labourer walking with an empty water container at a construction site in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh on May 23, 2022 (AFP)

Heat dangers
Around one billion farm workers and tens of millions in construction and other outdoor industries are in the frontline, the conference was told. But swimming pool lifeguards, gardeners and postal delivery workers also face heat dangers. Construction workers can be exposed to enough ultraviolet rays over 30 to 40 years to more than double the risk of non-melanoma skin cancer. Taiwanese researchers warned in a 2020 study that kidney disease from extreme heat 'may represent one of the first epidemics due to global warming'. According to ILO forecasts, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa will suffer most from lost working hours due to extreme heat in coming years. India, Bangladesh and their neighbours have huge agricultural populations and large numbers working in informal sectors with no health insurance. Vidhya Venugopal, an occupational health professor at the Sri Ramachandra Institute in Chennai, highlighted the case of hundreds of thousands of salt farmers in India working in desert-like conditions who suffer high rates of kidney and other diseases. "They have no cover and they are stood in salt all day long," Venugopal told AFP. In the summer months, about 80 per cent suffer some kind of heat illness. AFP

INDIA

Biden to host Modi for visit in June

It will be the first state visit by PM Narendra Modi to the United States

Washington, US - US President Joe Biden will host India's Narendra Modi for a state visit in June, it was announced on Wednesday, as Washington courts New Delhi as a bulwark against China.

The state visit, the highest level of diplomatic reception, will boost the United States and India's 'shared commitment to a free, open, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific', the White House said.

The invitation comes despite rising concerns about human rights and democratic backsliding under Modi's Hindu nationalist leadership in India, the world's most populous nation.

Washington has long sought to boost India as a counterinfluence to an increasingly assertive China in Asia - and New Delhi, worried about Beijing's build-up on the other side of its border, has also sought to build ties.

But Ukraine has emerged as a stumbling point in the partnership. India, a long-time military ally of Russia, has called for an end to hostilities, but has never condemned the Russian invasion.

It will be the first state visit by Modi to the United States. He visited Biden at the White House in 2021 as part of the Quad summit bringing together



This file photo shows US President Joe Biden greeting India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi as they arrive to attend the outreach programme on at Elmau Castle, southern Germany, on June 27, 2022 (AFP)

the United States, Australia, Japan and India.

This time India is understood to have sought the highest level of protocol for a head of state. The trip will include a state dinner.

New Delhi welcomed the visit as 'historic,' and hailed the chance to build collaboration with Washington and to 'discuss opportunities to expand and consolidate the Quad engagement.'

Asia-Pacific alliances

Under the Biden administration, French President Emmanuel Macron was the first to be welcomed for a state visit, complete with military honors and a gala dinner.

More recently, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol was also hosted for such a visit, with the two allies issuing a stern warning to North Korea over nuclear weapons.

Modi's visit will strengthen

the two countries' 'shared resolve to elevate our strategic technology partnership, including in defense, clean energy, and space', the White House added in its statement.

Education, climate change, development and health security are also on the agenda.

Modi's government has been widely accused by political opponents and rights groups of seeking to target and silence critics.

Nonetheless, he is a leader much courted by the West: he will also be the guest of honour at the July 14 Bastille Day celebrations in Paris.

Biden is working to renew or deepen US alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, amid growing concern in Washington about the fate of Taiwan -

The state visit will boost the United States and India's commitment to a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific, the White House said

which China sees as its own territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary.

The US leader is due to visit Japan and then Australia in ten days' time, with a notable stopover in the South Pacific state of Papua New Guinea.

He warned on Tuesday that he may have to cancel the trip if there is no progress on difficult debt limit negotiations with the Republican opposition.

AFP



Voters stand in queues to cast their votes for the Karnataka assembly elections, at a polling station in Bengaluru on Wednesday (ANI)

Karnataka: Exit polls give INC the edge, BJP close behind

New Delhi - Congress is expected to have a clear edge in Karnataka in the assembly elections held on Wednesday with four exit polls giving it a full majority and some predicting a hung assembly with an advantage to the party.

A few exit polls also said that BJP is ahead in the sweepstakes to form the government. The exit polls, which were released after the polling ended in Karnataka, predicted that Janata Dal-Secular JD(S) would not touch the 37 seats it won in the 2018 polls but will continue to be a strong regional player in the state. If Karnataka throws up a hung assembly, the JD-S could emerge in the role of kingmaker.

According to India Today-Axis My India exit poll, Congress is poised to win a comfortable majority with 122-140 seats, BJP will get 62-80 seats, JD(S) 20-25 and others 0-3 seats.

A party needs 113 seats for a majority in the 224-member Karnataka assembly.

The poll of polls shows an advantage for the Congress with the party poised to win 109 seats, BJP 91 seats and JD-S 23.

News24-Today's Chanakya predicted Congress crossing the halfway mark. It said BJP is poised to win 92 seats, Congress, 120 and JD-S 12 seats.

Times Now-ETG poll and India TV-CNX poll also predicted Congress hitting the majority mark. Times Now-ETG said BJP is expected to win 85 seats, Congress 113, JD-S 23

and others three.

India TV-CNX poll gave 80-90 seats to BJP, 110-120 to Congress, JD-S 20-24 and 1-3 to others.

Republic P-MARQ has predicted that Congress would get a 40 per cent vote share, BJP 36 per cent, JD(S) 17 per cent and seven per cent for independents and others.

The poll predicted that no party would get the majority mark in Karnataka with BJP poised to get 85-100 seats, Congress 94-108, JD-S 24-32 and others 2-6 seats.

The ABP-C Voter exit poll gave 83-95 seats to BJP, 100-112 to Congress, 21-29 to JD(S) and 2-6 to others.

TV9 Bharatvarsh-Polstrat poll predicted a hung assembly. It said that BJP would win 88-98 seats, Congress 99-109 seats, JD-S 21-26 seats and others 0-4 seats.

The Zee News-Matrize exit poll gave a clear advantage to Congress. It predicted BJP getting 79-94 seats, Congress 103-118 seats, JD-S 25-33 seats and others 2-5 seats.

The News Nation-CGS exit poll predicted a majority for BJP. It predicted that BJP will win 114 seats, Congress 86, JD-S 21 and others 3.

Asianet Suvarna News-Jan Ki Baat also predicted that BJP will be ahead of Congress with a better chance of forming the government. As per the exit poll, BJP is expected to get 94-117 seats while Congress would be close second with 91-106 seats.

ANI

No burial: Relatives mount corpse protest in Manipur

Churachandpur, Manipur - The stench of death hangs heavy over the morgue at an Indian hospital - and relatives are refusing to bury the rotting corpses in protest at their killings in ethnic violence.

Kamallian Ype, 35, from the mainly Christian Kuki tribe, was killed fleeing attackers from the majority Meitei people, who are mostly Hindus, said his friend P Hentinglian.

"He was shot in the back and fell down," the 25-year-old told AFP at the mortuary in Churachandpur. "They approached him and shot him point blank at the forehead. I saw it all."

Around 60 people have been killed on both sides in the clashes in the hilly northeastern



Meitei refugees arrive to board a paramilitary truck at a transit point, near Imphal, Manipur on Tuesday (AFP)

state of Manipur and around 35,000 residents have fled their homes since last week.

The far-flung states of north-east India - sandwiched be-

tween Bangladesh, China and Myanmar - have long been a tinderbox of tensions between different ethnic groups.

Now the families of Kukis

killed in the latest violence are demanding a separate entity of their own.

Ype's widow and their four sons want nothing from the Manipur state government and see him as a 'martyr for the people... for the tribal community', said his elder sister Siamting, 39. "What I really want now is the separation of tribal regions from Manipur, for the Indian government to carve out a separate state for tribals in the region," she went on.

Another father of four, daily wage labourer Lalthansang Siekzathang, lay among the bodies in the morgue.

'Real justice would be a separate state cut away from Imphal' - the regional capital -

'which only promotes one community', said his widow Jelevi Hmingthangmoi, 30.

Both women insisted their families will not hold funerals for their menfolk until the government agrees to their demands.

"He died defending our land," said Siamting. "As our demands are not met he is still at the morgue."

The clashes in Manipur were sparked by a protest about plans to give the Meitei 'Scheduled Tribe' status.

A form of affirmative action to combat structural inequality and discrimination, that classification would give them guaranteed quotas of government jobs and college admissions.

AFP

Schoolboy's body found after NZ cave tragedy

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand police said on Wednesday they had recovered the body of a teen killed during a 'tragic' school caving trip that is now the subject of a comprehensive investigation.

The teen was visiting the popular Abbey Caves complex north of Auckland on Tuesday when his class 'encountered a severe weather event'.

After a day-long search in squalid weather, police said a body was recovered late on Tuesday and the boy's family was being offered support while the formal identification takes place.

"Our thoughts remain with them at this tragic time," Northland police superintendent Tony Hill said.

Well-wishers left flowers at the caves, which remained behind a police cordon on Wednesday. "I think it is every parent's worst possible nightmare to send your child off to school in the morning and not have them returned safely

home in the evening," Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said, according to the *NZ Herald* newspaper.

Questions have been raised about why teachers took more than a dozen 15- and 16-year-olds from Whangarei Boys' High School to an area highly prone to flash floods. The area received about 13 centimetres of rainfall (five inches) on the day of the trip and there was widespread flooding.

Principal Karen Gilbert-Smith said on Wednesday the school and local community were 'devastated', having lost a 'much loved and treasured son and brother'.

"I realise that people have lots of questions, but I simply am not in a position to provide answers at this early stage," she said.

"We need to allow a full and comprehensive investigation involving the NZ Police and Worksafe NZ into this tragic incident to be completed."

AFP

Pakistan ex-PM Imran Khan remanded in custody

Islamabad, Pakistan - Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan was remanded in custody for eight days on Wednesday by an anti-graft court as violent nationwide protests over his arrest erupted for a second day.

Khan was arrested on Tuesday during a routine hearing in the capital Islamabad and whisked away to an unknown location overnight before appearing behind closed doors in a specially convened court at police headquarters.

The drama follows months of political crisis during which Khan, who was ousted in April last year, has waged an unprecedented campaign against the country's powerful military. "If they think that the arrest of Imran Khan will demoralise us, then they are hugely mistaken," said Niaz Ali in Peshawar, where several monuments and government buildings have been torched.

"We stand with Imran Khan and will support him till death."

Ali Bukhari, a lawyer for Khan, told AFP by phone that the court had approved eight days of physical remand of Khan demanded



Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party activists and supporters of former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan, clash with police during a protest against the arrest of their leader in Peshawar on Wednesday (AFP)

by the country's top graft agency.

Afzal Marwat, another of Khan's lawyers, earlier said Khan was in 'good spirits' but had complained of being hit on the back of the head and leg by paramilitary forces who arrested him.

The former cricketing superstar, who remains wildly popular, has previously said the dozens of cases brought against him are part of an effort by the struggling government and military establishment to prevent him from returning to power.

His arrest has brought thou-

sands of his supporters to the streets in cities across the country, where police have attempted to quell crowds with tear gas.

At least six people have died in protest-related incidents, police and hospitals reported, including one person who died from smoke inhalation after a multi-storey building was set on fire in Lahore.

Confrontation with military

Khan's arrest came hours after the military rebuked him for al-

leging that a senior officer had been involved in a plot to kill him.

Pakistan politicians have frequently been jailed since the country's founding in 1947, but few have so directly challenged a military that has staged at least three coups and ruled for more than three decades.

Criticism of the military establishment is rare in Pakistan, where army chiefs hold significant influence over domestic politics and foreign policy, and have long been accused of interfering in the rise and fall of gov-

ernments. "The senior army leadership is uninterested in repairing the rift between itself and Khan," said Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center.

"So with this arrest it's likely sending a message that the gloves are very much off."

Internet cut, exams cancelled

The interior ministry had ordered mobile internet services cut and restricted access to social media sites Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, the country's communications agency said.

Authorities have ordered schools closed across the nation - with end of year exams cancelled for students. Hundreds of police officers have been injured across the country, while in Pakistan's most populous province of Punjab nearly 1,000 people have been arrested and the army ordered to deploy to keep peace. "At a time when we are already struggling to feed our children, further uncertainty has been created," Farooq Bhatti, a van driver, told AFP in Rawalpindi.

AFP

'IT HAS BEEN AN HONOUR'

Barcelona legend Sergio Busquets to leave club

Barcelona, Spain - Sergio Busquets will leave Barcelona in June at the end of his contract, the midfielder confirmed Wednesday, ending a highly successful era at the club.

"The moment has arrived to announce this is my last season at Barcelona," said Busquets on Instagram. "It has been an unforgettable journey."

Busquets has won the Champions League three times with Barcelona and La Liga on eight occasions before this season, with the Catalans set to triumph again for the first time in four years.

The 34-year-old has been a key player for Barca since breaking into the first team under their former coach Pep Guardiola in 2008, becoming the club's captain in 2021. Busquets is Barcelona's third-highest appearance maker of all time, playing for the club on 718 occasions, lifting 31 trophies in total.

He did not say where he might go next, with Spanish reports suggesting he may move to a team in Saudi Arabia.

"It has been an honour, a dream, a pride. It has been everything to be able to defend and represent this badge for so many years, but everything has a beginning and an end," continued Busquets.



The moment has arrived to announce this is my last season at Barcelona. It has been an unforgettable journey

SERGIO BUSQUETS

"Although it has not been an easy decision, I think the time has come."

Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez, who played with Busquets in the team's midfield for several years, wanted the midfielder to stay next season, but said the decision was up to him.

Busquets' team-mates past and present paid tribute to him on social media after he announced his future lay outside the club.

"My friend, after so much we've lived through together, what can I say that you don't know?" wrote Barcelona defender Jordi Alba on Instagram.

"You're leaving your home, having made an indelible imprint on Barcelona's history."

"More than 700 games and a fundamental part of so many titles, and glorious nights that all Barca fans will forever remember."

Former Barcelona playmaker

Andres Iniesta said Busquets was "number one".

'An example'

"You are the best, Sergio, I will miss you," wrote Barca midfielder Sergi Roberto, who is set to inherit the captain's armband.

"An example in all senses, I have been lucky to share many moments with you and it will not be easy day to day without you."

Barcelona hailed him as "one of the best players ever to represent the club".

"Busquets' story at Barca is one of class and commitment in the centre of midfield," read a statement on the club website.

"His talent and his ability to read the game has made him one of the best defensive midfielders in the game."

Busquets has been notable as a ball-playing pivot, using perfect positioning and anticipation rather than physicality to recover the ball for his side.

The veteran has long been thought to favour a move to Major League Soccer in the United States at the end of his Barcelona contract, with Inter Miami one of the teams mentioned. However in recent days the player has been linked in Spanish media with a move to the Saudi Arabian top flight.

Former Barcelona forward Lionel Messi, a close friend of Busquets, is another player who may end up in the oil-rich kingdom after a source close to negotiations told AFP it was a "done deal" for the Argentine forward to move to the Middle East.

AFP

South Africa qualify for World Cup as Ireland vs Bangladesh match ends in no result

London, United Kingdom - South Africa secured direct qualification on Tuesday for the 50-over Cricket World Cup in India later this year after the first one-day international between Ireland and Bangladesh ended in a no-result washout.

Ireland had to win all three matches in a series against Bangladesh taking place at Chelmsford, the headquarters of English county Essex, if they were to move up from 11th place in the points table.

Even if Ireland now take the series 2-0, they cannot surpass South Africa in eighth place in the World Cup Super League (WC SL) standings.

Ireland will now have to compete in the June 18-July 9 qualifying tournament in Zimbabwe, that also includes former champions West Indies and Sri Lanka.

The Irish were 65-3 in the 17th over, chasing Bangladesh's 246-9, made from a full 50 overs, when bad light and rain halted play at 4:34pm local time (1534 GMT). A minimum of 20 overs had to be bowled in Ireland's innings for a result to be declared under the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern method for rain-affected matches.

But the fixture was called off at 1800 GMT when the umpires deemed conditions too wet to restart play.



Philippines' Ernest John Obiena celebrates after winning the men's pole vault at Southeast Asian Games in Phnom Penh on Monday

World No 3 pole vaulter auctions off winning shoes for Philippine kids

Phnom Penh, Cambodia - Pole vault star Ernest John Obiena will auction off his gold-medal-winning spikes to raise money for children back home in the Philippines who practise in a sawdust pit.

World-ranked number three Obiena took his third consecutive gold at the Southeast Asian Games in Phnom Penh on Monday.

Clearing 5.65m, he broke his own Games record.

Afterwards, the Paris Olympics-bound 27-year-old told reporters he had seen a video of a child pole vaulter in the

Philippines using sawdust to land in.

"Anyone who's listening: it's up for grabs," he said, brandishing the pink-and-orange sports shoes.

"All money, all proceeds, will go to buying a new pole vault pit or a second-hand pole vault pit," he added.

"If we can't get actual size then we'll get something - just not sawdust."

The shoes could well increase in value over the next year or so, with Obiena in strong contention for a podium finish at Paris 2024. AFP

Argentina's Etcheverry lines up Djokovic clash at Italian Open

Rome, Italy - Novak Djokovic's will begin his bid to retain the Italian Open title against Tomas Etcheverry after the Argentine beat Luca van Assche in the first round on Wednesday.

World number 61, Etcheverry beat Frenchman Van Assche in straight sets, 7-6 (9/7), 6-3, in Rome to reach the second round, when the top seeds join the fray.

Djokovic comes into the clay

court tournament he has won six times recovering from an elbow injury and set to lose top spot in the world rankings to young gun Carlos Alcaraz.

Spaniard Alcaraz just needs to play a match in Rome to become world number one ahead of the French Open.

Djokovic won his record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam at the Australian Open in January.

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TODAYS MATCH

MATCH 56

6 PM

KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS

RAJASTHAN ROYALS

Suryakumar's explosive 83 lifts Mumbai to third

Mumbai, India - **Suryakumar Yadav** hammered 83 off 35 balls as Mumbai Indians thrashed Royal Challengers Bangalore by six wickets on Tuesday to jump from eighth to third in the IPL table.

Chasing 200 to win, Suryakumar put on a blistering stand of 140 with Nehal Wadhera, who made an unbeaten 52, as Mumbai romped home with 21 balls to spare at Wankhede Stadium.

Mumbai's sixth win in 11 matches revived their faltering campaign as the five-time champions target a top-four finish to qualify for a play-off berth.

Suryakumar's blitz laced with six sixes was his IPL best and made Bangalore's 199-6 look a small total after skipper Faf du Plessis (65) and Glenn Maxwell (68) lit up the first innings.

"He is one of the best isn't he?" Du Plessis, who leads the tournament batting chart with 576 runs, said of Suryakumar.

"When he gets going he's really difficult to bowl to. So many options you can't shut him down. One of the greats of the game at the moment."

Suryakumar, who had a bad start to the season before hitting form, said: "Much needed from team's point of view. I am very happy to win a home game like this."

Opener Ishan Kishan hit a quick-fire 42 but Mumbai slipped to 52-2 when skipper Rohit Sharma fell for seven to extend his batting slump.

However, Suryakumar and the left-handed Wadhera soon revived the chase.

Once settled, Suryakumar burst into life to reach his 50 in 26 balls and kept up the charge with a string of sixes and fours.

Suryakumar fell with his team needing eight more to win and Tim David got out for a duck, but Wadhera hit the winning six to bring up his fifty.



CLINICAL CHENNAI CHOKE DELHI TO CONSOLIDATE SECOND POSITION

MATCH 55

Chennai Super Kings' Ajinkya Rahane (R) celebrates with Deepak Chahar after the run out of Delhi Capitals' Mitchell Marsh during their Indian Premier League match at MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai on Wednesday. Chahar took two wickets while Matheesha Pathirana claimed three as Chennai choked Delhi batting line up to register a 27-run victory. Earlier, a host of players including Rahane and MS Dhoni hit useful runs to help Chennai make 167 for 8, which proved more than enough in the end.

SKYSCRAPERS GALORE

Huge totals becoming new norm in run-fest IPL

New Delhi, India - A marauding Faf du Plessis and emerging power-hitters including Rinku Singh have helped make team totals over 200 the new normal in this high-scoring edition of the Indian Premier League.

The 38-year-old South African Du Plessis, captain of Royal Challengers Bangalore, leads the batting charts with 576 runs at a destructive strike rate of over 157 and 32 sixes.

This season does not finish until the end of the month but it has already witnessed 30 innings totalling 200 or above.

That happened on 18 occasions in the entire edition last year.

Du Plessis hit 65 on Tuesday and forged a 120-run stand with Glenn Maxwell - but opponents Mumbai Indians still reached the



Royal Challengers Bangalore's Faf du Plessis plays a shot during their match against Mumbai Indians

200 target with 3.3 overs to spare. This season third-placed Mumbai have chased down three 200 or 200-plus totals with Suryakumar Yadav hitting half-centuries in all of them.

"I have no idea what a safe score is. The last four games we have seen excess of 200 has been scored," said Mumbai skip-

per Rohit Sharma.

"Most of the teams are taking risks and it is coming off. The batters are taking risks and 200-plus scores are being chased.

"The mindset of the batters is to do something special for the team and it is coming off as well."

Players and pundits say there a few reasons for the tall totals.

IPL pitches are more batting friendly than before to encourage big-hitting and provide more entertainment.

Former Australia batsman and ex-IPL coach Tom Moody says that the Kookaburra balls could have something to do with it because they are not swinging as much. The nature of Twenty20

cricket is also evolving, with a new breed of specialists.

But the biggest factor behind the skyscraper scores in the IPL looks to be the new Impact Player rule.

It allows a substitute and effectively adds an extra batsman or bowler to the team line-up.

Lucknow Super Giants have led the high-rise war after they posted the second-highest team total since the IPL began in 2008.

They made 257-5 in a 56-run victory last month against Punjab Kings, with West Indies' Kyle Mayers and Australian all-rounder Marcus Stoinis smashing 11 boundaries each.

Virat Kohli recently scored a 46-ball 55 in a losing cause for Bangalore and the superstar batsman was criticised for consuming too many deliveries.

Moody called Kohli's innings "yesterday's approach or last year's approach".

"Now we have an impact player, the game has changed," the Australian, who took Sunrisers Hyderabad to the 2016 title, told ESPNcricinfo.

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KNIFE-EDGE

De Bruyne rocket leaves Man City and Madrid level in Champions League semi-final first leg

Madrid, Spain - Kevin De Bruyne's brilliant drive earned Manchester City a 1-1 draw at Real Madrid in a gripping Champions League semi-final first leg battle on Tuesday.

The Belgian slammed Pep Guardiola's visitors level after Vinicius Junior opened the scoring for the reigning champions from distance in similarly spectacular fashion.

Madrid managed to completely shackle lethal striker Erling Haaland but De Bruyne's powerful effort left the tie on a knife edge ahead of the second leg in Manchester next week.

The record 14-time winners knocked City out at the same stage last season despite being outplayed in both games, and took the lead at the Santiago Bernabeu against the run of play.

However when Madrid found their stride in the second half, City - still chasing their first ever Champions League trophy - hit back through De Bruyne.

Madrid central defenders David Alaba and Antonio Rudiger did not give Haaland room to breathe.

"We have to see if we can attack (better), Alaba and Rudiger were so close on Erling," Guardiola told reporters.

"It was not easy to find the spaces. We'll try to adjust something in the second leg to be more fluid and play with a bit more rhythm."

The visitors controlled much of the first half, with nearly 70 percent possession, but went in trailing at the break.



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior celebrates after scoring against Manchester City in their Champions League semi-final first leg match on Tuesday (AFP)



Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne celebrates after scoring against Real Madrid in their Champions League semi-final first leg match in Madrid on Tuesday (AFP)

Thibaut Courtois fielded an early barrage of shots from De Bruyne, Rodri and Haaland, as City dominated and Madrid sat back, soaking up the pressure.

The hosts took the lead through a lethal counter-attack 10 minutes before the break, with Eduardo Camavinga surging past Bernardo Silva, tearing into space and feeding Vinicius.

The Brazilian arrowed a strike into the top left corner from almost 25 yards, past Ederson's helpless dive. It was Madrid's only shot in the first half, but the game's most effective one.

"It's normal that City have the ball, we don't have to go mad about that," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "After the goal we played very well, controlling the space, creating things, we played very well, I hope we can repeat it in the second leg."

Haaland shut down

Alaba thwarted Haaland with a fine block early in the second half, as Madrid kept the Norwegian goal machine under lock and key on his first appearance against them.

Madrid did not allow him a clear sight of goal, ensuring he could not add to his 51 goals from 46 games this season across all competitions.

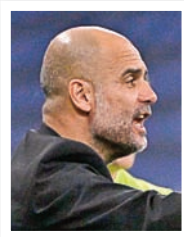
Rudiger, who played ahead of the suspended Eder Militao, put in one of the best performances of his Madrid career.

"He had a fantastic game, clearly we have to highlight that," said Ancelotti. AFP



REAL MADRID COACH CARLO ANCELOTTI

"Defensively we were good. (Antonio) Rudiger against (Erling) Haaland did really well. The midfield covered well the position in front of the defence. We are satisfied."



MAN CITY MANAGER PEP GUARDIOLA

"When we were better, they scored. When they were better, we scored. Tight game, Bernabeu semi-final always is difficult. 1-1, a final next Wednesday at home with our people."

Grealish warns Real Madrid that Man City are 'unstoppable' at home

Madrid, Spain - Jack Grealish said Manchester City are confident of finishing the job against Real Madrid at home to reach the Champions League final after a 1-1 draw in their semi-final first leg on Tuesday.

City have won all 14 games at the Etihad this year by a combined score of 49-7 as Pep Guardiola's men close in on a potential treble of Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup.

But it is conquering Europe for the first time that matters most to the English champions.

City suffered heartache against Madrid at the same stage of the competition last season as a late collapse in the second leg at the Santiago Bernabeu saw the Spanish giants go on to win the competition for the 14th time.

But home advantage for the return leg could make the difference this year after the sides could not be separated in Madrid.

Both goals came from spectacular strikes from outside the box as Kevin De Bruyne cancelled out Vinicius Junior's



Manchester City's Jack Grealish (L) battles with Real Madrid's Spanish defender Dani Carvajal during the Champions League semi-final first leg match in Madrid on Tuesday (AFP)

opener.

"At the Etihad at the moment we feel unstoppable," Grealish told BT Sport.

"We came here tonight to try and win, but I think it shows our character to go a goal down and

come back. In the end it was a fair result."

City are now unbeaten in 21 games in all competitions.

But they were not at their fluent best as Madrid successfully cut the supply line to 51-goal

striker Erling Haaland.

The visitors had dominated possession until they were hit by the Real sucker punch when Vinicius drove forward and fired into the top corner on 36 minutes.

But the roles were reversed after the break as just when City appeared on the ropes, they hit back when De Bruyne drilled past his Belgian international teammate Thibaut Courtois.

"When we were better, they scored. When they were better, we scored," said Guardiola. "Tight game, Bernabeu, a semi-final always is difficult. 1-1 and we have a final next Wednesday at home with our people."

Under Guardiola City have dominated English football. They are on the brink of a fifth Premier League title in six seasons.

But they are yet to replicate that success on the European stage. In contrast to Madrid's wealth of experience, City have only reached the Champions League final once in their history.

"They are so demanding. They are so good, (they have) the experience, the quality," added Guardiola.

"Now they travel to Manchester and we are going to see what we can do better."

AFP

From Pele to Beckham: Four superstars who dipped their toe in football's backwaters

Paris, France - Argentine football superstar Lionel Messi's move to spend the final years of his stellar career in Saudi Arabia, according to a source close to the negotiations, will come as a crushing blow to Barcelona fans who dreamed of a return to the club that nurtured him.

In fact, 35-year-old Messi will be following a well-trodden path of the greats of the 'Beautiful Game' by taking a lucrative pay day in football's backwaters.

Here AFP Sport picks out four examples:



PELE

New York Cosmos (USA) 1975-77

It took the persuasive powers of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to lure the man, who vies for the greatest ever with Messi and Diego Maradona, to the North American Soccer League (NASL) in 1975.

"They want to make soccer big in the United States," Pele told CNN in 2011.

"That was the reason (I went).



GABRIEL BATISTUTA

Al Arabi (QAT) 2003-05

The Argentine took the high road to the previously low-key Q-League on a free transfer and reportedly received \$8million to join Al Arabi.

'Batigol's' eye for goal - which had seen him rattle in the goals for Serie A sides Fiorentina and AS Roma - did not desert him in Doha. He scored a record 25 goals for the club in his maiden season.



ZICO

Kashima Antlers (JPN) 1991-94

His exploits on the pitch earned him a stint as Brazil's sports minister but despite being in his early forties Zico broke off his nascent political career to play for second tier Japanese side Sumitomo Metalls.

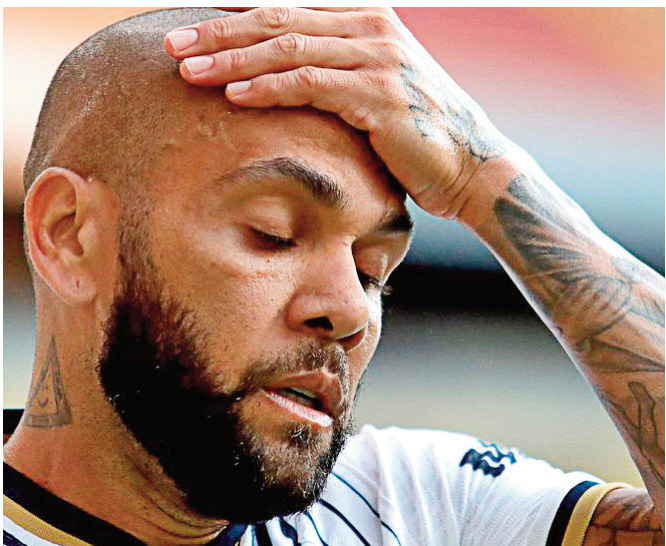
The task was to secure them a place in the first ever Japanese professional league.



DAVID BECKHAM

LA Galaxy (USA) 2007-2012

It was quite a coup when the MLS franchise secured the signature of arguably European football's highest-profile player at the age of 32. Beckham's five-year contract - paying him \$6.5 million a year - reaped dividends for Galaxy in terms of a new shirt deal and a huge rise in season ticket sales.



Dani Alves

Judge rejects Brazil defender Dani Alves's bail request

Barcelona, Spain - A Spanish judge on Tuesday denied Brazil defender Dani Alves's second bail request while the footballer awaits trial for alleged rape.

The 40-year-old was detained in January after he was accused of raping a young woman in the bathroom of a Barcelona nightclub late last year.

The former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain star will remain in custody after the

court investigating him said there was a "high risk" he would try to flee.

It "rejected the request for release made by the defence", the High Court of Justice of Catalonia said Tuesday.

It said his wealth "could allow him to leave Spain at any time".

This was the second time Alves's legal team have pushed for his release after their first request was turned down in

February.

His lawyers asked for bail again in April, shortly after he addressed the judge at a hearing where he said the pair had sexual relations but claimed they were consensual.

Alves's legal team proposed revoking his two passports, Brazilian and Spanish, to reassure the judge he could be granted bail this time - but the request was rejected.



14
SUMMER SALADS
Toss together some bright coloured ingredients and light up your lunches



15
IN TOWN
King Charles III's coronation celebration, and Old Muscateers reunion



16
ENTERTAINMENT
A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood

CREATION WITH CURIOSITY

ROBOTICS EDUCATION

Six High School students from TAISM attend VEX Robotics World Championship (April 24-May 5) in Dallas, Texas - the first team from Oman to attend the prestigious event



Jason Teifel (left) with the TAISM Robotics team

This year, for the very first time, the largest robotics championship in the world welcomed a team from the Sultanate of Oman – Six High School students of The American International School of Muscat. TAISM's VEX Robotics Competition team was made of high school students passionate about technology, robotics and computer science. The group worked together to design, build, and programme a robot that could quickly and efficiently solve specific challenges. The VEX Robotics Competition prepares students to become future innovators with a great majority of participants reporting an increased interest in STEM subject areas and pursuing STEM-related careers in future. Tournaments are held year-round at the regional, state, and national levels and culminate at the VEX Robotics World Championship in April. "As an experienced robotics mentor, I've seen firsthand the engineering skill and leadership expertise that students gain by participating in the VEX Robotics Competition," says Dan Mantz, CEO of The Robotics Education & Competition (REC) Foundation which manages the VEX Robotics Competition. "It's an experience that will stay with them long after their school days are over, offering a new appreciation for STEM and laying a strong foundation of critical problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills that will serve them well throughout their lives." At TAISM, students apply what they've learned about STEM in the classroom every week to build semi-autonomous machines. An equally important set of

skills is learned through the competition, like communication, project management, time management, and teamwork. TAISM's Robotics team meets after school wherein students learn about electronics, programming, mechanical systems, animation, 3D CAD, computer-aided machining, web design, and materials fabrication. Jason Tiefert, Computer Science Teacher at TAISM who has been spearheading Robotics education in the school, said, "Competing at the Vex Robotics World Championship is a monumental achievement for a first year team, and I could not be more proud of the students for their skills, grit and determination. "Vex matches require teams to strategise with partner teams that they just met, so the social skills are as important as the engineering and programming skills. The TAISM students faced all challenges with the calm, collaborative approach of a much more seasoned team. What is most exciting is that all they've achieved this year is just a first step in building a community of robotics in Oman." "Since 1998, our mission has been to develop ethical, responsible, and globally conscious life-long learners," added Kevin Schafer, director at TAISM. "Robotics education is just one part of our duty to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist, and to teach them to adapt and lead in an ever-changing world. We look forward to engaging with education partners here in Oman as we lead the way in building a hub for Robotics events, learning and competitions in the sultanate." (TAISM has organised an open house for other schools to participate on May 29. Interested schools may contact info@taism.com)



Jason Teifel, advisor TAISM Robotics Club, shares key insights on Robotics

What is your opinion about robotics education in shaping young minds and preparing them to think critically, strategise and solve problems, which would be helpful in their careers? I do think all schools should offer robotics opportunities to their students. While robotics does foster a certain kind of critical thinking, collaboration and problem solving that can be useful in future career paths, I am personally passionate about supporting it for two reasons - it brings joy and provides another space for students to find others with similar interests. TAISM offers many opportunities for students to find a sense of belonging - the football pitch, art studios, black box theatre, etc. A robotics programme will find those students that may not have other platforms to shine, and I can't think of a more important reason than that to invest our time, attention and money.

What role could TAISM play in propagating Robotics Education in other schools and in facilitating competitions and extra-curricular interactions among the student community in Oman?



TAISM is looking to create a community around robotics competition in Oman and beyond. We are the event partner for Vex Robotics in Oman, which brings a responsibility to lead the charge in supporting schools to get teams started. We are planning to host events that will allow our students to connect and collaborate with others beyond their school walls. Our first goal is to host a tournament for the 2023-2024 season that would qualify a team to travel to the Vex Robotics World Championship in Dallas, TX. Our team attended as the first team from Oman to enter the competition, and we are ready to share our knowledge to help create the next phase of competition.

cook-up



SUMMER Salads

No time to cook, no mood to eat? It's summertime, and you must get some sunshine on your plate, too. Chop up these colourful salads in advance and bring them out at mealtime to brighten up your appetite

Avocado Salad

- Ingredients**
- 2 medium avocados - cubed
 - 2 cups cubed cucumber
 - 3tbsp fresh lime juice
 - 2tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 jalapeno - seeded
 - 1 small garlic clove - minced
 - ¼tsp sea salt
 - ½ cup chopped fresh herbs (cilantro, parsley, basil)
 - Hot sauce - optional

Method

In the bottom of a salad bowl, whisk the lime juice, olive oil, garlic, jalapeno, and salt together. Stir in the herbs. (If making ahead of time, cover and refrigerate up to one day.) When ready to serve the salad, add the cubed avocado and cucumber to the bowl with the dressing. Gently toss the avocado and cucumber around the bowl so that they are well coated in the dressing. Taste, and then season with additional salt and hot sauce (optional).



Watermelon Salad

- Ingredients**
- 4 cups watermelon - cubed
 - 2 cups chery tomatoes - halved
 - 1 medium cucumber – diced small
 - 1 cup bean sprouts
 - ½ cup Queso fresco (Mexican cheese) - crumbled
 - 2tbsp chopped parsley and mint leaves

For the dressing

- 1tbsp olive oil
- 1tbsp balsamic glaze
- Salt and black pepper, to taste

Method

In a large bowl, combine watermelon, ripe tomatoes, cucumber and bean sprouts. Toss well. Add crumbled queso fresco and some chopped parsley and mint. Drizzle with olive oil and balsamic glaze. Then sprinkle salt and pepper. Toss and serve.

Pineapple Salad

- Ingredients**
- 2 cup pineapple slices, 1 bell pepper, 1 cup diced ripe avocado, 1 cup diced cucumber, 1 mildly spicy green chilli - finely chopped
 - 2tbsp chopped cilantro or coriander, tbsp extra virgin olive oil, 2tbsp lemon juice, 1tsp honey, 1¼tsp salt

Method

Roast the bell pepper and pineapple slices over direct flame/grill till some charred marks appear on the surface. Cool, and dice. Combine chopped pineapple, roasted bell pepper, cucumber, avocado, green chilli, and herbs in a salad bowl. Add olive oil, lemon juice, sugar, and salt. Toss the salad gently in the dressing. Keep in the refrigerator for 1 hour. Sprinkle fresh herbs.

Tropical Pineapple Salad is ready to serve.



Light Green Salad

Ingredients

- 2 cups packed baby spinach
- 1 cup sliced cucumber
- 4 scallions - thinly sliced
- 1 ripe avocado - peeled and sliced

For the dressing

- ½ cup hemp seeds
- ¼ to ½ cup water
- 3tbsp minced basil
- 2tbsp minced parsley
- 2tbsp minced chives
- 1tsp ground mustard
- 1tbsp lemon juice
- 1 clove garlic, Salt, to taste
- Pepper, for serving

Method

Prep the salad ingredients as stated above, slicing everything into roughly the same size. Place in a bowl. To make the dressing, combine all the ingredients in a blender and puree until smooth. If using a regular blender or food processor, soak the hemp seeds for an hour or so before making the dressing. Taste and adjust salt as needed. Pour roughly ½ cup of dressing over the salad, toss until well combined, and serve with extra dressing on the side.







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take a break

IN TOWN

KING CHARLES III CORONATION



Embassy of Britain hosted a special function at Al Bustan Palace, A Ritz Carlton hotel, to mark the coronation ceremony of King Charles III



Friends reunion



Old 'Muscateers' and friends held a reunion get-together at the Diplomatic Club



(Photos: VK Shafeer)

BOGGLER

E	Y	R	E
O	P	O	H
A	L	O	T
H	U	S	S

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

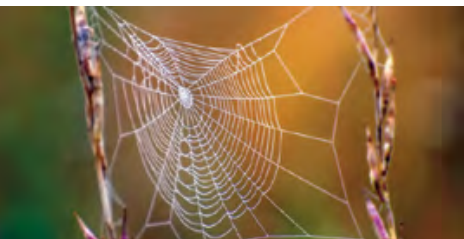
LEVEL EASY:

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

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

True...or False?

Can you spot the difference between a fun fact and a made-up tidbit? Take this 'Weird But True...or False' quiz to find out, based on facts from National Geographic Kids magazine.



Spider silk was used for guitar strings - True or False?
False: Spider silk was never used to make guitar strings - but it has been used to make violin strings. When something touches the silk on a spider's web, the silk vibrates in a way that gives the spider important information about the state of its web and location of prey.

Interesting facts

Desert animals are tough in this extreme habitat. Discover some interesting facts about desert animals.

What's a nictitating membrane?

- a. Something that helps desert animals sweat more
- b. A special organ to help desert insects fly
- c. A third eyelid
- d. It's what makes some animals glow in the dark

Answers: Meerkats - members of the mongoose family that live in deserts and grasslands of southern Africa - have a special third eyelid, known as a nictitating membrane that helps keep out sand.

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

This is a time to relish your personal freedom. Even if you're in a relationship, you need to foster your independence every once in a while. Do something by yourself, something that no one else enjoys as much as you do. Go off on a day trip to a location that has special meaning for you. Remind yourself what it's like to be able to do whatever you want to do whenever you want to do it.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Someone's flattering attention has increased to a point where you might be starting to feel suffocated. If their demands on your time are starting to annoy you, let them know that you need some alone time the next time they ask to hang out. They might hear this as a rejection, so you should be ready to explain that you need more space in this relationship.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Are you feeling a little more thrifty than usual? It's not surprising, given the recent fiscal headaches that you've been dealing with. But before you swing into full-on panic mode, stop and take a deep breath. Something inside you is pulling you toward a more cautious type of fiscal behavior, and all you have to do is follow it.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Try to stay close to home right now. There could be something threatening your bliss there. Stick with the relatives or roommates you think you know so well and get to know them even better. You don't have to work too hard at accomplishing this. Just hanging out in the same room at the same time is all the quality time you really need to have with them.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

That foggy-headedness you've been feeling is about to clear up. The sun is coming out today in the form of a very interesting new person who makes you smile every time they say hello. This is definitely an exciting development that will leave you feeling good and maybe a bit tongue-tied! When you find yourself alone with them, just relax and keep things light.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

This isn't a good time to throw your money around indiscriminately. Avoid making any impulse purchases. Even if you recently came into some money, you'd be better off holding on to it. If it feels like it's burning a hole in your pocket, just let it keep burning away! Too much uncertainty is coming your way in the near future.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your work life and private life have been out of balance for a while now, and it's been going okay. The people who are getting less attention have been fine with it, but their understanding isn't unending. You need to be prepared for them to start saying something about how they need more commitment from you.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Why settle on just one plan for the entire day? There's no reason to commit yourself to doing one thing in the morning, when so many other things will pop up as cool possibilities as the day moves forward! Keep it as loose as you can today. Being spontaneous is something you're good at, but you haven't done it in far too long.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your sense of fairness will be out in full force today, and you'll want to speak up when you see some injustice. No matter who is in the wrong, you'll feel compelled to call them on the carpet and give them a piece of your mind. You know what's right, so don't let politics or hierarchy prevent you from drawing attention to a situation that just isn't fair.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

It's a good idea for you to have some conversation starters ready today, because there could be a lot of awkward silences in store for you. In order to initiate some good chats with people you don't know very well, avoid touchy topics like politics, religion, or money. It's much wiser for you to stick to safer topics like movie.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You're probably going to feel a bit overwhelmed by one or more of the choices you need to make today, but that's okay. Just don't panic and make a decision because you think that someone's losing patience with you. If you do, you'll only end up going back on it a few days later when you learn something new. Take your time today in everything you do.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

No one else sees things quite the way you see them right now. You have an eye for what is true and what is a bunch of baloney! This new "take no prisoners" attitude of yours is starting to turn heads and get people talking. A new leadership position is coming up, and your name has just been added to the list of nominees.

entertainment

STARS TAKE CENTRE STAGE AS UK STEPS UP CORONATION

Celebrations



Britain revelled in the coronation of King Charles III on Sunday as it staged a star-studded concert watched by 20,000 people at Windsor Castle and millions more across the country and world. Charles, 74, and Queen Camilla, 75, watched on from a royal box in the grounds of the castle west of London, as Lionel Richie, Katy Perry and British band Take That topped the bill of performers. Screens erected nationwide broadcast the televised event - featuring a 70-piece orchestra, choirs and several unique dramatic performances - to communities, while organisers said it was telecast in over 100 countries. Seen here, is US artist Katy Perry (right) and Lionel Richie during performances inside Windsor Castle grounds at the Coronation Concert.

COMING SOON

THE POPE'S EXORCIST

Inspired by the actual files of Father Gabriele Amorth, Chief Exorcist of the Vatican (Academy Award-winner Russell Crowe), *The Pope's Exorcist* follows Amorth's investigations.

Genre: **Horror**

Starring: **Alex Essoe, Russell Crowe, Daniel Zovatto**

Language: **English**

JENNIFER ANISTON - AGEING BACKWARDS

Jennifer Aniston, who became an overnight sensation after the popular American sitcom *Friends*, where she played Rachel Green's role, always stood out because of her beauty, acting skills and fashion choices. Being one of the A-list actresses of Hollywood brings a lot of controversies, from personal affairs to plastic surgeries. However, one wonders what is the secret behind her timeless beauty? The mid-50 actress believes in ageing naturally. Yes, that's right. She's totally against injecting anything into her skin, she admitted.



Biden urges 'fair deal' for striking writers

US President Joe Biden said he wants to see striking movie and television writers in Hollywood promptly get a 'fair deal' on contract negotiations.

"I sincerely hope the writers' strike in Hollywood gets resolved and writers are given the fair deal they deserve as soon as possible," he said during a film screening at the White House in honour of the Asian-American community.

It is the first time the pro-union Democrat has commented on the strike, which kicked off after negotiations between the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and major US studios and streaming services failed last week.

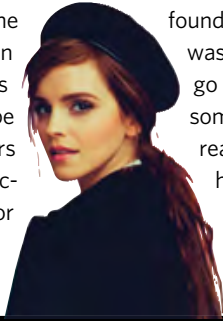


BRAD PITT IN A FORMULA 1 CAR

Get ready to witness actor Brad Pitt in the driver's seat of real Formula One car. Yes, you read it right. The *Fight Club* star will drive at British Grand Prix as part of shooting for Joseph Kosinski's directorial,

Variety reported. During a panel about the untitled film at the F1 Accelerate Summit in Miami, Kosinski and producer Jerry Bruckheimer shared production details of the Apple Studios movie, which stars Pitt and counts

seven-time Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton among its producers. It is unclear if Pitt will actually be racing against other drivers during the event, or if production will happen before or after the race.



Emma Watson says she felt 'caged' in Hollywood

Emma Watson hasn't acted since December 2018, when she wrapped production of Greta Gerwig's beloved *Little Women* adaptation.

Considering the Harry Potter actor's break from acting would touch five years at the end of 2023, she was asked about the reason for her staying away from the camera.

In a recent interview, she said that she wasn't very happy with the profession.

"I think I felt a bit caged," Emma Watson said. "The thing I found really hard was that I had to go out and sell something that I really didn't have very much control over."



BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW:

AFWAAH

Genre: Mystery thriller
Starring: Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Bhumi Pednekar

Rumours can ruin

Afwaah, released in theatres this week stars for the first time Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Bhumi Pednekar in lead roles. Though the movie is expected to throw light on social and political hypocrisies in a big way, it has nevertheless proved to stutter at the box office.

Set in a small town in Ra-

jasthan named Sawalpur, the story is about a renowned advertising executive Rahab (Nawazuddin) and the heiress to a political dynasty, Nivi (Bhumi Pednekar) and how a social media rumour creates havoc for them.

A young woman from a political family flees a marriage (a political alliance) she is being forced into and comes across a



good Samaritan who tries to help her. With her rejecting an ecosystem of hate and he belonging to a minority, the situation assumes horrific dimensions mired with political intentions.

Afwaah exposes how worthless lives are lost as a cost of this complete lack of ability to reason. The question of identity in *Afwaah* is extremely powerful. The plot showcases how a name defines religious identity, and the intersection of gender with this reality, are critical narratives in the terrifying times we live in.

Watch it if it's your cup of tea.

Rating ★★☆☆☆

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