

H M MEETS GCC, ARAB LEADERS

Abu Dhabi, UAE - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik took part in a fraternal meeting that brought together leaders from some GCC countries, apart from Jordan and Egypt, in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday.

The meeting on 'Prosperity and Stability in the Region', was called on the invitation of the UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan.

The other leaders present at the meeting were; King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa of Bahrain, Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, King Abdullah II ibn al Hussein of Jordan and President Abdel-Fattah el Sisi of Egypt.

His Majesty the Sultan's participation stems from a conviction in the significance of such fraternal meetings and their fruitful outcome that contributes to realising the aspirations of their countries' peoples.

His Majesty the Sultan returned in the afternoon from Abu Dhabi. During his departure, His



Majesty the Sultan sent a cable of thanks to Sheikh Mohamed.

His Majesty expressed his appreciation for the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to him during the visit. He hailed

the fraternal meeting as an opportunity to discuss relations and means of consolidating cooperation among the states in all fields.

According to the UAE state

news agency WAM, the meeting was held to consolidate and deepen cooperation between the brotherly countries across various sectors that serve development, prosperity and stability in

the region through cooperation and regional integration.

The meeting touched upon a number of regional and international issues and developments of common interest and the chal-

lenges the region is witnessing politically, security wise and economically, and the importance of coordinating positions and strengthening joint Arab action in dealing with these challenges to

ensure building a more stable future for the peoples of the region.

The leaders reiterated the deep-rooted historical ties between their countries in various fields, and their mutual keenness on communication, consultation and continuous coordination towards various transformations in the region and the world.

They stressed that cooperation in building economic and development partnerships between their countries and other Arab nations in the region is the way to creating a better future for all people in the region.

The leaders also affirmed their common vision to enhance stability and prosperity in the region and their firm belief in the significance of communication for the sake of construction, development and prosperity.

They highlighted the importance of adhering to the rules of good neighbourliness, respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs.

Agencies

Oman upbeat about third Gulf Cup title

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is one step away from realising their dream of winning the third Arabian Gulf Cup trophy with the final encounter set against Iraq on Thursday 8pm. The match will be held at the Basra International Stadium in the Iraqi city of Basra.

The last time Oman was in the final was in Kuwait in 2017-18, when they won the tournament after edging out the UAE in a penalty shootout.

With Oman being so close to the title, hopes are high among football fans as well as sports analysts, who believe lifting the cup the third time is very likely.

Oman's head coach Branko Ivankovic also confirmed the readiness of his players for the final. "The match will be played in the presence of more than 65,000 fans. This will motivate the players to do their best and we will play to win the match," he said on Wednesday.

Nabhan al Nabhani, a sports analyst, said, "Our team is better in terms of individual skills and that will be the difference in Thursday's match. Oman have

Sayyid Theyazin directs to operate 4 flights for fans

Muscat - His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, issued instructions on Wednesday to operate four flights for fans to watch the match against Iraq.

H H Sayyid Theyazin also gave directives to give a bonus to players and staff of the national team.

managed to win the title twice in the four times they were in the finals. So they stand a good chance to do it once more." He observed players having strong harmony and homogeneity, which is a positive impetus in controlling the match. "The players should stick to the plan of the coach, playing the way they have played so far," he told Muscat Daily.

Hammoud al Hadrami, a die-hard football fan, said that the final match will certainly not be easy, "but we trust our team to win the championship".

Continued on Page 02

Oman-Britain Business Conference today in UK

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The commercial attaché at the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in the United Kingdom, in cooperation with the University of West London, will organise the Oman-Britain Business Conference in London on Thursday.

Key representatives from the Oman Investment Authority and its subsidiaries will be heading the delegation from Oman.

The conference aims to shed light on investment opportunities in the sultanate and introduce various sectors available for investment, so as to achieve economic diversification through the logistics, tourism, mining, food security and fisheries sectors.

Participating companies

Omran, Asyad, Fish Development Oman, and Minerals Development Oman will give presentations on incentives offered by Oman to investors, including the investor residency programme and related services.

It will also announce the provision of 'Invest in Oman' services by opening a commercial registry, granting an affiliation certificate, and licensing activity for the first time directly from the Omani Embassy in London.

Companies and individual investors will also be given an opportunity to open bank accounts directly from the embassy in London, and introduce the services of Credit Oman - Export Credit Agency - and the services and facilities it provides to individual and corporate investors.

الأوبرا السلطانية
دار الفنون الموسيقية
ROYAL OPERA
HOUSE OF MUSICAL ARTS

Folk Music Festival

26th, 27th January | 7:00 PM

In the annual Folk Music Festival, nations are brought together to present their folk music traditions in a vivid display. Groups from Oman, the Philippines, Romania, and Brazil feature in the festival, offering audiences a global experience over two nights at Maidan Al Bahri of the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts.

BOOK NOW
rohmuscat.org.om

SEASON 2022-2023

5,000 year old site discovered in Nizwa

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), in cooperation with a Japanese mission from the Institute of Human Sciences in Kyoto, has documented an ancient city dating back 5,000 years in the wilayat of Nizwa in Dakliyah governorate.

A statement issued by the ministry said, 'Excavations carried out at the Tanuf archaeological site in Nizwa resulted in finding archaeological evidence to prove the existence of a human settlement in a cave dating back to the Wadi Suq era.'

The mission also documented many archaeological sites dating back 5,000 years adjacent to the cave, in addition to the Bronze Age towers and tower tombs dating back to the Hafeet era.

The ministry has been working with the Japanese mission for more than 12 years, during which extensive surveys and documentation of many archaeological sites were conducted.

In December last year, the ministry, in cooperation with a Polish mission from the University of Warsaw, discovered an ancient city dating back to the 1st millennium BC in Dhahirah.



The ministry said that the excavations carried out at the Ain Bani Sa'ida archaeological site, now in the sixth season, resulted in the discovery of remnants of an ancient city, which dates back to the 1st millennium BC of the Iron Age.

Private sector entities invited to develop Musannah Castle



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has initiated a plan to develop Musannah Castle with the participation of private players to boost tourism in the area.

'The ministry is looking to partner with private sector entities for managing and developing the castle for which a tender has been floated,' MHT in-

formed through a statement.

The Musannah Castle was built to protect the wilayat of Musannah and its inhabitants, which eventually became a major tourist attraction in South Batinah governorate.

The ministry confirmed that the competing companies must submit a study that should include a proposal on how to market the fort commercially and culturally - holding cultural workshops, organising events,

and introducing various activities to revive the castle.

'Competing companies must highlight the architectural uniqueness of the fort and involve the local community in various cultural and social events.'

Spread over 22sqm with its walls standing 15m to 18m in height, the three-storied castle consists of a number of corridors and rooms, and cannons. It also has a basement and secret

tunnels that were used to maintain necessary supplies during the time of any siege.

Following the government's continuous efforts to develop the tourism sector, the historical sites in Oman recorded a significant increase in the numbers of visitors - 22,259 in 2020 compared to 7,064 in 2016 - registering a growth of 315 per cent, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

RO2,000 contest to develop Rustaq gate

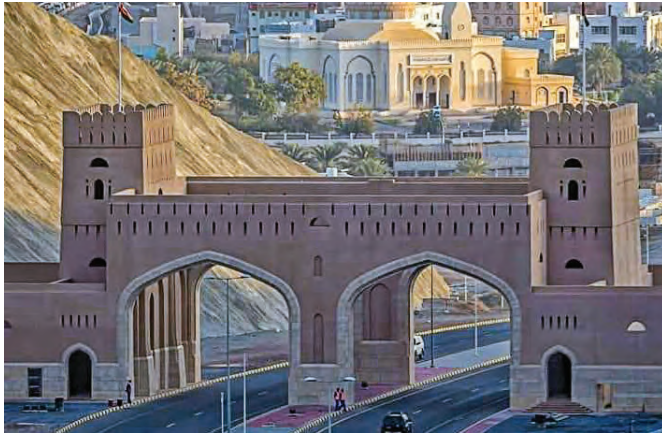
Our Correspondent
Muscat

South Batinah governorate announced a competition for the citizens of the country asking them to share their ideas for the development of the Rustaq Gate in northern Oman.

The winner of the competition will be rewarded with RO2,000, an official said.

The wilayat of Rustaq is considered the centre of the governorate, which boasts of many monuments such as the archaeological landmark Al Huqain Fort, whose construction dates back to the year 1722 and is characterised by its clay construction.

'The RO2,000 competition aims to gather creative ideas from the Omanis for the development of the Rustaq Gate and obtain the best design for the gate and the parking area surrounding it,' said the official from the South Batinah's office.



The governorate has set some conditions, such as that a participant should be an Omani, and the design must be implementable and inspired by the country's tradition and environment. It also should include the variety of facilities and services that can be offered to attract visitors.

The deadline for the submission of designs is March 12.

The wilayat of Rustaq is not only dotted with historical

monuments and landmarks, it is also distinguished by a number of important tourist sites such as Ayn al Hout, a water pool in Wadi Bani Awf; Ayn al Khadra, a water pool located in Wadi al Sahtan surrounded by trees and palm trees; and Ayn al Zarqa in the niyabat of Al Huqain.

Rustaq has also a number of waterfalls, some of which are in the niyabat of Al Huqain and others in Wadi al Sahtan.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Muscat	25	16
Abu Dhabi	24	15
Doha	20	13
Kuwait City	18	9
Manama	20	13
Riyadh	17	5

Oman upbeat about winning Gulf Cup title third time

Continued from Page 01

Mohammed al Sheiba, a former national football player, said that the team took steady steps, growing in confidence, from its first match in the tournament. 'Winning the title is not impossible. We trust our players. But they have to focus and not rush

to attack and leave spaces for the Iraq players to score.'

Imad al Hosni, a member of the 2009 Gulf Cup winning squad, said that the medical and administrative staff of Oman's national football team plays a major role in preparing the players mentally and psychologically. 'This is more so when the rest

days between matches are very short, which was the case in Iraq. The match will not be easy, because you are playing against Iraq in the midst of their fans.'

Youssef al Sheyadi, goalkeeper of Sohar Club, believes Oman's goalie Ibrahim al Mukhaini will play a major role in the game. 'Omani fans in large

numbers will also be there to support and encourage the Red Warriors.'

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in cooperation with Omantel, OQ, PDO and Vodafone Oman has allocated four flights for Omani fans to fly to Basra and support the national team.

Oman, Zanzibar review bilateral cooperation

Muscat - H E Sheikh Khalifa Ali al Harthi, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, received Haroun Ali Sueliman, Minister of Constitutional and Legal Af-

fairs of the Government of Zanzibar, on Wednesday. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed areas of bilateral cooperation and means of enhancing them in all fields.

مركز
الشمس لطب الاسنان
Sun Dental Centre
Al-Khuwair

SCAN TO FIND LOCATION

95961234

www.sundentalmuscat.com
/sundentalcentre
sundentaloman
sundentalghubra@hotmail.com

Our Services

- Bleeding gums
- Teeth Cleaning
- Fixed Teeth
- Bad Breath
- Whitening Teeth
- OPG X-Ray
- Braces
- Root Canal

Dr. Karthik
BDS, MDS, MOrth (UK)
Specialist Orthodontist.
91105912

Affordable
Experienced doctors
Al khuwair

Approved Insurance:
National Life, Mednet, Metlife, AXA, NAS, OQIC
Saico, NextCare, Vipul Better Care, Greenline & More

MOH No: 44/2023

Meeting reviews health system in governorates



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The second health leadership meeting under the chairmanship of H E Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, was held on Wednesday to review and follow-up on the health system across all governorates.

The meeting - with the under-secretaries, directors general of health services and directors of hospitals - addressed the health sector's challenges and suggested solutions and initiatives in addition to health leadership projects.

H E Dr Sabti thanked all attendees for their efforts to raise the standard of the health services in the country, while working on the challenges facing the sector.

The minister stressed the need for cooperation of all to ad-



There is a need for cooperation among all to address the challenges in order to provide high-quality and efficient health services

H E DR HILAL BIN ALI AL SABTI

dress these challenges in order to provide high-quality and efficient health services.

Dr Waleed bin Khamis al Nadabi, Director of Oman Vision 2040 Office at the Ministry of Health (MoH), highlighted the aspects and priorities of Oman Vision 2040, while focusing on the country's public health priorities that demand strategic goals and programmes, projects and initiatives as per the ministry's plan for this year.

Dr Abdullah al Harthi, senior consultant in accident surgery,

presented a paper on the national initiative to reduce the wait list for various surgeries in the sultanate.

Harthi addressed, in detail, the initiative's success in reducing the wait list, specially pediatric surgery, in a number of governorates.

Engineer Khalid al Tamimi, Director of Information Technology in Dakhiliyah governorate and developer of the Nabd Al-Afiah programme and Queue Management System (QMS), reviewed the updated version of

the two programmes.

The updated version of the Nabd Al-Afiah programme displays the work indicators directly from the health institutions in the country by using the data entered into Al-Shifa electronic system. Through this process, the decision-makers can intervene to solve any problem without effort and field visits.

Tamimi touched upon the QMS after its implementation in 22 health institutions in Dakhiliah, as well as at the emergency department of Khoula Hospital.



Oman ranks second in GCC, 8th in world for dates production

Muscat - The international forum on developing practices for marketing and promotion of dates kicked off under the patronage of H E Dr Saud Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, on Wednesday.

The two-day forum went underway to highlight the importance of dates and its contribution to food security and general health. It will also shed light on aspects of dates production and leading experiences in the field of investments in date-related industries.

H E Dr Ahmed Nasser al Bakri, Undersecretary for Agriculture in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said that the plan for organising the forum stemmed from the belief in the importance of the date palm trees as part of historic heritage and as a strategic and economic crop in the Arab region and the GCC countries.



The area under date cultivation is estimated at 62,000 feddans, constituting 22 per cent of the total cultivated area

H E DR AHMED AL BAKRI

Date palm is the most cultivated crop in Oman. There are approximately 9mn date palm trees of 325 varieties. "The area

under date cultivation is estimated at 62,000 feddans (26,000 hectares approx), constituting 22 per cent of the total cultivated area," H E Bakri said.

In terms of total production of dates, Oman ranks second in the GCC and 8th in the world.

H E Bakri explained that the national strategy for the promotion of date palms helped increase date production, reaching 374,000 tonnes in 2021, constituting a growth rate of 49 per cent from 2005 to 2021.

Dr Abdul Rahman al Habib, executive director of the International Dates Council, said that the forum touched on issues related to dates production, marketing and promotion. It is also covering the benefits of dates for all segments of the value chain, including farmers, manufacturers, marketing agencies, traders, consumers, the national economy, the environment and sustainable development.

Deadline for design entries on Oman pavilion at Expo Japan 2025 announced

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Office of Bilal bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design on Wednesday announced January 22 (Sunday) as the deadline for receiving design entries for Oman's pavilion at Expo Japan 2025.

The competition, which was launched on January 8, is being held under the supervision of Belarab Bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

To be build on an area of 1,763sqm, Oman's pavilion proposes to present itself as a platform to unite people from different cultures in line with the expo's slogan 'Designing Future Society for Our Lives'.

A statement issued by the Office of Bilal bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design said, 'Participation in the competition is open to Omanis, without age restriction, for specialists in the fields of architecture, design and urban planning, individually or as part of a team of up to five mem-

bers. Local consulting offices also have the opportunity to participate in the competition'.

The Japan Expo event - through its slogan - aims to create an ideal future society through sustainable development goals of participating countries through three axes: Ensuring life sustainability, improving life, and enhancing life through communication.

The results of the competition will be announced in February and the winning project will receive a financial reward of RO10,000, the office said.

PDO celebrates graduation of 782 staff members in Shababuna Programme



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) on Wednesday celebrated the graduation of 782 Omani staff from the company's Shababuna Programme.

The graduation ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Mohsin Hamad al Hadhrami, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

"PDO has a commendable model in the field of staff training, which contributes to achieving the company's missions and Oman's goals in the energy field.

PDO has a commendable model in the field of staff training. Shababuna is among the most important programmes

H E MOHSIN AL HADHRAMI

Shababuna is among the most important programmes aimed at sharpening the skills of national cadres," Hadhrami said.

PDO Managing Director

Steve Phimister explained that this programme has been "designed to provide our young employees with the skills and knowledge they need to excel in the oil and gas industry, and we are confident that they will make a significant contribution to PDO in the years to come".

Shababuna Programme was introduced in 2013 to provide structured, on-the-job training, monitoring and assessment for Omani staff who join the company after graduating from universities and colleges.

The programme's main objective is to support graduates dur-

ing the early stages of their careers and quickly integrate them into the workplace through a combination of on-the-job and off-the-job training enhanced with e-Learning, focused coaching and mentoring.

Furthermore, this programme has been rolled out to different technical and non-technical functions, covering more than 20 disciplines with dedicated policies, processes and resources.

It is based on the learning philosophy of 70:20:10 model of 70 per cent on-the-job learning, 20 per cent coaching and ten per cent training.

Nawader Oman to hold pet show tomorrow

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Nawader Oman - a club for pet lovers in Oman - will hold an exhibition of pet birds and rabbits in Seeb on Friday.

Ahmed al Habsi, the media coordinator at the club, told *Muscat Daily* that the exhibition at Al Bahaa School for Basic Education in Maabala in the wilayat of Seeb will witness the presence of "18 different types of birds".

Visitors can see exotic pigeons, doves, parrots and sparrows, as well as some rare breeds of rabbits in the exhibition.

According to Ahmed, the fourteenth edition of the exhibition targets more than a thousand visitors and aims to spread the culture of caring for pets.

"It will also help visitors to identify various types of birds. The visitors will get to know about the most appropriate ways to raise and care for their pets,

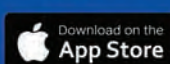
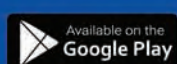
and develop interest in the environment and its living creatures."

This annual exhibition receives a large number of citizens and residents from all segments of the society, in addition to a number of visitors from abroad.

"There will be a jury to identify the purest and strongest birds according to the international aesthetic standards, and a ceremony will be held at the end of the day to honour the participants," Habsi added.

Bring Home your Exchange

Download our App Today!



PURSHOTTAM KANJI
EXCHANGE



شركة برشوتم
كانجي للصرافة



99101314, 99849289 customersupport@pkexchange.net
www.pkexchange.com pkexch @pkexchange1



MARKET WATCH

MSX30 4,836.93
Sensex 61,045.74

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian	211.16
Pakistan	595.69
Bangladesh	276.45
Philippines	141.46
Sri Lanka	944.80

*Rates as on January 18
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

UK inflation slows in December but remains sky-high

Annual inflation in Britain slowed to 10.5 per cent in December, official data showed Wednesday, but remained close to historically high levels that are causing a cost-of-living crisis and mass strikes.

The Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rate compared with 10.7 per cent in November, the Office for National Statistics said in statement.

"Inflation eased slightly in December, although still at a very high level, with overall prices rising strongly during the last year as a whole," said ONS chief economist Grant Fitzner.

He noted that petrol prices "fell notably in December, with the cost of clothing also dropping back slightly".

"However, this was offset by increases for coach and air fares as well as overnight hotel accommodation," Fitzner added.

UK inflation began soaring last year amid sharp price rises worldwide due to supply constraints caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the lifting of Covid pandemic lockdowns.

Oman starts gas production in Mabrouk North East field

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals on Wednesday announced that the gas production from Mabrouk North East field in the sultanate's Block 10 has started.

Gas production from Block 10 is expected to reach 0.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day by mid-2024, the ministry said in a tweet.

Shell Integrated Gas Oman, the operator of Block 10 and a subsidiary of global energy giant Shell, confirmed the start of gas production from the Mabrouk field.

H E Eng Salim al Aufer, Minister of Energy and Minerals, said, "This start of gas production from Mabrouk field is an important milestone that will strengthen Oman's rich natural gas reserves, whilst bringing value to support Oman's economic growth in the energy sector."

"It will also play a key role in powering local industries and LNG export facilities. Production from Block 10 is expected to reach 0.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day by mid-2024," H E Aufer said.

As per the ministry's announcement, the produced gas from Mabrouk field will be supplied to liquefied natural gas (LNG) export facilities of Oman LNG and to OQ Gas Network for feeding local industries.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, Walid Hadi, Oman Shell's senior vice president and



Gas production from Block 10 is expected to reach 0.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day by mid-2024

country chair, said, "Shell and the government of Oman are developing options for a separate downstream gas project in which Shell could produce and sell low-carbon products and support the development of blue hydrogen in Oman. The proposed blue hydrogen project is subject to further agreements and future investment decisions."

In December 2021, the Min-

istry of Energy and Minerals signed the concession agreement with Shell Integrated Gas Oman and its partners, OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC (a joint venture between TotalEnergies and OQ), to develop and produce natural gas from Block 10. The parties at that time also signed a separate gas sales agreement for gas produced from Block 10.

The concession agreement established Shell as the operator of Block 10, holding a 53.45 per cent working interest, with OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC holding 13.36 per cent and 33.19 per cent, respectively.

In addition, Shell and Energy Development Oman (EDO) also signed an agreement to process the natural gas from Block 10 in EDO's Saih Rawl facility.

Block 10 - which covers an area of approximately 1200 sqkm - is located in Saih Rawl in the Al Wusta Governorate of Oman, around 400km from Muscat.



Oman LNG inks gas supply deals with PTT Global, TotalEnergies

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman LNG Wednesday signed two binding term-sheet agreements with Thailand's PTT Global LNG and French energy giant TotalEnergies to supply a total 1.6mn metric tonnes per annum of liquefied natural gas (LNG) starting from 2025.

These new agreements solidify the partnership between Oman LNG and the global energy firms, the company said in a statement to Oman News Agency.

The signed term-sheet agreements will see Oman LNG supplying PTT Global LNG with a total volume of 0.8mn metric tonnes per annum of LNG based on a nine-year contract, starting from 2026, and 0.8mn metric tonnes per annum to TotalEnergies for a total duration of ten years, starting from 2025.

The agreements were signed by Hamad Mohammed al Nu'amani, CEO of Oman LNG, Ratchada Lertwanichwatana, managing director of PTT Global LNG and Thomas Maurisse, sen-

ior vice president of LNG at TotalEnergies.

H E Eng Salim Nasser al Aufer, Minister of Energy and Minerals was present during the signing ceremony.

The agreements reflect Oman's efforts in providing energy to the global markets. It also complements Oman LNG's strive to renew its contracts for beyond 2024 with a strong interest to leverage partnership with many global partners. This ensures Oman LNG sustains its position in the global LNG market and contributes to global energy security, where it currently continues delivering clean and reliable energy.

Nu'amani said, "Signing the term-sheet agreement with PTT Global LNG and TotalEnergies enhances our efforts to further grow and strengthen our market positions including new business opportunities.

"Such step complements our mission to add value to the local economy through increasing capacity, and strengthening collaborations with international firms."

Marafiq increases its power generation capacity at SEZAD

Duqm - OQ Group-owned Centralized Utilities Company (Marafiq) has announced the increase of power production in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) after operating a new gas-powered power plant.

The new plant was developed in cooperation with the Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer).

Eng Abdullah Saif al Farsi, director general of operations and maintenance at Marafiq, said that the new gas-powered plant started operation in 2021 as a replacement for the previous diesel-powered plant. "The production volume of the new plant reached around 212 gigawatt per hour in the first 10 months of 2022."

Farsi said, "Establishing the new gas-powered plant in the



Special Economic Zone at Duqm reflects the joint efforts of Marafiq and Tanweer to meet the increasing demand for electricity in SEZAD which is seeing rapid population and development growth."

The gas-powered plant consists of four mobile gas turbines with a production capacity of 80 megawatts, which is sufficient to meet Tanweer's power require-

ment to cover the needs of SEZAD over the next five years, Farsi added.

Commenting on the economic benefit of the new plant, Farsi further said that the new plant reduces the cost of power generation, which in turn decreases the cost of government subsidies for power in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm.

ONA

Beehive crowdfunding platform officially launched in sultanate

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The UAE-based financial technologies (fintech) company Beehive, which is a Capital Market Authority (CMA) regulated crowdfunding platform, officially celebrated launching in Oman with an event at Crowne Plaza Muscat on Tuesday.

Deputy head of the Public Authority for SME Development, Abdul Aziz al Reesi, was present to inaugurate the event. The company, that partners with Ahlibank on its Tamkeen product, soft-launched in June 2022 bringing an alternative finance solution for small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to the sultanate.



(From left) Abdul Aziz al Reesi, Mayan al Asfoor, Oman country manager of Beehive, and Peter Tavener, CFO and COO of Beehive

Craig Moore, CEO and founder of Beehive, said, "There is much potential for SMEs to bring economic growth to Oman. Improving their access to finance supports this, and we are excited to be part of that journey."

Beehive, headquartered in the UAE, uses its fintech platform to connect a crowd of investors with small businesses looking for finance. It has funded over US\$400mn in total in the GCC since its inception in 2014. In

partnership with Ahlibank, the company has funded twenty businesses and a total of RO1.4mn in financing since launching in Oman.

Peer-to-peer lending is an established source of funding for SMEs in many countries and is becoming increasingly widespread across the GCC. The financing is unsecured, meaning businesses don't have to provide physical collateral for security, and instead the approval is based on the business's creditworthiness, which is assessed using Beehive's robust credit decisioning engine.

Amongst the first companies to receive funding from Beehive and Ahlibank were Charisma Clinic and Al Naamani.

Saudi Arabia says curbing oil dependency a priority for economy

Davos, Switzerland - Saudi Arabia is working to reduce its reliance on oil exports, Economy Minister Faisal Al-Ibrahim said Wednesday, as the Middle East powerhouse sent one of the largest delegations to the Davos summit to make its case.

Despite its goal of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2060, the country remains hugely dependent on crude oil exports that have powered its growth for decades, raising doubts about its potential for an economic makeover any time soon.

"We want to lessen our dependence on oil... We want to diversify our economy, it is important, it is essential," Ibrahim

told AFP at the World Economic Forum.

Riyadh has dispatched eight top-ranking officials to the gathering of business elite as it seeks more foreign investment and partners outside the all-important oil sector.

On Tuesday, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud told the World Economic Forum's annual meeting that geopolitical stability is "absolutely key" to global energy security.

During a high-level panel titled 'Keeping the Lights amid Geopolitical Fracture', Prince Faisal bin Farhan emphasised the need for near-term stability, especially in the world's energy



markets.

"The kingdom is investing almost US\$200bn in renewable energy at home and abroad. Our companies are active in 21 countries, deploying solar and wind energy and other sorts of renewable energy," he said.

"In the meantime, we need to maintain a supply of traditional energies that are priced in a way that ensures stability - and we

The kingdom is investing almost \$200bn in renewable energy at home and abroad. Our companies are active in 21 countries, deploying solar and wind energy and other sorts of renewable energy

PRINCE FAISAL BIN FARHAN AL SAUD

will continue to address this in a responsible way," he added.

Soaring crude prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine allowed the kingdom to post in 2022 its first budget surplus in nine years, giving it the financial firepower for economic development.

"It's never too late for sectors that are starting from scratch in Saudi Arabia. Tourism, culture,

sports and entertainment - they are going to bring a wealth of diversification," Ibrahim said.

"But we also care about other sectors like mining and industry for it to be even more competitive."

Saudi Arabia is hoping to build on momentum from the high-profile visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Riyadh last month, where deals worth

billions of dollars were signed in areas including energy and infrastructure.

"It's not advertising or showcasing, people are very interested in Saudi's growth story," the minister said, noting the kingdom's 8.5 per cent expansion in GDP last year.

On the heels of the football World Cup in Qatar, Saudi Arabia could be a candidate to host the competition in 2030, recently hiring the Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo to promote the potential bid.

And at Davos on Tuesday, Saudi officials announced a joint initiative with the Davos forum organisers to accelerate high-tech innovation in the country

via the virtual reality of the metaverse.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been pushing to open up the country and enact economic and social reforms, although critics have denounced a crackdown on dissidents and the murder of critic Jamal Khashoggi inside the kingdom's Istanbul consulate in October 2018.

"We've opened up much more than before and that lets people see," Ibrahim said. "They see the culture, they see the values, they see the progress and they see that we are tackling a lot of challenges and issues regionally and globally."

AFP

Cost-of-living crisis biggest global risk: Davos study

Davos, Switzerland - The cost-of-living crisis is the biggest global risk over the next two years, the World Economic Forum warned in a survey.

The WEF report described the cost-of-living crisis as the "biggest short-term risk" between now and 2025, followed by natural disasters, extreme weather events and "geo-economic confrontation".

Global inflation remains at sky-high levels after energy and food costs rocketed last year, largely owing to the invasion of agricultural powerhouse Ukraine by major oil and gas producer Russia.

Supply constraints caused by the Covid pandemic have also contributed to decades-high prices for consumers.

"Conflict and geo-economic tensions have triggered a series of deeply interconnected global risks," said the annual study during gathering in the Swiss Alpine village of Davos.

"These include energy and food supply crunches, which are likely to persist for the next two years, and strong increases in the cost-of-living and debt servicing," it added.

The report said such "crises risk undermining efforts to tackle longer-term risks, notably those related to climate change, biodiversity and investment in human capital".

The survey, produced with the



Participants are seen during a session of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in Davos (AFP)

consulting firm Marsh McLennan and Zurich Insurance Group, took into account the views of more than 1,200 global risk experts, policymakers and industry leaders.

"The short-term risk landscape is dominated by energy, food, debt and disasters," said Saadia Zahidi, a managing director at WEF.

"Those that are already the most vulnerable are suffering - and in the face of multiple crises, those who qualify as vulnerable are rapidly expanding, in rich and poor countries," she wrote in the report.

Zahidi highlighted the fact that respondents to the survey were placing traditional warfare

as less of a risk than geo-economic conflict - such as sanctions, punitive tariffs and other forms of trade war - or cyber warfare.

"The nature of how conflict happens is changing," she said.

"That doesn't mean that we shouldn't be concerned, because for the first time in a fairly long time, military spending has seen a small but pronounced uptake in many large economies."

The WEF study called on leaders to act "collectively and decisively, balancing short- and long-term views".

And it concluded on the need for cooperation to strengthen "financial stability, technology governance, economic development

and investment in research, science, education and health".

Carolina Klint, a risk management leader at Marsh, said this year would be marked by "increased risks" related to food, energy, raw materials and cyber security that could further disrupt global supply chains and impact investment decisions.

"At a time when countries and organisations should be stepping up resilience efforts, economic headwinds will constrain their ability to do so," she wrote in the report.

Many analysts warn that the global economy will suffer a recession in 2023 as inflation remains elevated.

AFP

'Pressing need' for US, China to talk on economic issues

Zurich, Switzerland - Close communication between the United States and China on economic issues is vital, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Wednesday ahead of a meeting with a top Chinese official in Zurich.

"Amid a complicated global economic outlook, there is a pressing need for the two largest economies in the world to closely communicate on global macroeconomics and financial conditions," Yellen said at the start of her first face-to-face meeting with Chinese Vice Premier Liu He.

The countries also needed to "exchange views on how we are responding to various challenges," she said.

Yellen voiced hope that the pair, who have already met virtually on three occasions, would on Wednesday "delve deeply into topics of mutual concern, including macroeconomic cooperation and climate finance".

Speaking through an interpreter, Liu also called for "serious communication and coordination on macroeconomic affairs, climate change and other issues of mutual interest".

"In our view the China-US relationship is highly consequential," he said.

Wednesday's meeting comes amid heightened diplomatic efforts to keep high tensions in check between the two behemoths.

A US official confirmed Tues-



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (right) and Chinese vice-premier Liu He meet in Zurich, on Wednesday (AFP)

day that Secretary of State Antony Blinken would visit Beijing in early February.

He will be the first US secretary of state to travel to China since a brief visit in October 2018 by his Republican predecessor Mike Pompeo, known for his blistering criticism of Beijing.

Long-simmering disputes between the two countries flared during the Donald Trump presidency and have continued -- if less acutely -- under President Joe Biden.

The United States and China, which are locked in a fierce strategic competition, spend more on their militaries than any other nation.

But both Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping have said they want to reduce tensions.

When the two leaders met in November on the sidelines of

the Group of 20 summit in Bali, both voiced guarded hope at preventing disputes from spiralling out of control.

They pledged "to continue responsibly managing the competition between our two countries and to explore potential areas of cooperation," the State Department said in November.

Referring to the Bali meeting, Yellen said that "we share a responsibility to show that China and the United States can manage our differences and prevent competition from becoming anything ever near conflict."

"We have areas of disagreement, and we will convey them directly," said Yellen, who was on a brief stop in Zurich before an 11-day trip to Africa, aimed at deepening economic ties on a continent where China has become a key player.

AFP



China imports, exports plunge in December

Beijing, China - China's exports in December fell at their fastest pace since 2020, according to official data, owing to a drop in global demand and after health restrictions hit economic activity at home.

The world's second-largest economy is still reeling from the effects of years of its zero-Covid policy, which hammered businesses and supply chains, and dampened consumption.

China began lifting most of the hardline measures at the beginning of last month, but the country has since seen a massive spike in Covid-19 infections.

Exports fell 9.9 per cent year-on-year to US\$30.6bn, China customs said, their second consecutive month of decline and the biggest fall since the early days of the pandemic in 2020. That followed a fall of 8.7 per cent in November.

Exports had been the main driver of China's economy since 2020, when the global shut-down led to strong demand for Chinese goods such as medical products, and then as the rest of the world reopened.

The uncertainties linked to Covid and the economic slow-down in China are having an impact on the need for foreign products.

Imports were down again in December, sinking 7.5 per cent, following a 10.6 per cent drop the previous month. Both imports and exports dropped much more than forecast in a survey of economists by

Bloomberg.

For all of 2022, the Asian giant's exports rose 7.0 per cent, compared with a 29.9 per cent jump in the previous year.

Imports for 2022 were up 1.1 per cent, against a 30.1 per cent rise in 2021 when activity in China was recovering from the first wave of the pandemic.

China's trade surplus in December nevertheless reached US\$78bn, but still well below July's record US\$101.2bn.

China will unveil its 2022 economic growth figure on Tuesday, along with a host of other indicators. The previous year gross domestic product grew more than eight percent.

Beijing had set itself a growth target of around 5.5 per cent for 2022, but that has been undermined by the stifling zero-Covid health policy that was in place for most of the year.

Larry Hu, an analyst for the Macquarie investment bank, said: "For the whole year of 2023, the weak global economic environment could be a major downside risk to the Chinese economy."

And Zhiwei Zhang of Pinpoint Asset Management wrote in a note: "Both the weakening global demand and the wave of Covid outbreak likely contributed to this decline."

"The weak export growth highlights the importance of boosting domestic demand as the key driver for the economy in 2023."

AFP

Amazon reclaims most valuable brand title

New York, US - The US-based e-commerce giant Amazon reclaimed the title of the most valuable brand, according to a new report.

According to the report released by Brand Finance, a leading valuation and strategy consultancy group, Amazon regained the title despite a 15 per cent drop in its brand value to US\$299.3bn.

Amazon was the most valuable brand in the 2020 report with a value of US\$220.8bn but lost ground to Apple in 2021 and



2022.

In the 2023 report, Apple was in second place with a value

of US\$297.5bn, down by 16.2 per cent on a yearly basis.

In third place is Google with

US\$281.4bn, followed by Microsoft (US\$191.6bn) and Walmart (US\$113.8bn).

Among the top 10 firms included Samsung, ICBC, Verizon, Tesla and TikTok.

Among the top 10 companies, seven are from the US, two are from China and one is from South Korea.

David Haigh, the chairman and CEO of Brand Finance, said: "Technology brands across the world have lost significant value in response to shifting demand patterns."

"Inflation has affected brands across many sectors, but as consumer habits partially revert to pre-pandemic patterns, demand for the services of tech brands has been hit particularly hard."

The US dominated the list of 500 most valuable brands with 201 brands (US\$3.98tn), followed by China with 79 brands (US\$1.43tn), Germany with 24 (US\$479.6bn), Japan with 32 (US\$425.5bn), and France with 31 (US\$331.2bn).

Anadolu Agency

US retail sales shrinks on weak demand

Washington, US - US retail sales slumped for a second straight month in December while wholesale prices fell, said government data released Wednesday, as consumers grow cautious on economic uncertainty.

The US central bank has been raising interest rates steeply to cool the world's biggest economy as American households found themselves squeezed by decades-high inflation - and the effects are now rippling across sectors.

Retail sales contracted more than expected by 1.1 per cent in December from a month prior, to US\$677.1bn, said the latest Commerce Department figures. This was down from a revised one percent drop in November.

Falling sales at department stores and gasoline stations proved to be a drag, while the auto and furniture segments also saw declines.

Gas prices plunged last month, and analysts said bad weather across the country could have temporarily held back vehicle sales as well.

But retail sales remains 6.0 per cent up from December 2021. For all of last year, total sales still jumped 9.2 per cent, the Commerce Department said.

Spending at restaurants and



In this file photo taken on November 25, 2022 people shop during Black Friday in Santa Anita, California (AFP)

bars took a hit as well, dropping 0.9 per cent between November and December, despite consumer resilience previously.

Growth engine hit

In a separate report, the Labor Department said US producer prices fell 0.5 per cent in December from November, the biggest drop since early in the pandemic.

This signals further easing in inflationary pressures, as gauges for goods and energy costs both fell.

"Weaker consumer spending momentum at the end of 2022 is a sign the economy's main growth engine is beginning to sputter," said Oren Klachkin of Oxford Economics.

He added that the Federal Reserve is "unlikely to unwind its

recent monetary policy tightening any time soon," stressing that the central bank is comfortable with allowing a recession if consumer inflation returns to its two percent target.

Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said the steep drop in December retail sales continues a downward trend since last spring.

While food service sales "out-

performed" for much of last year, partly due to a shift in consumption towards services and away from goods, the segment is now struggling, he added.

This comes as "consumers start to reduce discretionary spending in the face of an uncertain economic outlook and sharply higher borrowing costs," Shepherdson said.

AFP

INFINITI QX55 impresses its owners with inspired dynamics

Eye-catching crossover coupe INFINITI QX55 has been impressing owners with its performance-inspired details premium qualities, driver-convenience attributes, inspired dynamics, spacious cabin, and great connectivity.

A vehicle that is truly, unapologetically individual, Infiniti QX55 offers a collection of comfort and convenience features. The extraordinary crossover hits the right notes, merging innovative technology and daring style in equal measure, a press release said.

The provocative QX55 returns to the soul of Infiniti — bringing the legendary crossover coupe shape of the FX back to life. The QX55 is packed with performance, connective, drive-assist safety technology. 2Ltr VC-Turbo Engine with 268 HP and Intelligent All-Wheel Drive.

Customers like Rashid al Rujaibi said, “Under the hood, the QX55 has the edge when it comes to performance figures. I have felt that a Greater horsepower and torque helps deliver a more rewarding experience behind the wheel.”

Faris al Harasi said he loves the QX55’s Bose Performance Series audio system with 16

speakers. “The audio system provides a concert-like acoustic experience,” he said.

A senior spokesperson at Infiniti Oman said, “The QX55’s brilliant dynamics, plush interior, and perceptive technology offers owners a perfect vehicle. Its generous cabin, advanced driver-assistance systems, leading convenience features make QX55 owners and passengers happy participants in every journey.”

Infiniti QX55 is available in three well-appointed categories - LUXE, ESSENTIAL and SENSORY.

The QX55 boasts of a refined design language, and sporty styling. The signature double-arch grille is complemented by a stunning, origami-inspired mesh pattern that delivers visual depth and showcases modern Japanese-inspired artistry. It is flanked by standard LED headlights that mimic the human eye.

The stylish and flowing lines of the model reach from the hood, over the front fenders, across the doors, and over the rear wheels.

Twenty-inch wheels are standard on all QX55 models, which fill the wheel arches and affirm the SUV’s dynamic presence.

The rear of the QX55 height-



ens the nuance of the automaker’s design and interpretation of Japanese minimalism by coupling an uncluttered liftgate with handsome, understated technology to deliver a lasting impression.

Digital “piano key” taillights combine 45 separate LEDs in a single housing to create an elegant light signature.

The Infiniti logo on the tailgate is similarly advanced and houses the power liftgate release, which further frees the rear end from clutter.

Genesis bags two 2022 Good Design Awards

Genesis has announced the win of two awards at the 2022 Good Design Awards.

The G90 and connected car Integrated Cockpit (ccIC) Infotainment System both won in the Transportation category for their outstanding designs that charter new directions for innovation, a press release said.

The G90, as a flagship sedan with the most elegant interpretation of Genesis’ design identity and brand values, garnered several significant accolades over the past year - it was named the 2023 MotorTrend Car of the Year last November and received an IDEA award in September.

The flagship sedan was also lauded for its safety features, earning the Top Safety Pick+ rating from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) last year.

The G90 is the ultimate expression of Athletic Elegance that carefully balances dynamic driving and an elegant rear seat experience,” said SangYup Lee, Executive Vice President and Head of the Genesis Global Design Center. “It is the result of the passion, dedication and creative collaboration of our dream design team, as well as those of our engineers at the Namyang R&D Center.”

MoH celebrates graduation of Health Sciences batches

The Ministry of Health (MoH) celebrated on Wednesday the graduation of 1640 students from the Oman College of Health Sciences, holders of bachelors and diplomas in Health Specialisation majors of the academic years (2019-2020), (2020-2021), (2021-2022) in the Governorate of Muscat and its branches.

The graduation ceremony, held at Sultan Qaboos University Grand Hall, was under the auspices of H E Sheikh Nasr bin

Amer bin Shuwain al Hosni, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour for Labour, and attended by number of dignitaries and officials of the ministry, a number of governmental and military authorities, in addition to members of the teaching and administrative staff in educational institutions, parents of graduates, and invitees, a press release said.

Dr Mustafa Fahmi Mohammed, dean of OCHS, said these batches have been pro-

vided with the wide specialised science and knowledge and the necessary training to keep up abreast with the labour market requirements and society's needs.

He added that the key goal of the College of Health Sciences, with all its various branches, is to ensure the provision of high-quality health education according to international standards. It always seeks to develop its academic services in compliance

with the requirements and needs of the labour market by adopting the philosophy of student self-learning for problem-solving and lifelong self-learning.

The Dean then addressed the graduates highlighting the college's endeavour to enrich their educational journey, keeping them updated in order to benefit the country, community, and particularly their parents, advising them to be devoted to their families and to what lies ahead.

Nissan Z's lineage spans through seven generations

The seventh generation Nissan Z 2023 is nothing short of spectacular. However, to truly appreciate the Z brand, one must understand how it started and how decades of fine-tuning led to ultimate perfection, says a senior official of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA).

Since its launch in 1969, Nissan Z has proven itself as a strong competitor on and off the racetrack, selling over 1.8 million units to date and earning the admiration of enthusiasts across the globe, a press release said.

A senior official of SBA explains, “The legacy of Nissan sports cars has been built over more than 50 years with more than 40 models. Some of Nissan’s sports cars include: the original Nissan Skyline, the modern GT-R, the historical Fairlady Z, the Nissan 350Z, and the newly unveiled Nissan Z. Nissan has earned its reputation of being strong contenders on and off the track.

“The original Z was sold in October of 1969 in Japan as the Nissan Fairlady Z at Nissan Exhibition dealerships that previously sold the Nissan Bluebird. It was initially marketed as the Datsun 240Z for international customers. Since then, Nissan has

	2nd Generation Nissan 280 Z
	3rd Generation Nissan 300 ZX
	4th Generation Nissan 300 ZX 2by2 Twin Turbo
	5th Generation Nissan 350 Z
	6th Generation Nissan 370 Z

manufactured seven generations of Z-cars.”

About the Nissan Z 2023, he says, “The all-new Nissan Z serves up classic sports car proportions of a long hood and a short rear deck. Staying true to its performance roots, and iconic Z styling elements, it creates a complete modern design That's not all, the all-new 2023 Z has a

powerful six-cylinder under the hood; a front midship, and a rear-wheel-drive design that places the engine farther back in the chassis for enhanced balance.”

The Nissan Z’s exhilarating heritage, which spans over five decades and seven generations, serves as a clear reminder of the icon's thrilling driving experiences.

Jebel Sifah Brings Legendary Amr Diab To Oman

Jebel Sifah will once again turn into an al fresco hotspot as it will host the legendary Amr Diab for a one-of-a-kind performance this Friday at Dunes Beach Club.

Fans in Oman can look forward to a live set featuring signature songs from the iconic international singer, while enjoying stunning views at Jebel Sifah, a press release said.

Known as the ‘King of Arab Pop’, Amr Diab is a best-selling Egyptian singer who has created his own style of music, a blend of Western and Egyptian rhythms.



His 1996 signature song ‘Nour El Ain’ gained the groundbreaking artist recognition inside and outside the Arab world. In fact, Diab’s unique Mediterranean music genre has earned him international recognition throughout his career, including seven World Music Awards and six African Music Awards, as well as a Guinness World Record for most World Music Awards for best-selling Middle Eastern artist.

The open-air staged concert will be brought to the audience by master developer Muriya, a joint

venture between Orascom Development Holding and OMRAN. Karim Boushra, Area Destinations director at Muriya, said, “Situated between the sea of Oman and Al Hajar mountains, what better location to hold a performance by the world-famous Amr Diab than at Jebel Sifah. The Dunes Beach Club, one of the newest hotspots at Jebel Sifah has been serving up not just the finest food but also the finest entertainment including a stellar line-up that so far consisted of DJ Rodge and Tamer Hosny to name a few.”

Oman Oasis announces winners of ‘Buy More Win More’

The highly successful ‘Buy More Win More’ promotion, run by Oman Oasis, came to a close on 31 December 2022. The offer, which gave customers the chance to win exciting prizes by purchasing Oman Oasis, Sifr, or Mai Alkaline drinking water from participating retailers, received an overwhelming response from the market.

By participating in the offer, customers could win prizes like iPhone 13s, gold coins,

laptops, and fuel coupons. After the first set of 130 winners was announced on November 3rd, the second draw took place on December 5th and an additional 139 customers were declared as lucky winners, a press release said.

The third and final set of 131 winners was announced on January 4. The winners of the iPhone 13s are Hilal al Hinai, Asaad bin Salem Marhoon al Jabri, Sudesh Kutti Poojary,



Md Masud, Abdulaziz Abdallah, and Moidin Ashique.

Lenovo laptops were won by Marcelino Calderon, Ameer Abdul Salam, and Manir Hossen.

8 Gram gold coins were won by Nada bint Rashid bin Saed Al Abreyah, Habib bin Salem bin Hamad Al Fakhri, and Raad bin Mahmoud bin Ramadan Al Zadjali, whereas 4g gold coins were won by Safia Salem Abdullah al Quraini, Muhammed Rafeek,

and Guddu Kumar. In addition to this, Fuel Coupons worth RO5 each were won by 115 winners from across Oman.

Speaking about the raffle draw, N S S Subramaniam, COO, said, “We are thrilled that so many of our customers were able to enjoy this offer and win valuable prizes. We appreciate your support and look forward to continuing to provide you with the highest quality products and exceptional offers in the future.”

Erdogan sets stage for May 14 Turkish election

He signalled that he intended to bring the date of Turkey's general election forward by one month

Ankara, Turkey - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday signalled that he intended to bring the date of Turkey's most consequential general election in generations forward by one month to May 14.

The announcement sets the stage for a vote that could either extend Erdogan's Islamic style of rule into a third decade or turn the country on a sharply more secular - and potentially predictable - course.

The 68-year-old leader stamped his mark on Turkey by rolling back a fiercely secular tradition established in the mostly Muslim nation by its founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk one century ago.

He oversaw years of economic booms and busts as well wars and even a failed but bloody coup.

His supporters revere him for giving a voice to the marginalised and creating a thriving new middle class in the nation of 85mn people.

But his opponents highlight an authoritarian streak that emerged in the second decade of Erdogan's rule.

The country enters the elec-

tion with much of its media under the government's stranglehold and thousands of activists and politicians - many of them Kurds - languishing behind bars.

The NATO member's allies meanwhile remain uneasy about Erdogan's mercurial foreign policies - most recently exemplified by his refusal to accept Sweden and Finland's bids to join the Western defence bloc.

Evoking history

Many analysts think the upcoming election is too close to call.

Erdogan's secular opposition enters the campaign divided over everything from policy to strategy and has not agreed on a candidate to field against Erdogan.

Turkey's next general election is officially due to be held on June 18.

But Erdogan's allies have been hinting for weeks that they may bring the polls forward because of religious holidays and school exams.

Erdogan delivered a campaign-style speech to his ruling party on Wednesday in which he recalled the day contemporary Turkey held its first free election in 1950.



Turkish President and leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a group meeting at the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara on Wednesday (AFP)

That May 14 vote was won by Adnan Menderes - a prime minister who was toppled by a military junta in 1960 and executed a year later.

Erdogan was himself deposed and briefly jailed when he was mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s and often compares himself to

Menderes.

"The late Menderes said on May 14, 1950 'enough, the people will have their say', and emerged victorious at the ballot box," Erdogan said in televised remarks.

"Our people will give their answer to the (opposition) on the

same day 73 years later."

Divided opposition

Erdogan enters the election with his approval ratings bruised by a year-long economic crisis that saw inflation touch 85 per cent late last year.

But the fractured opposition

has still not united around a single candidate after more than a year of heated talks.

Their best hope at one stage appeared to be Istanbul's popular mayor Ekrem Imamoglu.

The telegenic 52-year-old beat Erdogan's ally in landmark 2019 municipal elections in which the opposition also swept to power in the capital Ankara and Turkey's third-largest city Izmir.

Now there is no other choice for the opposition but to determine the joint candidate as soon as possible

KADRI GURSEL

But a criminal court last month banned Imamoglu from politics for calling officials who annulled his initial 2019 victory 'idiots'.

Imamoglu has appealed and can still technically run for president. But he would have to step down from office if he won and

his conviction for slander was eventually upheld.

The risks around Imamoglu have turned the main opposition party's leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu as the most likely candidate to stand against Erdogan. But the 74-year-old former civil servant's failure to light up opinion polls has caused divisions within the six opposition parties now allied against Erdogan.

The six intend to hold their next discussions about a presidential candidate on January 26.

"Now, there is no other choice for the (opposition) but to determine the joint candidate as soon as possible and to stand behind this candidate with all their party organisations," veteran Turkish journalist Kadri Gursel tweeted.

The polls will also challenge Erdogan's control of parliament.

His ruling party is currently in an alliance with a far-right group whose support has dwindled in the past few years.

"Polls show the opposition in the lead but momentum seems to be back with Erdogan," emerging market economist and veteran Turkey watcher Timothy Ash wrote in a note to clients.

AFP

French-Irish citizen held in Iran in 'critical' health: France

Paris, France - A French-Irish citizen held in Iran since October 2022, who relatives say is on hunger strike, is in a critical state of health, a French diplomatic source said on Wednesday.

Bernard Phelan, a Paris-based travel consultant and one of seven French nationals held by Iran, was arrested in October while travelling and is being held in Mashhad in northeastern Iran.

The 64-year-old's family has said he started a dry hunger strike on Monday, refusing water, in addition to the food hunger strike he had been on since the start of the year.

"He is showing serious signs of physical and psychological exhaustion," said the French diplomatic source, adding he was in a 'critical state'.

The Iranian authorities have so far refused to release Phelan on medical grounds despite repeated requests from the French and Irish authorities, the source said.

His sister Caroline Masse-



Bernard Phelan (AFP)

Phelan told AFP on Wednesday that her brother was an innocent man detained for reasons 'beyond our comprehension'.

She said his health condition meant he had to be released urgently. "It's a question of days," she said. "He's an innocent man caught in the middle of I don't know what. He loves Iran, he is 64, sick, and wants to go home." "I think he is part of a group of Europeans imprisoned for political reasons... of which I know nothing," she added. "We have nothing to do with this story."

Phelan is one of two dozen

foreigners who are currently held in Iran, according to activists, who describe the detainees as 'hostages' seized to extract concessions from the West.

Phelan was travelling through Mashhad during the ongoing protests against Iran's clerical regime when he was arrested.

He is being held in Vakilabad prison in Mashhad.

Fellow French national Benjamin Briere, who was sentenced last year to eight years in prison on spying charges, is being held in the same prison.

"Bernard Phelan is in contact twice a day with the crisis unit of the French foreign ministry, which passes on the messages from his family," the source said.

But requests for direct communication with the family have been turned down by the Iranian authorities.

Phelan received his first French consular visit only on January 9, after repeated requests, the diplomatic source added.

AFP

World's oldest known person dies aged 118

Marseille, France - The world's oldest known person, French nun Lucile Randon, has died aged 118, a spokesman told AFP on Tuesday.

Randon, known as Sister Andre, was born in southern France on February 11, 1904, when World War I was still a decade away.

She died in her sleep at her nursing home in Toulon, spokesman David Tavella said.

"There is great sadness but... it was her desire to join her beloved brother. For her, it's a liberation," Tavella, of the Sainte-Catherine-Laboure nursing home, told AFP.

The sister was long feted as the oldest European, before the death of Japan's Kane Tanaka aged 119 last year left her the longest-lived person on Earth.

Guinness World Records officially acknowledged her status in April 2022.

Randon was born in the year New York opened its first subway and when the Tour de France had only been staged once.

She grew up in a Protestant



This file photo shows Sister Andre praying in a wheelchair, on the eve of her 117th birthday, in Toulon, southern France on February 10, 2021 (AFP)

family as the only girl among three brothers, living in the southern town of Ales.

One of her fondest memories was the return of two of her brothers at the end of World War I, she told AFP in an interview on her 116th birthday. "It was rare, in families, there were usually two dead rather than two alive. They both came back," she said.

She worked as a governess in Paris - a period she once called

the happiest time of her life - for the children of wealthy families.

She converted to Catholicism and was baptised at the age of 26. Driven by a desire to 'go further', she joined the Daughters of Charity order of nuns at the relatively late age of 41.

Sister Andre was then assigned to a hospital in Vichy, where she worked for 31 years.

In later life she moved to Toulon along the Mediterranean

coast. Her days in the nursing home were punctuated by prayer, mealtimes and visits from residents and hospice workers.

She also received a steady flow of letters, almost all of which she responded to.

In 2021 she survived catching COVID-19, which infected 81 residents of her nursing home.

'Work kept me alive'

Randon told reporters last year that her work and caring for others had kept her spry.

"People say that work kills, for me work kept me alive, I kept working until I was 108," she told reporters in April last year in the tearoom of the home.

Although she was blind and relied on a wheelchair, she used to care for other elderly people much younger than herself. "People should help each other and love each other instead of hating. If we shared all that, things would be a lot better," she said at the meeting with journalists.

AFP

60-year French-German friendship under strain

Paris, France - Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a changing world order are straining ties between France and Germany as they prepare to celebrate 60 years since a post-World War II treaty sealed their reconciliation.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz is expected in Paris on January 22 to meet President Emmanuel Macron before the pair lead a joint cabinet meeting to mark the Elysee Treaty signed on January 22, 1963.

But the two leaders' relationship is seen as cordial at best.

"Scholz isn't very European at all, he's much more 'Germany first'," a senior member of Macron's Renaissance party, who asked not to be named, told reporters this week.

In Paris there's an impression of German 'disinterest in the French-German relationship', said Jacob Ross, a researcher at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin.

The frictions are even being felt by the public, with 36 per cent of French respondents and 39 per cent of Germans telling



This file photo shows Emmanuel Macron Olaf Scholz waving upon Scholz' arrival for a lunch at Elysee Palace in Paris on October 26, 2022 (AFP)

pollster Ipsos this week that relations were suffering.

But the legacy of the 1963 treaty - signed in Paris by post-World War II leaders Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle - remains strong on everything from military cooperation to youth exchanges.

'Difficult'

And a vast majority in both countries believe French-German collaboration is vital for the European Union. Macron's first

term from 2017 was marked by a charm offensive, as the centrist leader tried to restore French economic credibility with Berlin and Brussels through sometimes painful and unpopular reforms.

Eventually his warm ties with Scholz's predecessor Angela Merkel helped secure the unprecedented European response to the coronavirus crisis.

A more confident Macron has also been cultivating other European partners, signing bilateral treaties with Italy and Greece in

2021 and another this week with Spain. "If it's difficult with Germany right now, and not moving forward as he might hope, then

Chancellor Olaf Scholz is expected in Paris on January 22 to meet Emmanuel Macron and lead a joint cabinet meeting

he'll try to find alternative partners," Ross said.

Ukraine invasion

Differences between France and Germany have bubbled to the surface since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year.

Both were initially reluctant to alienate Russia, Germany's top supplier of natural gas which France had seen as a key global power player. But as the war's toll mounted, France sent powerful mobile artillery to Ukraine

ahead of the Germans last April and this month announced supplies of light tanks before Washington and Berlin decided to send infantry fighting vehicles.

The head of Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD) Lars Klingbeil complained to the Die Zeit newspaper last week that the signal 'would certainly have been even stronger if all three countries announced their decision at the same time'.

Like Britain and Poland, France is pushing Berlin to deliver modern Leopard 2 battle tanks to Kyiv, or at least to allow re-export of the German model widely sold abroad.

Many observers expected German-French plans to cooperate on next-generation tanks and fighter jets to gain urgency after the war prompted Scholz to declare a 'new era' in defence policy. But 'even under the pressure of the events in Ukraine, apparently there isn't much movement' with contracts for the next stage of tank development still unsigned, researcher Ross said.

AFP

Iranian man gets eight years for beheading wife

Tehran, Iran - An Iranian man has been jailed for more than eight years after decapitating his wife and displaying her head in public, in a case that shocked the country, the judiciary said on Wednesday.

Mona Heidari, 17, was killed in February 2022 by her husband and brother-in-law in Ahvaz, capital of the southwestern province of Khuzestan.

Video that emerged later of her smiling husband parading her decapitated head in the street sparked an outpouring of grief and outrage in the Islamic republic.

Sajjad Heidarnava was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison for murder and eight months for assault, judiciary spokesman Massoud Setayeshi told reporters.

The family of Heidari had pardoned the killer rather than demanding qesas - Iran's Islamic law of retribution.

"The accused has no right

to protest against the verdict and the decision is final," the spokesman said.

"The second defendant in the case, Heidar Heidarnava, was sentenced to 45 months in prison for complicity in intentional homicide," he added.

At the time of the murder, media outlets in Iran said Heidari had been married at the age of 12 and was the mother of a three-year-old son when she was killed.

After the crime, human rights defenders called for changes to the law to protect of women against domestic violence and to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls, currently set at 13.

Iran has been rocked by protests that erupted after the September 16 death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, after her arrest for an alleged breach of the country's dress code for women.

AFP



People protest against the government of Peruvian President Dina Boluarte in Lima on Tuesday (AFP)

As more unrest looms, Peru leader Boluarte calls for calm

Lima, Peru - With Peru's capital bracing for two days of anti-government protests starting from Wednesday, President Dina Boluarte called on the demonstrators flooding into Lima to gather 'peacefully and calmly' - even as they demand her resignation.

The South American country has been rocked by over five weeks of deadly protests since the ouster and arrest of her predecessor Pedro Castillo in early December.

Thousands of protesters from rural areas are descending on Lima this week to keep up pressure against the government, often defying a state of emergency declared to try to maintain order.

With tensions mounting, many poor and Indigenous demonstrators were already making their presence felt on Tuesday in the capital, where police used smoke canisters against marchers who gathered ahead of the larger mobilisations.

"We know they want to take Lima, given everything that is coming out on social media, on the 18th and 19th (Wednesday and Thursday)," Boluarte said in a speech at Peru's Constitutional

boarded buses on Tuesday from Ilave city in the Puno region, on the border with Bolivia.

"I am excited to travel to Lima because the fight continues, all the Aymara blood brothers are

country's south and east, according to Peru's human rights ombudsman. Various groups are demanding Boluarte's resignation, the dissolution of parliament and immediate elections.

But the president warned that 'the rule of law cannot be hostage to the whims' of a single group of people.

Rival marches

Demonstrators from all over Peru have arranged to meet in the capital to protest together, but despite various announcements, it is still difficult to determine how many people will arrive in Lima.

By Tuesday afternoon, dozens of people were already marching through Lima's streets to Plaza San Martin, the historic epicentre of demonstrations.

"All of us who have come from the city of Cusco are joining the national strike. Dina Boluarte should leave because she does not represent the coast, the

The South American country has been rocked by over five weeks of deadly protests since the ouster and arrest of Boluarte's predecessor Pedro Castillo in early December. Thousands of protesters are descending on Lima this week

Court.

"I call on them to take Lima, yes, but peacefully and calmly. I am waiting for them in the seat of government to discuss their social agendas."

Convoys of demonstrators were still on their way.

Hundreds of members of the Indigenous Aymara community

traveling to the fight," Julio Cesar Ramos told AFP before boarding one of the buses.

"It hurts me to see my country like this, that is why Aymara and Quechua brothers, we are united as one," said Roger Mamani, 28.

At least 42 people have died in clashes between protesters and security forces, largely in the

Seoul spy agency raids labour group over 'N Korea ties'



Labour group members struggle with police in front of the headquarters of the KHMU in Seoul on Wednesday (AFP)

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea's spy agency on Wednesday raided the country's main labour union group, saying it was part of a years-long investigation into whether some members had illegal links to North Korea.

Seoul remains officially at war with its nuclear-armed neighbour, and under its controversial National Security Act, possession of publications or other materials produced in the North can be a criminal offence. Officials from the National Intelligence Service and the police raided the office of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions in central Seoul, saying some of its members were suspected of having 'ties with North Korea', the agency said.

"We and the national police

agency have been carrying out our own investigation into the suspects' alleged ties with North Korea for several years," an official from the spy agency told AFP.

"Based on the evidence obtained in the process, we judged that a compulsory investigation was necessary, and we went ahead with the raid after the court issued a search and seizure warrant," he added. The KCTU termed the raid 'barbaric', accusing Seoul's conservative administration of 'conniving' to target the labour organisation.

As one of the country's largest umbrella union groups, the KCTU was linked to recent strike action by some truck drivers, whose union falls under the KCTU.

AFP

Australia to scrap fleet of Taipan military helicopters

Sydney, Australia - Australia on Wednesday announced it would scrap its fleet of European-made Taipan military helicopters, despite last-ditch lobbying by France to save the contract.

Trust between the two countries plummeted in 2021 when Australia's former conservative government abruptly tore up a Aus\$90bn agreement (US\$62bn) to bolster the navy with French-built submarines.

At the height of the spat, French President Emmanuel Macron accused Australia's then-prime minister Scott Morrison of lying about the deal, and Paris recalled its am-

bassador from Canberra.

Defence Minister Richard Marles, part of a centre-left government elected last year, said on Wednesday the Taipans would be replaced with US-made Black Hawks.

Marles said he was confident this would not damage Australia's relationship with France, which has been somewhat repaired since the submarine row.

"The most important thing here is dealing with the French in an honest way," he told national broadcaster ABC.

"We are confident that this won't interrupt the renewed relationship with France."

AFP



A Qantas Boeing 737-800 aircraft operating as flight QF144 is seen past heat haze after its safe landing at the Sydney International Airport on Wednesday (AFP)

Qantas flight lands safely in Sydney after mid-air mayday

Sydney, Australia - Ambulance services scrambled at Sydney airport on Wednesday to meet an incoming Qantas plane that issued a mid-air mayday alert with engine trouble before landing safely.

The flight - QF144 - was carrying 145 passengers from Auckland, New Zealand, a statement from Qantas said. The Boeing 737-800 plane landed without incident on the runway at Sydney airport, said an AFP reporter at the scene, and will now be inspected by engineers.

Qantas said the mayday alert was downgraded to a PAN - or 'possible assistance needed' - before the flight touched down.

The airline did not identify the problem precisely but said one of the aircraft's engines had 'experienced an issue' about two hours after take off. "While in-flight engine shutdowns are rare, and would naturally be concerning for our passengers, our pilots are trained to manage them safely and aircraft are designed to fly for an extended period on one engine," it said.

Airservices Australia, the government's aviation regulator, said a PAN indicated a situation that 'requires attention from air traffic control'. Qantas is consistently ranked among the world's safest airlines and has not been involved in a fatal accident for

more than 70 years.

NSW Ambulance said earlier the service had initiated its 'emergency activation' plans because the plane had made a mayday call while flying over the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand. Paramedics were called and ambulance services were placed on standby at the airport, a spokeswoman said.

The Boeing 737-800 is a twin-engine plane and able to land safely with just one engine.

According to the Australian government, a mayday call 'indicates an aircraft is in grave and imminent danger and requires immediate assistance'.

AFP

'Victory for truth': Philippine's Nobel laureate Ressa acquitted of tax evasion

Manila, Philippines - Philippine Nobel Prize winner Maria Ressa was on Wednesday acquitted of tax evasion, among a slew of charges she has long maintained are politically motivated, calling the verdict a victory for 'truth'.

Ressa, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov in 2021, still faces three other cases, including a cyber libel conviction now under appeal that could mean nearly seven years in prison.

"Today, facts win. Truth wins," a teary-eyed and defiant Ressa told reporters outside the Manila courtroom after the ruling on four government charges that she and her online media company Rappler had dodged taxes in a 2015 bond sale to foreign investors.

It was her first court acquittal since former president Rodrigo Duterte's government began filing charges against her. Ressa had earlier termed the cases 'politically motivated' and 'a brazen abuse of power'.

The tax court said prosecutors failed to prove 'beyond reasonable doubt' that Ressa and Rappler had evaded income taxes.

In a separate interview with AFP following her acquittal,



Nobel laureate Maria Ressa gestures after she was acquitted of tax evasion cases at the Court of Tax Appeals in Quezon City on Wednesday (AFP)

Ressa said the verdict was a 'victory for journalists' in the Philippines and around the world.

"If you stand up to power, yes you get beaten up (for) four years and two months. But right will win," Ressa said.

"I think this is hope for anyone who has been unjustly accused."

The 59-year-old has been battling a series of cases that media advocates say were filed due to her vocal criticism of Duterte and his drug war, which claimed thousands of lives.

Ressa and Muratov were awarded the Nobel for their efforts to 'safeguard freedom of expression'.

she had left her fate up to the courts.

"What we do know is that the world is watching and that we have a government that wants the world to watch. So I'm optimistic about it," Ressa said.

Rappler is challenging a Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission order to close for allegedly violating a ban on foreign ownership in media.

Under the constitution, investment in the media is reserved for Philippine citizens or entities controlled by citizens.

The case springs from a 2015 investment by the US-based Omidyar Network, established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar.

Omidyar Network later transferred its Rappler investment to the site's local managers to stave off efforts by Duterte to shut it down.

The third outstanding case is also a tax-dodging charge against Ressa and Rappler.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos said in September he would not interfere in Ressa's cases, citing the separation of powers between the executive and judicial branches of government.

AFP

Copter crash: Ukraine minister among dead

More than a dozen people were killed in a helicopter crash near a kindergarten outside capital Kyiv

Brovary, Ukraine - Ukraine's interior minister was among more than a dozen people killed in a helicopter crash on Wednesday near a kindergarten outside Kyiv, spurring condolences from allies.

Officials initially said that 18 people had died but later revised the toll down to 16, including one of the minister's deputies and three children.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky described the crash of the helicopter, which was en route to the front-line in eastern Ukraine, as a "terrible tragedy."

There was no immediate claim from Kyiv that Russian forces were involved in downing the aircraft and an investigation has been launched into the cause.

The helicopter carrying Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky slammed down next to a kindergarten and a residential building in Brovary, a commuter town for the capital Kyiv that was the scene of fierce fighting with Russian forces last year.

AFP journalists at the crash site saw the charred remains of the aircraft mixed with debris



Military and onlookers stand at the site where a helicopter crashed near a kindergarten outside the capital Kyiv on Wednesday (AFP)

from nearby buildings and a car crushed by the blades of the helicopter.

Amateur footage circulating on social media in the immediate aftermath captured cries and a large blaze.

"A helicopter of the state

emergency service crashed in Brovary. As a result of the crash, the leadership of the interior ministry died," the head of Ukraine's police service, Igor Klymenko, said in a statement.

He said that both Monastyrsky and his first

deputy, Yevgeniy Yenin, were killed.

According to the latest death toll cited by presidential advisor Kyrylo Tymoshenko, 16 people died.

Thirty people including 12 children were hospitalised, he

added.

'Unspeakable pain'

Klymenko from Ukraine's police service said that nine of those killed were on board the helicopter when it crashed.

The presidency said that the

aircraft was en route to the frontline in eastern Ukraine.

Zelensky said he had instructed law enforcement bodies to launch an investigation into the circumstances of the crash and that emergency services were doing all they could on the scene. "Today, a terrible tragedy occurred in Brovary, Kyiv region," Zelensky said on social media. "The pain is unspeakable."

Monastyrsky, 42, a trained lawyer, had served as Ukraine's interior minister from July 2021.

He was a key member of Zelensky's party and was married with two children.

Prime Minister Denys Shmygal said the deaths of Monastyrsky and two other senior officials were 'a great loss for the government team and the entire state'.

EU chief Charles Michel expressed dismay and offered condolences.

"We join Ukraine in grief following the tragic helicopter accident," the president of the European Council said, in a message posted to social media. "Minister Denys Monastyrsky was a great friend of the EU."

There was no immediate comment on what may have caused the crash. Aviation accidents are fairly common in Ukraine, where the use of ageing and sometimes Soviet-era infrastructure is still common.

In one of the deadliest recent incidents, 26 people, most of them air cadets, were killed when their Antonov-26 plane crashed near the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv in September 2020.

The town of Brovary is located some 20km (12 miles) northeast of Kyiv and was among urban hubs around the capital that Russian troops had tried to capture after invading Ukraine last year.

Regions around the capital are no longer the scene of fierce fighting after Russian forces were pushed back, but a series of Russian missile strikes have disrupted power supplies across the country, including in the Kyiv region.

The crash came on the heels of a tragedy that saw 45 people including six children die when a Russian missile struck a residential building in the eastern city of Dnipro at the weekend. AFP



Heidi Chan, wife of Macau junket boss Alvin Chau, leaves the court in Macau on Wednesday (AFP)

Macau sentences 'junket king' Alvin Chau for 18 years

Macau, China - Macau's former "junket king" Alvin Chau was sentenced on Wednesday to 18 years in jail for running an illegal gambling empire, ending a criminal trial that shocked the casino hub and toppled one of its highest-profile gaming tycoons.

The 48-year-old founder of Suncity Group pioneered the junket industry that brought high rollers from mainland China to Macau, the only place in the country where casinos operate legally.

At its peak during the 2010s, junkets contributed the bulk of gaming revenue for the former Portuguese colony, which boasted a pre-pandemic casino industry bigger than Las Vegas.

Chau's downfall coincided with Chinese President Xi Jinping's years-long anti-corruption drive, which has included much closer scrutiny of corrupt officials who might travel to Macau to place bets and launder money.

Prosecutors charged Chau with 289 counts of fraud, money laundering and illegal gambling.

Judge Lou Ieng Ha on Wednesday found Chau guilty of fraud, running a criminal syndicate and operating illegal bets, but acquitted him on the money laundering charge.

Suncity under Chau's leadership 'conducted illegal gambling for unlawful gains for a long time', she said in her ruling, and sentenced him to 18 years be-

hind bars.

She also awarded damages of US\$834mn to the Macau government and lesser sums to five casino operators, saying their revenue took a hit due to Suncity not declaring the full extent of its gains.

Illegal bets

The trial began in September and centred on alleged under-the-table bets worth HK\$824bn (US\$106bn) over eight years, which defrauded Macau of tax

The 48-year-old founder of Suncity Group pioneered the junket industry that brought high rollers from mainland China to Macau

revenue exceeding HK\$1bn.

Chau, who was charged alongside 20 co-defendants, was also accused of facilitating proxy betting for Chinese customers to gamble remotely in casinos based in Southeast Asia.

The defence acknowledged that under-the-table betting existed in Macau, but pointed to the lack of direct evidence implicating Chau, Suncity executives or employees.

AFP

'Global tourist arrivals doubled in 2022'

Madrid, Spain - International tourist arrivals doubled in 2022 over the previous year, and should reach near pre-pandemic levels in 2023 thanks to the lifting of travel restrictions, especially in China, the UN's tourism body said on Tuesday.

There were 917mn global tourist arrivals last year, up from 455mn in 2021, the Madrid-based World Tourism Organization said in a report, calling it 'stronger than expected results'.

While the number of international arrivals last year was still just 63 per cent of the level posted in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the UN body predicts it could reach 80 per cent to 95 per cent in 2023.

"A new year brings more reason for optimism for global tourism," the body's secretary-general, Zurab Pololikashvili, said in a statement.

The report said international tourism is set to consolidate its recovery in 2023, backed by pent-up demand, particularly from Asia and the Pacific as



Tourists visit the Angkor Wat temple complex, in Siem Reap province in Cambodia on Monday (AFP)

destinations and markets open up. "In the short term, the resumption of travel from China is likely to benefit Asian destinations in particular," it added.

"At the same time, robust demand from the United States, backed by a strong US dollar,

will continue to benefit destinations in the region and beyond. Europe, in particular, will benefit." Travel in and out of China dropped dramatically from 2019 levels under Beijing's strict COVID curbs which all-but shut China's borders for three years

before they were reopened earlier this month.

The restrictions had left a gaping hole in the Asian travel market, where countries from Thailand to Japan had depended on China as their largest source of foreign visitors. Ana-

lysts expect Chinese airlines are likely to make significant increases to capacity from the end of March, with the start of the summer scheduling season.

China was the world's largest outbound tourist market in 2019 and the removal of its virus travel restrictions 'is a significant and much welcomed step to the recovery of the tourism sector', the report said.

But the UN body warned that high inflation and interest rates, fears of a global recession and the 'uncertainty derived from the Russian aggression against Ukraine' could hamper the recovery of the sector in 2023.

"Tourists are expected to increasingly seek value for money and travel close to home in response to the challenging economic environment," it added.

Europe, the world's most popular destination region, recorded 585mn arrivals last year, nearly 80 per cent of its pre-pandemic level.

AFP

England nurses stage new walk-out over pay

London, UK - Nurses across England began two days of strikes over pay on Wednesday, threatening fresh disruption for patients in the creaking state-run health service, as new figures showed inflation still surging.

The walkout comes after nurses held their union's first stoppage in more than a century last month, joining a wave of industrial action by UK public sector workers hit by a cost-of-living crisis driven by spiralling prices.

The latest annual inflation statistics, released early on Wednesday, showed they remained close to record highs, with rates easing slightly in December to 10.5 per cent, compared with 10.7 per cent the previous month.

The main nursing union accuses the government of failing to negotiate seriously on improving their pay deal for the current year, which they say is crucial given the economic situation. "We don't want to do this.



This file photo shows a healthcare worker holding a placard outside St Thomas' Hospital in London on December 20, 2022 (AFP)

This is the last thing we want to do because... we're caring people," mental health support worker Steven Bedford said from a picket line outside a south London hospital.

"We know A&E (Accident and Emergency) is probably struggling today. But we have to make a point. We have to make a stand at some point and hopefully something can happen." The latest walkout piles further

pressure on the National Health Service (NHS) at a time of peak demand due to winter illnesses and lengthening waiting lists for treatment caused by COVID cancellations and understaffing.

'Unaffordable'

Further strikes are planned for February 6 and 7 by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union, which has said they will 'be at

the highest intensity' in its history.

Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has insisted recession-hit Britain cannot afford to reopen public sector pay already set for this fiscal year, which ends on March 31.

He has hinted at the possibility of more flexibility in agreeing upcoming salary deals, handled by pay review bodies whose independence from government has been questioned.

"Unaffordable pay hikes will mean cutting patient care and stoking the inflation that would make us all poorer," health minister Steve Barclay wrote in *The Independent* on Wednesday.

He added that salary increases would 'take billions of pounds away from where we need it most'.

Two days of strikes by nurses in England and Wales in December led to the cancellation of some 30,000 elective procedures and outpatient appointments, according to Barclay.

AFP

7.0-magnitude quake hits eastern Indonesia

Morotai, Indonesia - An offshore earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 hit near eastern Indonesia's Maluku islands on Wednesday, forcing panicked residents to run into the streets and briefly triggering a tsunami warning.

There were no immediate reports of casualties but light damage was reported on at least one island.

The epicentre of the tremor was located 150km (93 miles) northwest of the eastern Indonesian island of Halmahera, at a depth of 48km, the US Geological Survey (USGS) reported.

The undersea quake occurred around 13:06pm local time off the coast of Sulawesi island, shaking nearby islands.

AFP

DOUBLE GILL

Shubhman Gill’s double-ton helps India survive Bracewell blitz in NZ ODI

Hyderabad, India - Shubman Gill scored a brilliant 208 as India held on to beat New Zealand by 12 runs in the first one-day international in Hyderabad on Wednesday despite a blistering century from Michael Bracewell. India looked to be coasting to victory with New Zealand in deep trouble at 131-6 while chasing 350 after opener Gill made just the 10th double hundred in ODI history. All-rounder Bracewell responded by making 140 off 78 balls before falling in the final over when he was pinned leg before wicket by Shardul Thakur. Disciplined early spells by India fast bowlers Mohammed Shami and Mohammed Siraj restricted New Zealand before Bracewell’s late fireworks gave them hope of a sensational win. Finn Allen struck a breezy 40 at the top of the order but New Zealand were facing a heavy defeat once Siraj removed Tom Latham for the sixth wicket. Bracewell was then joined by left-arm spinner Mitchell Santner, who hit 57 of 45 balls as part of an impressive 162-run partnership before falling to Siraj. Bracewell smacked 12 fours and 10 sixes but finished on the losing side as Siraj was the pick of the Indian bowlers with figures of 4-46. Earlier Indian opener Gill anchored the innings capably before he fell in the last over, after hitting 19 fours and nine sixes in a 149-ball marathon of an innings, achieving his first double ton. India’s other opener - and skipper - Rohit Sharma, who won the toss and decided to bat first, fell early after scoring 34 off 38 balls. The team’s in-form star batsman Virat Kohli fell cheaply to Mitchell Santner’s left-arm spin after scoring eight runs. India’s wicketkeeper-batsman Ishan Kishan scored only five runs before he fell to Lockie Ferguson’s pace in a mini middle-order collapse for the hosts. Two cameos by Suryakumar Yadav, a 26-ball 31, and all-rounder Hardik Pandya, 28 of 38 balls, stitched two crucial partnerships with Gill for India in the first game of the three-match ODI series. Santner, who took one wicket for 56 runs in his 10 overs, and Daryl Mitchell, with two wickets for 30 runs in his five overs, were the standout bowlers for New Zealand.

India’s Shubman Gill celebrates after scoring a double century in the first ODI against New Zealand in Hyderabad on Wednesday (AFP)



Dino Baggio

Ex-Italy midfielder Baggio asks for probe into ‘supplements’ after Vialli and Mihajlovic deaths

Milan, Italy - Former Italy international Dino Baggio has asked for an investigation to be carried out on substances administered to players of his generation after the recent deaths of Gianluca Vialli and Sinisa Mihajlovic. In an interview with the Gazzetta Della Sport published on Wednesday former Juventus, Parma and La-zio midfielder Baggio, 51, said he was worried about the effects of legal supplements given to foot-ballers during the 1990s. He also cleared up widespread reports that he had said in a television interview on Tuesday players were doped during the 1990s, saying he had expressed himself badly when talking about what he de-scribes as rigorous antidoping controls. “Team doctors couldn’t dope us, we were checked every three or four days,” Baggio said. “No, I simply want to know from scientists if the supplements we took could cause problems in our bodies over the long term.” Baggio, who made his comments after former Italy striker Vialli and Serbian great Sinisa Mihajlovic passed away in the last few weeks, said the substances he spoke about are “sold at chemists today” and simply helped players recover from physical efforts. Vialli lost a long battle with pancreatic cancer at the age of 58 earlier this month while Mihajlovic died of leukemia in December at 53. “My reasoning comes from the pain that I’m suffering for the death of Vialli, who I always considered a friend and who helped me a lot, of Mihajlovic and lots of others who played like me in the 1990s,” said Baggio. “There are too many who have left us, and I think we need to investigate the pharmaceutical products taken in that period. Maybe there’s nothing to it, maybe we’ll find something out.” Italy coach Roberto Mancini, who played for years alongside Vialli at Sampdoria and was a very close friend, urged caution regarding Baggio’s demand. “We need to be very cautious on this subject. Unfortunately, these things (illnesses) happen to all sorts of people, both those who play football and those who don’t,” Mancini at Wednesday’s presentation of the national team’s new kit. However former Romania striker Florin Raducioiu told Orange Sport in his home country that he would like to “have a discussion” with his former club doctor at Brescia where he played in the 1990s. “I don’t know (what substances he was given),” he said. “They told me it was glucose. It was a pink liquid prepared the day before the match, in the evening at the hotel.” AFP

All-time great Hashim Amla ends playing career

Johannesburg, South Africa - Hashim Amla ended his 22-year playing career on Wednesday, with his legacy secure as one of South Africa’s all-time cricketing greats. English county Surrey announced they had been informed by Amla, 39, that he would not be returning as a player this year after helping the side to win the English county championship in 2022. Surrey’s director of cricket Alec Stewart lauded Amla for his “phenomenal career”. “He will quite rightly go down as a great of the game. Hashim is



Hashim Amla

a fantastic cricketer and a wonderful person... Everyone at Surrey wishes him the best in the future,”

Stewart said. Amla was a key member of one of South Africa’s most powerful teams when they clinched the Test championship mace with a series win in England in 2012. Batting in a line-up which included captain Graeme Smith, Jacques Kallis and AB de Villiers, Amla made a South African record 311 not out in the first Test at The Oval in London. It remains South Africa’s only triple century in Tests. It was one of Amla’s 28 centuries in a 124-match Test career during which he scored 9,282 runs at an average of

46.64. He had an even better average in one-day internationals, hitting 27 centuries in 181 matches and scoring 8,113 runs at 49.46. Amla spent much of his Test career batting at number three but opened the batting in one-day games, setting records for reaching each thousand-run milestone between 2,000 and 7,000 in the fewest innings. He made his first-class debut for a Kwa-Zulu-Natal team, against the touring England team, as a 16-year-old in December 1999 and made his Test debut

against India in Kolkata five years later. He struggled at the start of his Test career and was criticised for a notably angled backlift. He made what he described as minor adjustments to his technique and became one of the most stylish players in world cricket with his fluent cover driving and wristy leg-side strokes. Amla captained South Africa in 14 Tests but never seemed fully at ease in the role and resigned midway through a series against England in 2015/16 after scoring a double century in a high-scoring draw in Cape Town.

CLASSIFIEDS

SITUATION WANTED

Indian female looking for a suitable coordinator/secretary/administrative job. Flexible to adapt to any other department. Contact: 78799951/7915 3904

A science graduate (B.Sc.) with 10+ years of diversified work experience in project site and document control administration and office management seeking a suitable opportunity. email: smanshoor@gmail.com Contact: 78341317

A mechanical engineer with experience in AutoCAD drafting, Solidworks and ANSYS looking for a job in Oil and Gas, Automobile sector or HVAC. email: uzairs447@yahoo.com Contact: 78655938

Send your request for Birthday/ Anniversary wishes to wish@apexmedia.co.om with your resident card copy (It’s free of cost)

Accountant(Male) with 8+years of experience in Accounts and Finance Department (MBA Finance), Experience in SAP S/4 HANA FICO. Looking for a suitable position. Contact : 99250801 Email: taimmeer2021@gmail.com

Looking for diploma sales, civil or electrical engineer. DL must. 3-4 years of Oman experience. Send CV to vivek@omanpoles.com

Biomedical Engineer(Male) with 7years of experience holding a

Bachelor’s Degree in Biomedical Engineering is seeking a suitable profile. Id- anoob619@gmail.com contact- 78467700



FOR RENT

Available 2100 sq meter best in class Warehouse cum office Space, fully furnished ready to use, Located at Prime area of Ghala in the heart of the city having easy access to airport & express Way.

Contact: Girish Sewani - 93893596

WJ Towell Group Company



Quality car rentals at competitive prices.

Muscat 9014 6672, 9679 0684
Sohar 9731 6218 | Salalah 9429 9325
www.orbit-oman.com

- Fleet of 2,000 vehicles
- Choose from a wide range of brands & models
- PDO, OXY and BP spec vehicles available
- Attractive rates for short-term & long-term lease



أوربت ORBIT
Car Rental & Lease

FOR RENT

- ❑ State of the Art warehouse and office in Misfah
- ❑ Centrally located with ease of access to Muscat-Nizwa-Sohar
- ❑ 13 loading/unloading bays, with state of the art racking and centrally air conditioning @21 degree
- Cold room and Chiller room**
- ❑ 600 pallets space available on monthly/per pallet rental bases.
- ❑ 02 loading/unloading bays, with 10 mts high state of racking.
- ❑ Temp zone 05 Degree, -25 Degree Frozen.
- Office**
- 650 sq mts of office space, centralized air conditioning ready to use.
- Warehouse**
- ❑ 6000++ pallets space available on monthly/per pallet rental bases.

for more details call: 95616835

FREE CLASSIFIED LISTING

Muscat Daily now offers free classified listings for individuals in the following categories: **Situations Wanted/ Accommodation Wanted or Available/Sale of Household Items/ Car for Sale or Wanted/ Matrimonial Alliances (Word limit is 35)** Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99104346

OMAN UNITED



Oman bank on team spirit and belief as they take on hosts Iraq in the Gulf Cup final on Thursday

Basra: Oman eye their third Gulf Cup title when they take on hosts Iraq in the final at the Basra International Stadium on Thursday, the same fixture that started the tournament two weeks ago.

That match, in which both teams wanted to avoid defeat, ended goalless, but this time they both have the confidence and the results to go all out, promising a thriller.

Oman left it late to defeat reigning champions Bahrain 1-0 thanks to a Jameel al Yahmadi wonder goal. The midfielder pounced on a loose ball to strike from 25 yards out into the top corner, sending Branko Ivankovic's men into their second final in six years.

That goal, that result, and the team spirit that they have shown throughout the tournament would surely give them a truckload of belief in the final.

Former IR Iran and Persepolis head coach Ivankovic entered his third year in charge of Oman strongly. A convincing point picked up against the hosts to get the tournament underway was backed up by a hard-fought comeback win against Yemen 3-2 and a 2-1 triumph against Saudi Arabia seeing him join Iraq in the semi-finals.

The late goal against Bahrain means Oman are one game away from equalling Iraq, Qatar and Saudi Arabia on three titles.

Oman have been the most successful side in the past 15 years of

the competition. The previous six editions of the Gulf Cup saw five different winners, with Oman the only team to win it twice, having never lifted the trophy prior to that. They also finished second in 2004 and 2007.

Ivankovic said advancing to the final was a morale booster for his side.

"I am satisfied by the performance and I am happy to face Iraq in the final.

"Although we have some injury concerns, we are very proud to have made the final and will give it our best," said Ivankovic.

Iraq reached the final after defeating reigning AFC Asian Cup champions Qatar 2-1 in Monday's semi-final. Ibrahim Bayesh's close-range finish was cancelled out by Amro Sirag's half-volley before Ayman Hussein bagged his third goal of the tournament to secure Iraq's place in the final.

Having been among the most successful teams in the competition with triumphs in 1979, 1984 and 1988, Iraq's best result of the 21st century is a final appearance in 2013 when they lost to the UAE 2-1, but with massive home support throughout this campaign, they would be hoping to better it.

In his first managerial job, Spanish coach Jesus Casas, previously assistant to Luis Enrique at Spain, led Iraq to top Group A. A goalless draw against final opponents Oman was followed by a 2-0 win against Saudi Arabia before the top spot was sealed with a 5-0 defeat of Yemen to set up a semi-final clash against Qatar.

Iraq's defensive resilience has been the key, with Qatar the only team to have scored against them.

But with players such as Al Yahmadi, who showed in the semifinal against Bahrain how to score unstoppable goals in their side, Oman would be hoping to go home with the trophy.

THE FINAL
OMAN VS IRAQ
8 PM

I am happy to face Iraq in the final. Although we have some injury concerns, we are very proud to have made the final and will give it our best

BRANKO IVANKOVIC



Cremonese stun Napoli to reach Italian Cup last eight

Milan, Italy - Cremonese will play Roma in the quarter-finals of the Italian Cup after Serie A's bottom side battled to a stunning 5-4 penalty shootout win over league leaders Napoli on Tuesday.

Felix Afena-Gyan struck the winning spot-kick under a torrential downpour in Naples to send Cremonese through after the former Roma forward had taken the match to extra time with a late looping header.

Napoli had been leading 2-1 with three minutes remaining of normal time thanks to headers from Juan Jesus and Giovanni Simeone after Charles Pickel gave the away side an 18th-minute lead.

Elliott's rocket sends troubled Reds into FA Cup fourth round

London, United Kingdom - Jurgen Klopp said he got the reaction he wanted after Harvey Elliott's sublime strike put troubled Liverpool back on track with a 1-0 win at Wolves in Tuesday's FA Cup third-round replay.

Klopp's side came in for scathing criticism after losing their last two Premier League games in desultory fashion at Brighton and Brentford.

But Elliott's brilliant long-range effort in the first half at Molineux secured a much-needed first victory in four games in all competitions.

Ironically, Liverpool's reward for seeing off Wolves is a return trip to Brighton in the fourth round. The Reds' dismal 3-0 defeat at Brighton on Saturday left them languishing in ninth place in the Premier League, 10 points adrift of the top four.

"It feels like ages ago that we had that feeling that we win and play well," Klopp said.

"We played a really good first



Liverpool's Harvey Elliott (C) scores past Wolverhampton Wanderers goalkeeper Jose Sa during the FA Cup third-round match on Wednesday

half and in the end it was just passion to block the shots. It's the reaction we wanted to see from ourselves and the boys delivered.

"The goal was exceptional. I don't want to make Harvey's performance smaller, but I had a few men of the match today, just the others didn't score."

In the bout of soul-searching that followed that embarrassment, Klopp said his struggling team needed to go "back to basics". Amid mounting questions about Klopp's own future at Anfield, the German claimed this week that he will not leave the club unless he is forced to and hinted at changes in his squad

during the summer.

Hamstrung by injuries to a host of key players including Virgil van Dijk and Luis Diaz, Klopp made eight changes after the Brighton debacle, with only Cody Gakpo, Thiago Alcantara and Ibrahima Konate retaining their places.

Mohamed Salah and Alisson Becker were among those left out, but Liverpool's understudies rose to the challenge.

Wolves had forced the replay with a 2-2 draw at Anfield, but Julen Lopetegui's side were angered when they had a potential winning goal from Toti controversially ruled out for offside in the final seconds.

They were unable to take their chance to avenge that injustice despite a lively start that saw Adama Traore's cross headed just wide by Raul Jimenez.

It was Elliott who produced the goal in breathtaking fashion in the 13th minute.

AFP

sifr
SODIUM FREE DRINKING WATER

SEASONAL OFFER

50% ONLY

HOT & COLD DISPENSER

PLUS 2 FULL BOTTLES

30 REFILL COUPONS

20% ONLY

WHITE TAP DISPENSER OR TAP DISPENSER OR MANUAL WATER PUMP OR CRADLE WITH TAP

PLUS 2 FULL BOTTLES

15 REFILL COUPONS

Offer valid from 1st January to 31st March 2023.
C.R. No.: 1365452 1 MM: 06/40/2023

CALL TOLL-FREE **800 71 222** or GSM: **9275 5522**

mai
alkaline

Alkaline Ionized Drinking Water

HYDRATE SMARTLY

- ✓ Ultra-hydrating
- ✓ Revitalizing
- ✓ Energizing

pH 9.1 to 9.5

oman OASIS

Toll-free **800 71 222** or **9275 5522**

C.R. No.: 1365452

RAFA'S REIGN ENDS IN PAIN

Defending champion Rafael Nadal hobbles out of Australian Open in major upset

Melbourne, Australia - Injured defending champion Rafael Nadal crashed out of the Australian Open in round two to 65th-ranked American Mackenzie McDonald in a major upset Wednesday, his worst Grand Slam result in seven years.

The Spanish 36-year-old, who was struggling with a hip injury, slumped 6-4, 6-4, 7-5 at Rod Laver Arena.

Defeat opens the door for arch-rival Novak Djokovic to draw equal with Nadal's record 22 Slam wins. The Serb is back in Melbourne after missing last year's tournament when he was



Rafael Nadal waves as he leaves the court after losing to Mackenzie McDonald in the second-round of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

The last time Nadal fell so early at a Grand Slam was at the Australian Open in 2016, when he departed in the first round.

The pair had met once before, also in the second round of a Grand Slam. On that occasion, at the 2020 French Open, Nadal dropped just four games in a comfortable victory.

This time McDonald was always in control with Nadal immediately on the back foot, broken on his first service game, with the American bursting out to a 4-1 lead. Nadal complained to the umpire that he was being rushed on his serve, before clawing a break back. He earned another break point at 4-5 to level it up, but the American held on and clinched the set.

Nadal left the court at the changeover, but it didn't help, with his serve again failing to fire, broken early once more as McDonald continued to dominate.

The Spaniard was on shaky territory, but as he has done so many times before, he found a way to claw back and level the set at 2-2.

Incredible champion

But the errors began to creep in again and he was broken once more before hurting himself at 15-30 in the eighth game, which he lost before gingerly walking back to his seat.

The physio was called and he could be heard saying "hip" in Spanish before leaving the court for a medical timeout with his wife crying in the players' box.

He returned and gamely carried on but was a shadow of his former self.

"It was pretty tough to stay mentally engaged but I found a way to just pull it out," said McDonald.

AFP



Coco Gauff celebrates her victory against Emma Raducanu in the second-round of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

'Lucky' Gauff gets the better of Raducanu

Melbourne, Australia - Coco Gauff won the battle of tennis prodigies on Wednesday at the Australian Open - then said she "got lucky" on the way to defeating Emma Raducanu in straight sets.

The seventh seed won 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) to reach the third round in Melbourne and will play China's Zheng Qinwen or fellow American Bernada Pera.

There were 70 places separating Gauff and 2021 US Open champion Raducanu in the rankings, but you wouldn't have known it as the pair tussled for an hour and 42 minutes on Rod Laver Arena.

It was a highly anticipated first tour-level match between the young talents and they did not disappoint.

The good friends went toe-to-toe throughout, exchanging service breaks, but the turning point came in the second set when Gauff grittily saved two set points serving at 4-5.

"I think I did a good job not freaking out on my serve," the 18-year-old told reporters.

"Honestly, one of those set points definitely probably had the ball on her racquet with the drop shot. I got a little bit lucky there."

Gauff then edged past the Briton on her third match point in the tiebreak, before they embraced warmly at the net.

"I just told myself to hang in

there and I was playing really good tennis towards the end," said the teenager.

The 20-year-old Raducanu, who is ranked 77, showed no signs of the ankle injury that forced her out of the recent Auckland Classic, which Gauff won for her third WTA Tour title.

"Kudos to Emma," said Gauff. "I know she had a tough week in Auckland. So really good for her to be able to play this level after such a scary moment."

"The whole match was great and considering the circumstances I can imagine both of us was nervous. This was a long-anticipated match-up since the draw came out."

Resilience

It was Gauff who struck the first blow, securing the first set after 43 minutes. She kept up the momentum at the start of the second with an early break.

But Raducanu, moving in closer to attack the American's second serve, aggressively hit back to square the set at 4-4.

"She raised her level a lot towards the end of the second set," said Gauff.

"It takes a lot of resilience to do that. When you're down a set and a break, it's easy to throw in the towel. I think she did a good job of raising her level when she needed to."

AFP

I was not able to hit the backhand at all. I was not able to run for the ball. But I just wanted to finish the match. I didn't want to retire, as defending champion here

RAFAEL NADAL

deported.

Top seed Nadal never settled, slumping a set behind before taking a medical timeout when a break down in the second set after hurting himself stretching for a forehand and grimacing in pain. He battled on but was in clear discomfort with his movement hampered.

His wife Mery was seen in the crowd in tears.

"It has been a couple of days

like this, but nothing like today in that movement," said Nadal. "I don't know what's going on, if it's muscle, if it's joint."

"I was not able to hit the backhand at all. I was not able to run for the ball. But I just wanted to finish the match. That's it."

"I didn't want to retire, as defending champion here. No, I didn't want to leave the court with a retirement."

New balls, please? Australian Open players say too 'fluffy'

Melbourne, Australia - As if the extreme heat and heavy rain weren't bad enough, top players at the Australian Open now have something else to complain about - the balls.

Nine-time Melbourne Park champion Novak Djokovic and departing title-holder Rafael Nadal have both said the balls at the first Grand Slam of the year aren't what they are used to.

"The longer you play, the more rallies you play, the fluffier or the bigger the ball becomes and it's slower," Djokovic said after swatting aside Roberto Carballes Baena in his opening

match on Tuesday.

Djokovic, now the hot favourite after Nadal's stunning second-round exit to Mackenzie McDonald, said he expects longer matches as a result.

"One of the biggest reasons will probably be the ball because particularly on the big courts, I don't think the speed of the surface has changed much."

"The outside courts are pretty quick. The stadium courts are a bit slower. But the ball is slower, so that affects the play."

Spanish great Nadal had said he had been told that the balls were no different from before.



Medvedev happy to be under the radar at Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - Daniil Medvedev said Wednesday he was happy to be flying under the radar at the Australian Open as he stepped up his bid to reach a third consecutive Melbourne final.

The Russian overcame a partisan crowd and tough veteran John Millman 7-5, 6-2, 6-2 on Margaret Court Arena to reach round three.

The seventh seed, who lost the 2021 decider to Novak Djokovic and then against Rafael Nadal last year, meets American Sebastian Korda or Japanese qualifier Yosuke Watanuki next.

Medvedev is on the same



Daniil Medvedev hits a return against Marcos Giron (AFP)

side of the draw as Nadal and was scheduled to meet him in the last eight.

But with the Spaniard's shock

defeat Wednesday to Mackenzie McDonald, his route to a third straight final has opened up.

"For sure the most important is to focus on yourself because, well, that's the only way how you can win," he said.

"Novak can lose. Rafa can lose. Stefanos (Tsitsipas) can lose. But if you lose too, it doesn't matter that they lose."

"It's normal when we have Rafa and Novak that all the attention comes to them. That's completely normal," he said.

"I can only try to play good. It's true that I made the finals two last times playing here, so I'm feeling good to play in Australia and looking forward to play some more matches this year."

The Russian dropped just

three games in a demolition of Marcos Giron in the first round, but met stiffer resistance initially from Millman, with plenty of long rallies.

They went toe-to-toe in the first set with both players struggling on serve, before the world number eight broke for a fourth time to seal the set.

Medvedev moved up a gear in the second set, and when Millman netted a backhand to give him a 2-1 advantage, the Russian put his foot to the floor to take full control. There was no way back for the Australian, with Medvedev in the zone as he raced to victory.

AFP



Move over mayo!

PERinaise has arrived!

Distributed by 

Please contact
+968 22060236/237



14
COOK-UP
When the mercury begins to dip, it's time to slurp and sip...some soups



15
IN TOWN
Book Fest 2023 and victory celebrations mark Oman Gulf Cup semis win



16
ENTERTAINMENT
A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood



MUSCAT NIGHTS

PARK AVENUE

Qurum Natural Park bounces back into the limelight as one of the key venues of the fortnight-long Muscat Nights fiesta which begins today



The decision to move the festival out of this venue had been hailed by citizens, especially those residing near the park who faced many hurdles everyday. However, it rendered the park desolate as it was frequented only by weekend

parking space during the festival which puts residents in the area as well as commercial establishments to untold hardships as visitors tend to usurp every available parking space. Also it is quite difficult for people residing in apartment

tended to promote domestic as well as international tourism, giving visitors from the region as well as other countries a reason to visit Oman and explore its cultural heritage as well as natural glory.

While performances are restricted to local artists, most of the activity at Qurum Park will be restricted to the Lake Theatre and surrounding area where arrangements were on in full swing yesterday for installing lighting, sound systems, electronic screens, LED festoons and decorations, stages and platforms as well as other equipment required to make the celebrations colourful every evening.

The artificial lake has been filled with fresh water and is teeming with plankton and weeds, creating a refreshing sight for viewers, who would churn around the ring of dome pergolas around the lake leading to the Lake Theatre which has been readied for performances.

Yesterday, work was on in full swing in different sections of the park to make it ready for visitors from Thursday. There is greenery everywhere, with lush lawns, colourful flowerbeds, manicured shrubs and trees giving the park precincts a fairyland look. What will be missing in this venue will be the Heritage Village which now has been shifted to Naseem Garden in Seeb.



Hubert Vaz

The ring of dome pergolas around the artificial lake have a new sheen, the lofty boughs of some of the most ancient trees in the capital seem to hold out a wish for every visitor, even the colourful flowerbeds of periwinkle and marigold are all dressed up for the much-sought-after fanfare... Qurum Natural Park is back in the limelight in 2023!

As one of the venues of the fortnight-long Muscat Nights - the new name of the popular Muscat Festival - Qurum Natural Park will welcome thousands of revellers every evening from today (January 19) till February 4. The other venues include Naseem Gardens,



Arrangements are on in full swing to install arches, sound systems, electronic screens, and other equipment for the fortnight-long festivities

Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and Oman Automobile Association grounds.

Qurum Natural Park had been the main venue of the festival for several years in the past since it housed the Heritage Village, Lake Theatre, City Amphitheatre, many international performances and

concerts as well as games and contests for children and adults. However, due to traffic congestion along the narrow streets leading to this venue, the festival was later shifted to the newly created Al Amerat Park which had ample space for all the festivities, stalls as well as plenty of parking.

revellers or morning/evening joggers. Thereby the facilities in the park, especially the lake theatre, remained under utilised.

This time round, with the return of the festival to Qurum Park, there are mixed reactions among citizens to this decision, given the perennial traffic jams and lack of

blocks near the parks to return home in the evenings due to the traffic congestion which creates beelines from the evening until midnight.

Muscat Municipality disclosed that the activities surrounding Muscat Nights will be not limited to entertainment, rather it is in-

cook-up

INNOVATIVE CUISINE

If you're fed up of popular chopped, grilled/mashed forms of brinjals on your platter try these new ways of celebrating the eggplant



Spicy Braised Eggplant Noodles

Ingredients
Kosher salt
350g dried wide rice noodles
3tbsp gochujang (Korean hot pepper paste)
1tbsp white or yellow miso
6tbsp extra-virgin olive oil - divided
600g medium eggplant – sliced 1.5cm thick
6 garlic cloves - thinly sliced
1 2cm piece ginger – minced
2tbsp tomato paste
2tssp unsalted butter
3 scallions - thinly sliced
¼ cup chopped salted dry-roasted peanuts

Method
Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a simmer. Remove pot from heat and stir in noodles. Let soak, stirring often, until very al dente. Drain, reserving 1 cup noodle cooking liquid. Rinse noodles under cold running water.
Mix gochujang and miso in a small bowl, gradually adding 1½ cups warm water, until smooth. Meanwhile, heat 3tbsp oil in a large skillet over medium-high. Add eggplant and drizzle with another 2tbsp oil, season lightly with salt. Cook, undisturbed, until golden brown - about 3 minutes. Toss; continue to cook, tossing occasionally, until most of eggplant are golden and nearly tender, about 5 minutes more. Transfer eggplant to a plate.
Reduce heat to medium and add remaining 1tbsp oil to skillet. Cook garlic and ginger, stirring often, until golden, about 2 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring, until slightly darkened, about 1 minute. Stir in gochujang mixture and return eggplant to skillet. Cook, stirring occasionally, until eggplant are nearly falling apart - 6-8 minutes.
Add noodles, butter, and ½ cup reserved noodle cooking liquid to skillet. Cook, tossing often and adding more cooking liquid as needed, until sauce is glossy, and season with salt. Serve noodles topped with scallions and peanuts.



Charred Eggplant with Spicy Tomato Sauce and Peanuts

If you've had enough of green chutney, tomato ketchup or any popular dip to accompany your winter snacks, try this 'wonderful tamarind dip' for an all new, zingy experience.

Ingredients
1 shallot, unpeeled, halved
4 garlic cloves, skin on
4 small tomatoes
½ bunch cilantro - tough stems trimmed
Juice of 1 lime
3 green Thai chiles
3tbsp fish sauce
1tsp dark brown sugar
6 Italian eggplants - halved
Extra-virgin olive oil (for drizzling)
Kosher salt
½ cup unsalted dry-roasted peanuts
Thinly sliced serrano chillies and coarsely chopped cilantro (for serving)

Method
Prepare a grill for medium indirect heat. Thread shallot and garlic onto a metal skewer. Arrange skewer and tomatoes on grate over direct heat and grill, turning halfway through, until skins are blistered and charred and flesh is slightly tender - 10-12 minutes per side. Transfer skewers and tomatoes to a large plate; remove skins from shallot and garlic.
Combine tomatoes, shallot, garlic, cilantro, lime juice, chiles, fish sauce, and brown sugar in a blender and blend to a coarse sauce. Transfer to a bowl.
Now, place eggplant, skin side down, on a rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle with oil and season with salt. Turn over and drizzle with oil and season with salt again. Place eggplant, cut side down, on grate over indirect heat. Cover and grill until slightly golden brown and flesh is tender, 18-20 minutes.
Move eggplant over direct heat (still cut side down) and grill until cut sides are charred. Transfer to baking sheet and arrange skin side down. Slightly mash flesh with a fork or butter knife.
Arrange eggplant on a platter. Drizzle tomato sauce over, and top with peanuts, chiles, and cilantro leaves.



Fried Eggplant with Crispy Basil, Whipped Honey Feta

Ingredients
1 large globe eggplant (400g)
1 cup all-purpose flour
3 large eggs
3 cups breadcrumbs
½ tsp kosher salt, plus more
Vegetable oil – for deep frying
Handful of basil leaves
200g feta cheese - at room temperature
¼ cup heavy cream
2tsp honey
Freshly ground black pepper

Method
Cut 1 large globe eggplant lengthwise into 2cm thick slabs. Cut each slab crosswise into 8cm pieces, then cut each piece lengthwise into 1cm thick strips to make fries.
Place 1 cup all-purpose flour in a shallow bowl, 3 eggs (beaten) in another shallow bowl and 3 cups breadcrumbs in a third shallow bowl. Using a measuring cup, crush the breadcrumbs into slightly finer crumbs. Season each component with kosher salt.
Dredge the eggplant fries in flour, then dip in egg and finally in breadcrumbs and transfer to a baking sheet.
Heat vegetable oil for deep frying in a wok. Working in batches, fry eggplant, turning occasionally, until golden brown and crisp on all sides, about 3 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and season immediately with salt.
Add few basil leaves to oil (be careful, oil may spatter). Using a long-handled wooden spoon, push basil down into oil to submerge (this will help stop spattering). Fry until leaves are dark green and crisp, about 1 minute. Transfer to rack with eggplant; season with salt. Repeat with remaining basil leaves and more salt.
Process feta at room temperature, in a food processor until as smooth as possible. Add ¼ cup heavy cream, 2tsp honey, ¼tsp kosher salt and lots of freshly ground black pepper. Process until smooth. Transfer to a small bowl.
Transfer eggplant fries to plates and top with fried basil. Serve with whipped feta alongside for dipping.



Bulgogi-style Eggplant

Ingredients
½ medium onion - finely chopped
3 garlic cloves - finely chopped
1 scallion - chopped
¼ cup rice syrup or 2tbsp sugar
1tbsp soy sauce
1tsp red chilli flakes
1tsp toasted sesame oil
1tbsp kosher salt
400g eggplants
1tbsp vegetable oil
1tsp toasted sesame seeds

Method
Mix onion, garlic, scallion, rice syrup, soy sauce, gochugaru, sesame oil, and ½ tsp salt in a medium bowl until well combined. Cut eggplants crosswise at 6cm intervals, then slice pieces 1cm thick.
Put eggplant strips in a large bowl and add 1tsp salt. Toss well by hand until all strips are salted. Let sit, tossing every 5 minutes, for 20 minutes.
Drain eggplant, discard liquid. Take up handfuls of eggplant and squeeze tightly to remove excess liquid, then return to large bowl. Add marinade to bowl with eggplant and mix together well. Cover and chill 30 minutes.
Heat oil in a large heavy skillet over medium-high and swirl to coat pan evenly. Add marinated eggplant and spread evenly in skillet. Leave to sear for a few minutes, until bottom is lightly colored. Turn with a spatula or tongs and cook until other side is lightly browned, 2-3 minutes. Reduce heat to medium and continue to cook, pressing eggplant into pan and turning from time to time, until eggplant is cooked through and glazed and any excess marinade has evaporated, 5-6 minutes.
Transfer eggplant to a plate. Sprinkle with sesame seeds. Serve hot or cold.

take a break

IN TOWN

BOOK FEST 2023



Embassy of India and Indian Social Club together hosted Book Fest 2023 (Jan 11-14) at the ISC premises in Darsait



OMANI FANS CELEBRATE VICTORY



Football fans in Oman celebrate Oman's victory over Bahrain in the Gulf Cup semi-finals held in Basra (Iraq), at OCEC earlier this week



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these is a martial art developed in the Ryukyu Islands in what is now Okinawa, Japan?
- A. Sushi
B. Bonsai
C. Karate
D. Origami
02. Atlantic equatorial currents pushed westward by the Trade Winds unite in the Gulf of Mexico and then flow northward. What is the north-flowing current called?
- A. Gulf Stream
B. Humboldt current
C. Force of Greenland
D. Sirocco
03. What does "savoir faire" mean?
- A. Ability to act appropriately in social situations
B. A magnificent effort
C. Newly rich
D. Taking over a government

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. A

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

N	T	E	U
R	E	R	O
P	A	E	R
S	E	K	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

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Today, you should believe your own eyes and ears, not what someone else tells you to believe. Don't let a bunch of agitators stir up trouble between you and your buddies. The shocking news they have in store for you might not be true. Gossip isn't always harmless, and you have to consider the source when it seems unbelievable.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Just like email attachments can contain viruses that make your computer act up, some of the attachments in your life could be making you sick! Today, let go of something in your life that is keeping you in less than optimal health. Upon closer inspection, your diet isn't as great as it could be. And that person you've been avoiding might finally need to be cut loose once and for all.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you think you don't have enough time to attend to the details or errands that this day demands, then you have to reorganize your day to make time. Things have been left alone for too long, and they require your attention. You can't put them off any longer. Procrastination not only robs you of being productive, it robs you of a sense of accomplishment.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your skills at chatting up new, interesting people are stronger than ever! So you should try to get out there and get more social while your communication skills are this sharp! Sure, you might prefer to hunker down at home with a good movie right now, but you try to push yourself to mingle. Just give a gathering or club a couple hours of your time, and you'll soon have fun.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Going with the flow is a much better tactic for today than swimming against the current! Don't be impulsive or combative, and try to let other people call the shots. It isn't that you shouldn't express your opinions or do what you want to do, it's just that you shouldn't do it if it will put you on a different course than everyone else is on.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Turn your attentions to resolving unfinished business today. Is there a project you left half finished? Is someone waiting to hear from you? Is there an errand you need to run? Get to it as soon as you can. Minor mistakes could turn into major headaches if you're not careful. Don't be shy. You need to make as many calls as it takes to reconnect with the people you need to speak with.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

It's going to become quite obvious today that someone who's been full of great ideas is also full of empty promises. They're doing nothing at all to build on their plans or follow through with what they told you they were going to do, and they show no sign of changing any time soon. Instead of calling them on it or getting frustrated, just move on.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You should know by now that perfection simply doesn't exist, and that sacrificing your precious free time in pursuit of it is a waste of effort. Readjust your expectations and relax a little! Sometimes being lax on details doesn't make you lazy; it makes you smart in a big-picture kind of way.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's time to get real and admit that there are certain things that are beyond your control. Stop hitting your head against that brick wall and tell yourself you can try again at a later date when things are more in your favor. Today, just get a fix on what you can accomplish and ignore the rest. In a way, you'll be giving yourself a road map.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Try not to take things too seriously today despite your surroundings. Even though you might be feeling a growing sense of responsibility for something, you don't have to feel like it's a burden. It's an honor. So lighten up and feel free to even make a few jokes about your situation. People want to know that it's okay to approach you, so give them the green light.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Not everyone around you will be able to agree on the right way to go about doing things today, but luckily you should find all this disagreement rather inspiring! Take care when dealing with other people, and listen to their suggestions with an open mind. Let them vent their frustrations without offering up your own opinion.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You have a strong critical eye right now, which makes you excellent at detecting foul play or hot air. Use this valuable skill today to make sure that no one is taking advantage of someone you love. If someone you care about is in a new relationship, starting a new job, or recently made an expensive purchase, check it out.

entertainment



GLAMOUR RETURNS TO

Golden Globes

Many wondered if Hollywood's power players would attend the controversy-hit Golden Globes, but the stars turned out in force last week for the first big showbiz awards programme of the year - and brought their top fashion game along.

Jewel tones, basic black and old-school glamour dominated the Globes red carpet - which was actually a deep gray, and under a tent after heavy rains in Los Angeles in recent days.

Here are some notes on the top looks served at the Beverly Hilton:

Royal palette

Emmy and Tony winner Billy Porter knows how to work a carpet - his black velvet Christian Siriano tuxedo dress broke the internet at the Oscars in 2019. His look on Tuesday - a vibrant magenta tuxedo dress, also from Siriano, and sparkly platform shoes - lived up to the high bar he has set.

Viola Davis, who is nominated for best film drama actress for her star turn in *The Woman King*, definitely understood the assignment, looking regal in a royal blue one-shoulder Jason Wu gown with ruching.

Abbott Elementary nominee Sheryl Lee Ralph stunned in an elaborately beaded purple gown by

Jason Rembert for Aliette, while *Only Murders in*



Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh poses with the award for Best Actress - Motion Picture - Musical/Comedy for *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

the Building star Selena Gomez, also a nominee, opted for a strapless velvet Valentino gown in a deeper amethyst shade.

Another television nominee, two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank, who is pregnant with twins, wowed in a dark green sleeveless Prada gown with pockets and black bows on the shoulders.

Back in black

The easiest way to show up red carpet-ready is to choose black - it's literally always in style. Jamie Lee Curtis, a nominee for *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, wore a black Valentino pantsuit with a flowing lace cape. Jennifer Coolidge, a winner for her acclaimed turn in *The White Lotus*, sashayed onto the carpet in an off-the-shoulder sparkly Dolce and Gabbana long-sleeved gown with matching black nail polish.

Ana de Armas, who went platinum to play Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde*, was back to brunette at the Globes in a strapless black and white Louis Vuitton gown with an intricate geometric panel on the front. And Rihanna arrived mid-show in a sculptural black gown and tons of bling.

Old Hollywood

If ever there is a time to evoke Tinseltown glamour



US actor Austin Butler poses with the award for Best Actor - Motion Picture - Drama for *Elvis*



US actress Jennifer Coolidge poses with the award for Best Supporting Actress - Television Limited Series/Motion Picture for *The White Lotus*



US actor Eddie Murphy poses with the Cecil B DeMille award

of yore by wearing a glittering, slinky, form-fitting gown, it is at the Golden Globes. Take Jessica Chastain, nominated for her portrayal of country music star Tammy Wynette in *George and Tammy*, who sparkled in an intricate silvery spider web patterned Oscar de la Renta gown.

Or Angela Bassett, a winner for best supporting actress in a film for playing Queen Ramonda in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, who slayed in a silver halter gown from Pamela Roland, her hair in soft waves.

As for the men of Hollywood, some of the top looks were the most classic, including winners Steven Spielberg and Ke Huy Quan in basic black, and Matt Bomer in a snappy double breasted burgundy velvet jacket.

NEW RELEASE

INDEPENDENCE: DETECTIVE KNIGHT 3



Bruce Willis stars as Detective James Knight in this final, tense chapter of the trilogy. Knight's last-minute assignment to the Independence Day shift turns into a race to stop an unbalanced ambulance EMT from imperiling the city's festivities.

Genre: Action
Starring: Dina Meyer, Bruce Willis, Lochlyn Munro
Language: English



HOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: OPERATION FORTUNE: RUSE DE GUERRE

Genre: Action

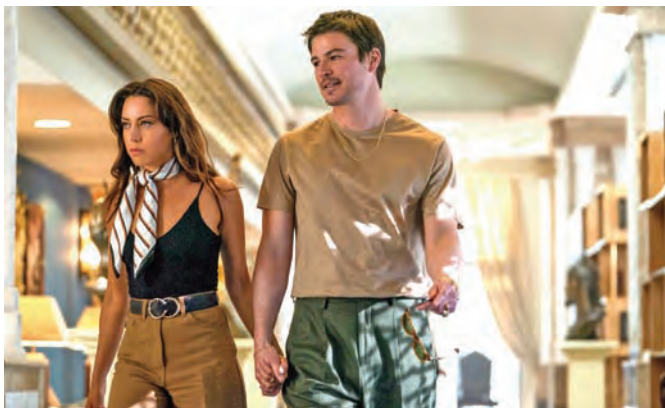
Starring: Jason Statham, Aubrey Plaza, Josh Hartnett, Hugh Grant

HEIST IN HASTE

Super spy Orson Fortune (Jason Statham) must track down and stop the sale of a deadly new weapons technology wielded by billionaire arms broker Greg Simmonds (Hugh Grant). Reluctantly teamed with some of the world's best operatives (Aubrey Plaza, Cary Elwes, Bugzy Malone), Fortune and his crew recruit Hollywood's biggest movie star Danny Francesco (Josh Hartnett) to help them on their globe-trotting undercover

mission to save the world. Mining a very similar vein of crime capering as his 2019 hit, *The Gentlemen*, director Guy Ritchie definitely doesn't dig any deeper in his latest movie, but rather sifts through the tailings in the hopes of unearthing something valuable. What that is, undoubtedly, is another cracklingly funny performance from Hugh Grant, who channels his character in *The Gentlemen* to play a sleazy arms dealer.

The arms dealer comes into possession of an ultimate Al weapon, and the only people who can stop it from hitting the open market are a bunch of private contractors hired by the British government. Led by a dapper gent named Nathan (played by Princess Bride star Cary Elwes, which is objectively fun), the real tip of the



spear is the uber cool Orson Fortune, which is a role Jason Statham was born to play (over and over again).

Rating ★★★★★