

Oman leaps 39 places in economic freedom index

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate has achieved remarkable progress in the 2024 Index of Economic Freedom, rising 39 positions to rank 56th globally, a substantial climb from its 95th standing in 2023.

This notable progress was highlighted in the latest edition of the index, celebrating its 30th anniversary.

The index - released by the American think tank The Heritage Foundation - evaluates 184 economies across the globe, assessing economic freedom based on 12 metrics categorised under four key policy areas: rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and open markets.

The 2024 report underscores the precarious state of global economic freedom, which has reached a 23-year low, with an average score of 58.6 out of 100, reflecting the challenges facing the international economic landscape.

In the Middle East and North Africa region, the UAE leads at 22nd, followed by Israel 26th, Qatar 28th, Bahrain 54th, Oman 56th, Saudi Arabia 69th and Kuwait 90th, among others.

Globally, Singapore continues



to dominate as the most economically free nation, with Switzerland, Ireland, Taiwan and Luxembourg completing the top five. Conversely, countries like North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, Sudan and Zimbabwe remain the least economically free nations.

Oman's score in the index has risen to 62.9 out of 100, moving its economy's classification to 'somewhat free.' This improvement is particularly notable in the fiscal health category, where

Oman's score rose from 12.1 in 2023 to 73.8/100 due to a reduction in public debt relative to GDP and a budget surplus.

Other areas of significant progress include the tax burden category, with Oman scoring 97.6/100, reflecting efficient personal and corporate tax structures and a balanced tax-to-GDP ratio. Additionally, Oman achieved commendable scores in monetary freedom and trade freedom, highlighting the country's commitment to price stability and open trade practices.

Under the guidance of the National Competitiveness Office

and in collaboration with the National Programme for Investment and Export Development (Nazdaher), Oman is determined to further enhance its position in the index. This ambition aligns with Oman Vision 2040's goal of positioning the sultanate among the world's top 40 countries in terms of economic competitiveness.

The National Competitiveness Office is actively coordinating with relevant authorities to monitor and improve Oman's standings in various international indicators, signifying a concerted effort to fulfil the aspirations of Oman Vision 2040 and bolster the sultanate's global economic standing.

Anthony Kim, research fellow and editor of Index of Economic Freedom at The Heritage Foundation, said, "The findings of the 2024 index are resounding: conserving and further enhancing the institutions of economic freedom is the key to true human empowerment and development. The stark difference between Taiwan and China, Chile and Venezuela or Israel and Iran are powerfully clear as the 2024 index documents categorically: freedom matters more than ever."

'National economy rebounds from COVID-19 lows'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's economy has rebounded significantly after its GDP nose-dived 3.4% - or RO1bn - during the COVID-19 pandemic, H E Dr Saeed bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, stated on Wednesday.

Speaking at a session hosted by Majlis A'Shura, H E Saqri provided insights into the ministry's strategic approach, focusing on economic diversification, overall economic performance and navigating regional and international economic challenges.

The minister outlined the hurdles encountered while formulating the 10th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), especially the adverse impacts of the pandemic in 2020. In response, the government initiated a series of measures to mitigate these challenges, including economic stimulus packages, tax exemptions, interest-bearing financing and direct financial aid to affected institutions. Efforts were also made to bolster vital sectors such as health and education, alongside promoting e-commerce and enhancing the country's digital infrastructure.

H E Saqri emphasised the successful transition of the Omani economy from recovery to growth, attributing this to strate-

The economy successfully transitioned from recovery to growth owing to strategic policies and an uptick in oil prices

H E DR SAEED AL SAQRI

gic policies and an uptick in oil prices. He reported significant growth rates during the first two years of the current Five-Year Plan, with real growth reaching 2.6% and 9.6%, respectively, and projected continued positive growth for the plan's duration.

"The government's strategies have also effectively shielded the economy from inflationary pressures, keeping it well below the global average of 6% in 2023. Measures like fuel price stabilisation and expansion of VAT-exempt goods played a crucial role in this achievement."

Addressing labour market dynamics, H E Saqri highlighted the successful integration of Omanis into the private sector, surpassing annual employment targets set under the Five-Year Plan. In 2021, a total of 21,062 citizens were employed, while in 2022, 28,029 got jobs, reflecting the government commitment to job creation and economic diversification.

NEWS BRIEF CAA ISSUES ALERT FOR HEAVY RAINS

Muscat - Heavy thundershowers associated with downdraft winds and hail are expected on Thursday morning in the governorates of North Batinah, Dhahirah and Buraimi.

The rains will gradually extend towards South Batinah, Muscat, Dakhliyah, North Sharqiyah and South Sharqiyah in the afternoon, Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) stated.

It advised all to be cautious, avoid crossing wadis and venturing into the sea during the weather disturbance.

Rains - expected in the range of 20mm to 50mm - may cause flash floods, CAA warned.



Book fair event showcases Palestinian resilience



The young dream of making the planet a better place

Bids invited to master plan tourism development in Sharqiyah Sands

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a move to boost tourism and contribute to the national economy, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has announced a tender for drawing a comprehensive tourism development master plan for Remal al Sharqiyah, the expansive sand dunes spanning North and South Sharqiyah.

The initiative aims to streamline the development efforts in the area, moving away from piecemeal approaches to prevent potential organisational, social and environmental challenges.

The proposed plan will involve crafting a detailed tourism strategy, including regulations for the region, pinpointing suitable tourism activities and events, and their spatial distribution. The plan is expected to provide a blueprint for proposed developmental activities within the area with submission deadline set for April 17.

The announcement follows



the 2019 ministerial decision (No 75/2019), which recognised three significant areas within Sharqiyah Sands as official tourist zones. These include Shagat Mareekadh (16,014,892sqm), Shagat Um Dhalmaa and Ghalfeedh and Tharmadeah (157,852,896sqm combined), and Shagat Shougab (302,761,963sq m), collectively covering vast expanses of the

desert landscape.

The tender has been met with enthusiasm from local stakeholders. Ali Salim al Hajri, a local entrepreneur and owner of Safari Desert Camp, praised the initiative as a crucial step towards attracting a greater number of tourists and foreign investment, spurring competition among local investors to enhance existing tourism services.

He highlighted the popularity of North Sharqiyah during the winter months, from October to April, as prime season for visitors to enjoy the desert's beauty and engage in activities like dune bashing, camel riding and camping. Ali underscored the need for improved infrastructure, including better road networks, Internet connectivity and entertainment facilities, to fur-

ther elevate the tourism experience in Remal al Sharqiyah.

Echoing these views, Mohammed al Hajri, a resident of Bidiyah, expressed optimism that this initiative would transform Remal al Sharqiyah into a globally recognised tourist destination. He emphasised the potential for this development to bolster domestic tourism, generate employment opportunities, and support small and medium-sized enterprises and families engaged in cottage industries. Highlighting Sharqiyah Sands as a premier camping site in Oman, he advocated sustainable tourism practices and the introduction of adventure activities like paragliding, sand biking and sandboarding to enrich the visitor experience.

This strategic push towards developing Sharqiyah Sands reflects the sultanate's commitment to harnessing its natural landscapes for sustainable tourism growth, promising a brighter future for local communities and the nation's economy.

Regional centre partners with UK health agency

Muscat - In a significant move to bolster public health infrastructure, the Gulf Centre for Disease Prevention and Control entered into a collaborative agreement with the UK Health Security Agency on Wednesday.

The partnership is aimed at enhancing exchange of knowledge and best practices in public health management, marking a crucial step in ongoing efforts to fortify health surveillance and epidemic response mechanisms across the GCC region.

The collaboration encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, including exchange of health-related information and data, organisation of joint workshops and seminars, development of training programmes aimed at capacity building, and cooperation in the realms of health research and epidemiological assessments.

Dr Pasi Penttinen, CEO of Gulf Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, expressed his enthusiasm about the partnership, highlighting its potential to pave new paths for international cooperation in public health.

Two-thirds of annual deaths due to NCDs in region: WHO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In the Eastern Mediterranean region, two-thirds of annual deaths are attributed to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). The likelihood of premature death due to NCDs ranges from 17.8% in non-conflict affected to 25.1% in conflict affected areas.

Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, made the remarks at a global high-level tech-



Dr Hanan Balkhy

nical meeting on NCDs in humanitarian settings, titled 'Building resilient health systems, leaving no one behind' on Tuesday in Copenhagen, Denmark.

"The Eastern Mediterranean region is home to 745mn people. Of those, 140mn require humanitarian assistance. That is almost one in five persons. The region is the source of 58% of the world's refugees and has 33.7mn people who have been forcibly displaced. Among its 22 countries and territories, 13 are directly or indi-

rectly affected by conflict. Nine are classified by the World Bank as 'fragile or conflict affected situations'," she informed.

She said the statistics were alarming. In the Eastern Mediterranean region, cases of heart attack, stroke and asthma might double or even triple in frequency immediately after a disaster.

"Among the most pressing health needs during a crisis is ensuring the continuity of NCD services, especially for chronic diseases, such as renal dialysis,

cancer treatment, insulin availability for diabetics and management of cardiovascular diseases along with mental health conditions and substance use."

The conflict in the Gaza Strip stands as one of the most challenging crises in the region's modern history, she added. "The conflict has depleted an already under resourced health system. Thousands were killed or injured, and over 1.6mn displaced, including 350,000 people living with chronic conditions. Only through

peace and stability can Gaza hope to rebuild its health infrastructure and provide essential medical services to its vulnerable population."

Before the war, Sudan was undergoing robust health system reform. However, in its tenth month of conflict, the health system is reaching a collapsing point where 7mn people remain displaced and 1.7mn seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. The conflict has led to over 13,000 deaths and 26,000 injuries.

Symposium showcases Palestinian resilience



Our Correspondent
Muscat

A symposium titled ‘Holding on to the Land in Palestinian Literature’ put the spotlight on the resilience of the Palestinian people amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza at Muscat International Book Fair on Tuesday.

The session, forming an integral part of the 28th edition of the book fair’s cultural activities, delved into the portrayal of the enduring struggle of the Palestinian people through the lens of their literature, underscoring its role in articulating the collective Palestinian saga.

Syrian author Subhi Hadidi led the discussions, focusing on Mahmoud Darwish’s pivotal contribution as a poet deeply connected to the Palestinian cause. Hadidi explored Dar-

Poets and novelists have weaved the Palestinian plight into their narratives, often using land and femininity as symbols of the struggle

FAKHRI SALEH

wish’s unique literary style and his profound attachment to the Palestinian land, likening him to the emblematic olive tree, as echoed in Shaker al Nabulsi’s book *Simply*, which describes Darwish as a symbol of the land itself.

The symposium also shed light on the challenges faced by Palestinian writers such as Emile Habib, Jabra al Jabra, Ghassan Kanafani, Abbad Yahya and Atef Abu Saif, whose rights have been denied, yet their works have significantly influenced a literary resurgence.

These authors have intri-

cately woven narratives around themes of love for the land, olives, struggle and perseverance, reflecting the unyielding spirit of the Palestinian people, particularly in the context of Gaza against the backdrop of Israeli occupation.

Fakhri Saleh, a writer from Jordan, examined the evolution of Palestinian literature against the canvas of contemporary issues, especially the ongoing strife. He emphasised how poets and novelists have weaved the Palestinian plight into their narratives, often using land and femininity as symbols of the

struggle. Saleh referenced Kanafani and Darwish’s works, notably the latter’s *The Land*, which pays homage to the martyrs of Palestine and celebrates the icons of resistance.

Palestinian writer Adel al Osta spoke on the role of Palestinian novels in the conflict and against Israeli occupation. His presentation underscored the novel as a medium for engaging with and reflecting upon the protracted conflict, highlighting the written word’s contribution to the Palestinian narrative of resistance and survival.

The symposium not only highlighted the enduring theme of attachment to the land in Palestinian literature but also celebrated the indomitable spirit of the Palestinian people through the prism of their literary achievements.

WE NEED TO TALK



NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

(Najma is concerned about topics on self, national and cultural development. She is a researcher and associate professor of social media and Arab Omani identity in the Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts & Social Sciences, at Sultan Qaboos University)

The annual Muscat International Book Fair occupies a cherished corner of my heart, not solely for its role in enriching my soul and personal library, but also for the serendipitous encounter it facilitated with none other than Thomas L Friedman, esteemed columnist for *The New York Times* and acclaimed author, during its 2019 edition.

As the distinguished guest speaker of the fair, he mesmerised the Omani audience with insights from his 2016 compelling publication, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, before engaging in a dialogue about my identity.

Prof Abdullah Baabood, presiding over the event, introduced me, highlighting my position as an Omani associate professor of social media and Arab identity at Sultan Qaboos University, as well as my contributions as a fellow columnist and op-ed writer of a celebrated essay for *The New York Times* (my essay was selected as the best of the week by *The Atlantic Wire* at the time).

From that moment onwards, a significant connection was forged.

Over the past half-decade, commencing with a cordial dinner invitation at the iconic Kargeen in Madinat Qaboos, Friedman not only seamlessly integrated into my and my family’s lives but also left an indelible mark on my students.

His essays on the Middle East became a valuable pedagogical tool, nurturing the burgeoning writing skills of young minds, who found the subject matter both captivating and intellectually stimulating. By dissecting his essays, they not only honed their craft but also gleaned profound insights into his perspectives on the region.

In 2019, when some of my students felt aggrieved by his portrayal of them in his essay *Beware the Mideast’s Falling Pillars*, they addressed their concerns to *The New York Times*. While their letter to the editor was not published, I conveyed their belief to him that they were unfairly characterised through a political lens. My Omani students especially sought to challenge Friedman’s framing of young Arabs as indolent waiting for government handouts.

To his credit, Friedman, or as affectionately dubbed ‘Basha Tom’ by me, welcomed this discourse, embodying the wisdom of his 2016 publication, which emphasises the forlorn art of listening to the multitude of voices in our world, truly listening - absorbing, digesting and empathising with the varied perspectives, facts and individuals that cross our paths.

Only by doing so can one survive the tectonic

movements reshaping our world, whether they be driven by technology, globalisation, climate change or wars.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, Friedman’s essays on the topic piqued the interest of my students further, with one translating some excerpts for dissemination on Arabic Twitter.

Then came an unexpected accolade – my students immortalised him in the form of WhatsApp stickers, a gesture, which despite initial mixed reactions from Friedman, was ultimately received as a mark of reverence.

Friedman’s genuine interest in engaging with young Omanis was evident as he reached out to them via email, finding the interaction invigorating. The sentiment was mutual; young Omanis sought not only to enlighten him about the Arabian Gulf but also to absorb his wisdom on writing, world politics and the Middle East.

The interplay between words and thoughts endures to the present day. Just last semester, a student composed a sincere, albeit probing, letter to him - a message that I have yet to convey.

On a personal note, irrespective of my alignment with some of his viewpoints, a profound respect for Friedman inevitably has blossomed,

particularly as he imparted to me, my nephews and nieces, and my students the cardinal principle of success: ‘Keep eyes on the prize.’

During a recent encounter in his historic Washington DC office, I posed a poignant query: “What if one finds themselves amidst distraught loved ones?” His response resonated deeply: “Confront the issue (and seek solace), then return to the pursuit of your aspirations. Distractions, whether auspicious or adverse, must not deter you.”

Ultimately, the aspiration is to leave behind a lasting legacy – be it in the form of a language museum like Planet Word, where I was graciously treated to a private tour by both him and its visionary creator, his wife Ann B Friedman, or curating (and reading) the largest collection of books on ancient esoteric knowledge.

“The timing of fruition becomes inconsequential.”

Basha Tom’s greatest legacy, therefore, lies in reminding us of the value of perseverance and unwavering focus amidst life’s myriad challenges.

What better way to begin 2024 than by reaffirming that the path to success consistently requires unwavering commitment to one’s goals, perseverance through setbacks, fulfillment of familial obligations, and overcoming personal tribulations, all while maintaining a steadfast focus on the ultimate prize.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of *Muscat Daily* or Apex Press & Publishing. Mail to: najmaz@gmail.com

إعلان مناقصات

TENDERERS ANNOUNCEMENT

SOHAR Port and Freezone invites Tenderers to the following tenders

تدعو شركة ميناء صحرار والمنطقة الحرة للموردين للمشاركة في المناقصات أدناه

No. الم	Tender Ref. الرقم المناقصاتي	Tender Title عنوان المناقصة	Tender Fee OMR الترخيم
1	SIPC 2024 – 010	Toward Excellence: Evolving the Culture of Continuous Improvement (CoCI) – Phase 2	26.250

- The above-mentioned tender fees including the VAT 5%.
- Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 9:00 am on Thursday ,29/02/2024 until 4:00 pm on Thursday 14/03/2024.
- Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:

Step 1: Interested Tenderers should remit the stated tender fees as per the below bank details:

Account Name اسم الحساب

Account Number رقم الحساب

Bank Name اسم البنك

SWIFT رمز تحويلات البنوك

SOHAR Industrial Port Co شركة ميناء صحرار الصناعية

3101-007970-500

Oman Arab bank SAOC – Main Br بنك عمان العربي شارع عم - الفرع الرئيسي

OMAABOMRUXXX

Note: Bank transfers is the only mode of payment accepted
ملاحظة: التحويل البنكي في الطريقة الوحيدة المقبولة للدفع

الخطوة الأولى: يجب على مقدمي العطاءات سداد رسوم المناقصة وفقاً للتفاصيل أدناه:

- لشمل رسوم المناقصة المذكورة أعلاه ضريبة القيمة المضافة وغيرها 5%
- بإمكان مقدمي العطاءات طلب استلام وثائق المناقصة إلكترونياً ابتداءً من يوم الخميس الموافق 29/02/2024 الساعة 9 صباحاً وحتى يوم الخميس الموافق 14/03/2024 الساعة 4 مساءً.
- على مقدمي العطاءات اتباع الإجراءات والخطوات التالية للحصول على مستندات المناقصة إلكترونياً.

الخطوة الثانية: يجب على مقدمي العطاءات سداد رسوم المناقصة وفقاً للتفاصيل أدناه:

- لشمل رسوم المناقصة المذكورة أعلاه ضريبة القيمة المضافة وغيرها 5%
- بإمكان مقدمي العطاءات طلب استلام وثائق المناقصة إلكترونياً ابتداءً من يوم الخميس الموافق 29/02/2024 الساعة 9 صباحاً وحتى يوم الخميس الموافق 14/03/2024 الساعة 4 مساءً.
- على مقدمي العطاءات اتباع الإجراءات والخطوات التالية للحصول على مستندات المناقصة إلكترونياً.

الخطوة الثالثة: سوف يستلم مقدمي العطاءات نسخة إلكترونية من مستندات المناقصة عبر البريد الإلكتروني.

- يحق لشركة ميناء صحرار والمنطقة الحرة قبول أو رفض أي مورد بدون الإفصاح عن الأسباب.
- يلتزم على جميع المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة تقديم بطاقة زيارة إلى جانب مستندات الشركة.
- في حال وجود أي أسئلة أو استفسارات تتعلق بالمناقصة الرجاء التواصل معنا عبر البريد الإلكتروني: procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

الخطوة الأولى: يجب على مقدمي العطاءات تقديم المستندات التالية:

- طلب الحصول على النسخة الإلكترونية من مستندات المناقصة
- نسخة من إصال التحويل البنكي
- أوراق السجل التجاري للشركة على أن يتم إرسالها إلى: procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

الخطوة الثانية: سوف يستلم مقدمي العطاءات نسخة إلكترونية من مستندات المناقصة عبر البريد الإلكتروني.

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Step 2: Tenderers to send the following documents:

- A request for the electronic tender documents Scanned bank transfer
- The firm's commercial registration documents
- All shall be communicated to the following e-mail address: procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

Step 3: Tenderers will receive the electronic Tender Document by e-mail.

- SOHAR reserves the right to accept or reject any tender without assigning any reasons
- All SMEs are requested to provide their RYADAH Card along with the required documents
- For any clarification regarding the tenders please send an e-mail to: procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

It all starts here

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Internal Tender Committee, Ministry of Labour, invites the following Tender:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Last date for electronic purchasing	Last date of tender submission
07 /2024	Providing 4 central devices for the human resources management system (Mawrid Plus)	Sunday 10/03/2024 at 02:00 pm	Wednesday 20/03/2024 at 10:00 am

- Specialised establishments can obtain electronic documents from this link below, starting from Thursday 29/02/2024, at 8:00 am.

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om/>

- Tender envelopes will be opened at 11:00am on the same day on Wednesday 20/03/2024.

(The ministry is not bound to accept the lowest price of or any tender)

labour_OMAN



New Mwasalat bus service connects Muscat to Sharjah

Muscat - National transport company Mwasalat launched an international bus service linking Muscat to Sharjah in United Arab Emirates on Wednesday. The 203km service through the wilayat of Shinas, offers two daily round trips starting from Azaiba Bus Station. Launched as a trial for the initial week, this service is part of a broader objective to bolster transportation links between Oman and the UAE. It is a step towards realising Mwasalat's ambition of regional transport leadership, a press release said. The route has stops at key locations, including Muscat International Airport, Burj al Sahwa,

Mabela, Suhar, Shinas ferry dock, Kalba, Fujairah and Sharjah Industrial Area 4 before ending at Jubail Bus Station. This development is the outcome of a passenger transport agreement with Sharjah Roads and Transport Authority last month. 'The service is not just a transportation link but a bridge to enhance tourism and cultural exchange between Oman and the UAE. It promises to offer travellers increased comfort, flexibility and a variety of transport options, thus strengthening the bond between the two neighbouring countries,' the release added.

Concerns over impact of private tuitions on education highlighted

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A high-level symposium titled 'Private Lessons in the Sultanate of Oman - Reality, Reasons and Proposals' took place in Muscat on Wednesday, highlighting the urgent need to address the growing trend of private tuitions. Organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), in collaboration with A'Sharqiyah University and the Ministry of Education, the event drew attention to the adverse effects of private lessons on students and the broader educational landscape. The symposium, held under the patronage of H E Dr Mona bint Salem al Jardaniyah, Undersecretary for Vocational Training in MoHERI, showcased the collective efforts of more than five government and private entities. Representatives of Ministry of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, University of Hong Kong, and A'Sharqiyah University, among others, participated. Dr Khalsa al Bahri, an education researcher at the Ministry of Education, opened the symposium with a speech that likened private lessons to double-edged swords. "While these offer some benefits, they also pose significant challenges at both the national and individual levels, impacting the educational process and its outcomes," she said.



While private tuitions offer some benefits, they also pose significant challenges at both the national and individual levels, impacting the educational process and its outcomes

DR KHALSA AL BAHRI

sium with a speech that likened private lessons to double-edged swords. "While these offer some benefits, they also pose significant

challenges at both the national and individual levels, impacting the educational process and its outcomes," she said.

vate lessons, delving into the reasons behind its rise and offering initial proposals for reducing its impact. Approximately 100 educators, including teachers, supervisors, school administrators and academics, besides parents, engaged in discussions aimed at enhancing teaching methodologies and minimising dependence on private tuitions. Officials highlighted the need of raising community awareness regarding the negative consequences of private tuitions. The symposium recommended the organisation of local and international workshops and training programmes aimed at enriching teachers' skills, thereby reducing the need for private lessons. It also proposed leveraging experiences of other countries to regulate the private tuition sector effectively. The symposium marked a crucial step towards addressing the challenges posed by private tuitions, emphasising the importance of collaborative efforts to improve the quality of education and ensure equitable access to learning opportunities for all students.

MoHERI opens applications for research funding programme

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has started accepting research proposals for its 2024 Block Funding Programme. The application form is accessible through the Research Information Management System (RIMS) on Oman Research Portal - <https://rims.trc.gov.om>. Research funding is available in three distinct categories: Research Grants, Graduate Research Grants and Undergraduate Research Grants. The Research Grants category is tailored for PhD holders or individuals with equivalent qualifications, including senior



specialists and medical doctors, and provides a maximum of two years for project completion and an allocated budget of

RO20,000 for each project. Graduate Research Grants are designed for individuals holding a master's or bachelor's degree

with at least one year of professional experience, or Oman Medical Speciality Board residents, offering a similar two-year project duration with funding of RO3,000 per project. Undergraduate students who have successfully completed their foundation year and maintained a GPA of no less than 2.30 are eligible to apply for Undergraduate Research Grants. The programme supports projects up to one year with a budget of RO1,500. Eligibility for the 2024 Block Funding Programme is subject to specific criteria. Applicants, whether principal investigators or co-principal investigators, must have been affiliated with their respective institutions between

October and December 2023. Conditions also stipulate that applicants must not have any ongoing or incomplete projects funded by MoHERI, with additional provisions for Undergraduate Research Grants candidates regarding their graduation status. Importantly, proposed research projects must be original and not previously initiated or completed. Members of institutional focal points, evaluation committees and those with potential conflict of interest are not eligible to apply, ensuring the integrity and novelty of the research. The deadline for submission to the programme is set for May 30, 2024. For more details, applicants can email BFP@moheri.gov.om



Sultan Qaboos University

With reference to the announcement of the sale of used Electromechanical materials, Motors and A/C chillers and air conditioning equipment, we would like to point out that the auction is on Sunday and Monday, March 3 - 4, not Tuesday and Wednesday.





CDAA to observe World Civil Defence Day on March 1, focus on sustainability

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman, represented by Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA), will join the global community in observing World Civil Defence Day on March 1. This is in line with the International Civil Defence Organization's decision to commemorate the day across the world, underscoring the critical role civil defence agencies play in safeguarding life and property. This year's theme, 'The Role of Civil Defence in Sustainable Development', highlights the contribution of civil defence in ensuring public safety, mitigating risks and implementing

emergency response measures. The theme emphasises the significance of civil defence efforts in promoting sustainable development goals by protecting communities and minimising the impact of disasters. The celebration serves as a platform to foster preventive awareness in communities, aiming to enhance the security and safety of individuals and their properties. A variety of awareness-raising initiatives are planned, including television and radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, seminars, lectures and the distribution of informative materials in public spaces. In a concerted effort to engage all social segments, the

CDAA has prepared an array of activities. These include awareness programmes, events and field visits to rehabilitation centres, hospitals, airports, ports and service stations across the governorates with the aim of reaching a wide audience. Additionally, on May 6 and 7, the authority is set to host the second edition of Oman Civil Defence and Ambulance Conference and Exhibition. The event is part of a broader initiative that also features two awareness exhibitions in Buraimi and Dhofar. Approximately 5,000 community members are expected to receive training in security, safety and first aid as part of this event.

TENDER NOTICE



SULTANATE OF OMAN
The Ministry of Agricultural
Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

The Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources Announces the following Tenders: -

Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales Start Date	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Companies that are eligible to participate	Tender Document fee (R.O)
1201/2023/MAFWR/HQ-129 - Recall - 1	Bathymetric Surveys And Sand Movement Studies For Fishing Harbours And Landing Facility Sites For A Period Of Three Years	Sunday 25/2/2024	Tuesday 5/3/2024	Sunday 17/3/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with first and second grades	(75/-) Omani riyals for local companies ----- (10/-) Omani riyals for SMEs
130/2024/MAFWR/HQ-11	Hosting, Backup and Storage services on the cloud for 2024-2025	Sunday 25/2/2024	Sunday 17/3/2024	Sunday 7/4/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with excellent, first, second, third and fourth grades	(25/-) Omani riyals for local companies ----- (10/-) Omani riyals for SMEs

- above mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- The value of the document will be paid & submitted on line on given website.
- The Tenderer should attach Bid Commitment Declaration for local companies, and for International company that not have head quarters in the Sultanate of Oman should attach Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman (as required in the tender) and addressed to the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources.
- All correspondence pertaining to the tender inquiry must be online at e-tendering System.
- All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: **+968 24402200** or **etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om**.

TENDERS COMMITTEE
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

Omantel bolsters cloud offerings with Google Cloud partnership

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunications services in the sultanate, announced on Wednesday its monumental collaboration with Google to introduce the first Google Distributed Cloud Edge solution in the Middle East, Turkey, and Africa (META) region.

This partnership is set to revolutionise the digital landscape, bringing advanced cloud infrastructure and services to the region, Omantel said in a press statement.

Omantel stated that the implementation of the Google Distributed Cloud Edge hardware enables it to deliver unprecedented levels of performance, reliability, and efficiency to its customers. The hardware will be strategically placed at the edge of the network, allowing faster data processing and reduced latency.

'This technology will unlock a new era of possibilities for businesses and individuals, providing seamless access to cutting-edge cloud services. This milestone collaboration will empower Omantel to stay ahead of evolving customer demands and deliver world-class services,' the company said.



The introduction of the Google Distributed Cloud Edge hardware further solidifies Omantel as a key player in the telecommunications industry, proving its dedication to providing exceptional solutions and driving digital progress in the META region.

The strategic partnership between Omantel and Google, signed in May 2023, centers on the implementation of Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning (AI/ML) for prediction models, revenue maximisation, network optimization, and API monetisation aimed at serving enterprise businesses.

"This landmark partnership smartly integrates Google Cloud's advanced AI/ML technologies into Omantel's prediction models, enabling us to optimize our predictive analytics to identify market trends, cus-

tomers behaviors, and revenue opportunities," said Talal Said al Mamari, Chief Executive Officer of Omantel.

"This cutting-edge application encourages better decision-making, enhanced customer satisfaction, and increased revenue growth. Additionally, the API monetisation project has been instrumental in elevating Omantel's service offerings to enterprise businesses. By leveraging Google Cloud's expertise in API management and monetisation strategies, Omantel is devising innovative solutions to cater to the evolving needs of its enterprise customers," he said.

According to Mamari, the establishment of Google Distributed Cloud Edge, an advanced platform that provides seamless and secure API services, will position Omantel as a pioneer in the region, and will

further strengthen its position as a strategic partner for enterprises seeking seamless connectivity and digital solutions.

Omantel is committed to driving digitisation, fostering technological advancements, and transforming the telecommunications landscape in Oman. The company's partnership with Google showcases the power of collaboration, innovation, and agility in creating sustainable and mutually beneficial business opportunities.

By leveraging each other's strengths, resources, and expertise, Omantel and Google Cloud aim to unlock new potential in the telecommunications industry and lead the way in digital transformation.

Google Cloud has already won four strategic projects in the realm of digital/telecoms for Omantel.

Shell Oman launches new and improved Shell V-Power

Muscat - Shell Oman Marketing Company has unveiled the new and improved Shell V-Power, the latest iteration of its premium fuel line, now available in Oman. This premium/performance fuel is designed to effectively clean up to 100% of critical engine components, providing optimum engine performance for drivers.

Beyond the realm of conventional fuels, Shell V-Power is meticulously designed to maximise engine performance.

In addition to Shell Oman's offering of a diverse range of fuels and a retail experience centered on convenience, quality, and choice, the new and improved Shell V-Power endeavors to surpass customer expectations.

Through its advanced formulation, new and improved Shell V-Power cleans up to 100% of critical engine parts, e.g., fuel injectors and/or inlet valves, therefore optimises airflow and



combustion, culminating in an ideal driving experience for the customers.

A new fuel formulation that ensures Shell's new and improved Shell V-Power not only meets current market demands, but also the evolving expectations of customers, solidifying its position as a symbol of driving excellence and a testament to Shell's commitment to innovation in the sultanate.

In a press release, Suresh Nair,

General Manager- Mobility at Shell Oman, said, "With the introduction of the new Shell V-Power, we are not merely launching a product; we are pioneering a new era of driving excellence in Oman. Symbolising our unwavering commitment to delivering a driving experience characterised by optimal smoothness, cleanliness, and efficiency, the enhanced Shell V-Power ensures extended and extraordinary journeys."

ahli Islamic launches crowdfunding initiative

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to support the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), ahli Islamic - the Islamic banking window of Ahlibank - has announced the launch of Tamkeen Islami, a first-of-its-kind crowdfunding initiative in Oman.

The initiative aims to empower bespoke SMEs and entrepreneurs to leverage their businesses with financial solutions catered to their needs, according to a press release.

Tamkeen is designed to deliver SMEs efficient and hassle-free access to finance through well-crafted Shariah-compliant products, such as Murabaha, and services like Ijara, all which bolster the sector and its contributions towards the Omani economy.

Through Tamkeen, customers can avail packages ranging between RO20,000 and RO100,000. Moreover, they can enjoy benefits that include competitive pricing, simple procedures, and flexible repayment terms, all without providing eq-

uity or collateral.

In a press release, Zainab al Lawati, AGM - Head of Corporate Banking, ahli Islamic, said, "At ahli Islamic, we recognise the important role played by SMEs in advancing the economy. SMEs provide job opportunities and fill the gaps and demands found within the local market. Taking in our stride to provide flexible and accessible financial options, Tamkeen Islami will tailor to the needs of SMEs and entrepreneurs, a feat that will alleviate their financial constraints."



Al Anwar Ceramic Tiles. CO. SAOG

P.O. Box No 143, Al Harthy Complex, P.code 118, Sultanate of Oman
Tel No: 00968 24649093, 24649095, Fax: 00968 24649097
Email: ceramics@omantel.net.om, www.alshams.org

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

It is my privilege to present to you the company's operating report for the year 2023.

Overview of operations and financial performance

The year 2023 has been a difficult year for the tile industry in the GCC. During this year our gross revenue declined by 24.5% to RO 20.85 M and operating profit by 79.9% to RO 1.165 M. However the profit after tax has increased by 30% to RO 3.799 M, on account of fair value changes and investment income.

The main difficulty in 2023 continued to be access to the Saudi Arabian market on account of the imposition of customs duty and revoking of antidumping duty in UAE. Imports from India continue to be growing on account of lower ocean freights and a declining rupee.

During the year we produced 16.053 million sq. meters of tiles. Our emphasis on continuous improvement programs, effective global sourcing, employing appropriate technologies and optimum levels of automation has helped us to reduce down time, process losses and costs while enhancing throughput and yield. Our competitive cost position continues to be a source of strength in relation to our regional peers.

I am pleased to state that we continue to be the market leaders in our home market in Oman and we have done very well in Yemen and Jordan markets during the year.

Future Outlook

Towards the end of 2023, the Saudi government has streamlined the reimbursement of the customs duty collections and have started granting 6 months waivers on payment of duty. In addition to this the producers in KSA have started raising their selling prices. All this should augur well for our business in Saudi Arabia, which remains the largest market in the region.

However both Yemen and Jordan which were doing well have now been adversely affected by the recent geo-political developments.

In addition to this, the problems in Red Sea have led to a sharp increase in the ocean freight rates to KSA which in turn has pushed up road freight rates significantly. So the challenges remain.

The company's strategy has been clear and consistent over the years. Our strategic intent is to emerge as the lowest cost producer of ceramic tiles in the region, by employing appropriate technologies and lean manufacturing systems driven by a committed and competent team of people.

We recognize that our strength and vitality are our people. Their proper selection, training, motivation and reward are basic to our continuing growth and success.

Dividends

The Board of Directors have recommended a cash dividend of 20 Baizas per share. This is subject to approval at the Shareholders Annual General Body Meeting scheduled on 26 March, 2024.

Corporate Governance

Al Anwar Ceramics is committed to its Corporate Social Responsibilities. Our CSR activities include assistance to selected community developmental activities, assistance to building of schools, mosques and support for local sports and cultural activities.

Conclusion

We continue to look to the future with optimism and excitement. On behalf of the Directors, I wish to thank the company's management and all our staff for their professionalism and commitment. They remain our greatest asset.

We are grateful to the government of Oman for their support and encouragement.

We are confident that Oman will continue to grow and prosper under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and we hope to play our part in this.

Hussain Ali Habib Sajwani
Chairman

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION (AUDITED) AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2023

	2023 RO	2022 RO
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment		
Right-of-use assets	18,839,493	21,015,516
Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	3,483,006	3,573,815
Deferred tax assets	2,032,472	1,674,773
	-	335,765
Current assets	24,354,971	26,599,869
Investments at fair value through profit or loss	3,466,350	7,648,696
Inventories	6,232,697	5,357,698
Trade and other receivables	10,569,675	9,874,157
Cash and bank balances	804,029	1,003,500
	21,072,751	23,884,051
	45,427,722	50,483,920
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Equity		
Share capital	22,000,000	22,000,000
Legal reserve	7,333,333	7,333,333
Retained earnings	5,250,420	3,650,833
Equity investment reserve	(739,709)	(1,043,754)
Total equity	33,844,044	31,940,412
Liabilities		
Non-current liabilities		
Non-current portion of term loans	1,618,956	3,350,079
Non-current portion of lease liabilities	3,922,054	3,876,694
Employees' end of service benefits	1,306,445	1,114,436
Deferred tax liabilities	333,775	-
	7,181,230	8,341,209
Current liabilities		
Current portion of term loans	1,031,123	773,342
Bank borrowings	-	2,749,994
Trade and other payables	3,310,861	5,622,748
Income tax payable	60,464	1,056,215
	4,402,448	10,202,299
Total liabilities	11,583,678	18,543,508
Total equity and liabilities	45,427,722	50,483,920
Net assets per share	0.154	0.145

STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME (AUDITED) FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2023

	2023 RO	2022 RO
Revenue	20,850,447	27,633,694
Cost of sales	(15,346,387)	(16,285,393)
	5,504,060	11,348,301
Gross profit		
Other income	26,149	123,302
Salaries and other related employee costs	(2,184,922)	(2,188,954)
Selling and distribution expenses	(1,565,222)	(2,944,315)
General and administrative expenses	(396,014)	(409,288)
Allowance for expected credit losses	(219,456)	(133,535)
Profit from operations	1,164,595	5,795,511
Fair value gain/ (loss) from investments at fair value through profit or loss	239,679	(3,135,506)
Gain on disposal of investments at fair value through profit or loss	1,711,388	-
Interest income from investments at fair value through profit or loss	1,744,751	933,167
Finance and dividend income	152,426	189,925
Finance costs	(530,729)	(343,963)
Profit for the year before taxation	4,482,110	3,439,134
Income tax	(682,523)	(513,307)
Net profit for the year	3,799,587	2,925,827
Other comprehensive income:		
Items that will not be reclassified to profit or loss:		
Changes in fair value of investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	357,699	(259,776)
Deferred tax (charge)/ credit on investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	(53,654)	38,966
Other comprehensive income/ (loss) for the year	304,045	(220,810)
Total comprehensive income for the year	4,103,632	2,705,017
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.017	0.013

Soaring cocoa prices set to cause chocolate shortages

Accra, Ghana - Chocolate lovers around the world may have to brace themselves for a sweet treat shortage as cocoa prices reach unprecedented heights, with economists projecting no downward trend through 2024.

Cocoa prices have more than doubled since the beginning of last year, reaching an all-time high of \$9,010.59 per tonne on the New York commodities market in the second week of February.

Unfavourable weather conditions, smuggling, and swollen shoot disease are said to have contributed to the price increase, resulting in lower crop yields in Ivory Coast, which produces nearly 40% of the world's cocoa bean, and Ghana, which produces 20%.

El Nino, a weather pattern that causes dryness in West Africa, has had a significant impact on cocoa production in these countries.

Strong seasonal winds and a lack of rainfall have also contributed to the shortage, forcing traders to scramble for supplies and driving prices up.

Chocolate manufacturers, as a result of rising primary ingredient costs, are bracing for a potential demand slowdown.

In a report by ingredients supplier Henley Bridge, cocoa price increases of 15-20% for the first half of 2024 are expected to continue for the remainder of the year.

This surge in pricing has already had a ripple effect on the industry, with chocolate makers adjusting their operations to



Cocoa prices have more than doubled since the beginning of last year, reaching an all-time high of \$9,010.59 per tonne on the New York commodities market in the second week of February

stay afloat.

"It's upsetting considering we haven't witnessed such a signif-

icant decrease in cocoa output in recent years," Samuel Adimado, president of the Ghana cocoa buyers group, told Anadolu Agency, expressing his concern over the decline in cocoa production.

"Not only have we observed a drop in production, but we've also had to scale back our operations, including layoffs and the termination of contracts for some staff members," he added.

However, Javier Blas, a London-based energy and commodities expert and Bloomberg opinion columnist, believes "this is a necessary crisis."

"The world needs higher

prices to encourage the replanting of millions of old trees - and take better care of the current ones," he said in a recent post on X.

The implications of the cocoa scarcity go beyond the chocolate business.

Other products that use cocoa as an ingredient, such as cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, may see price increases or supply chain disruptions.

Emerging economies, particularly those with a high demand for chocolate, may experience difficulty supplying customer demands.

Anadolu Agency

Chemical industry leaders discuss clean energy future

Dubai, UAE - Chemical leaders from across the GCC gathered at the 4th Gulf Petrochemicals and Chemicals Association (GPCA) Leaders Forum on Wednesday at the Kempinski Central Avenue, Dubai, to discuss the clean energy future and possible energy evolution pathways in the GCC region.

Now in its 4th edition, the exclusive, C-suite gathering took place under the theme 'Charting the Energy Evolution Pathways in the GCC', attracting leaders from different organizations in the Arabian Gulf, who are developing some of the biggest and most ambitious projects in the region.

Hydrogen took center stage at the discussions this year, as speakers addressed its development in the region, the global outlook and the energy transition in 2024.

Eng Abdulrahman al-Fageeh, CEO, of SABIC and Chairman of GPCA, delivered the welcome remarks, in which he discussed the need for the chemical and energy industry to accommodate themselves to a lower-carbon, more-circular economy. H

Fageeh's remarks were followed by a research presentation entitled 'The big picture: 2024 energy transition outlook' from Claude Mourey, Head of Hydrogen and Low carbon fuels - EMEA, Wood Mackenzie.

Dr Manar al Moneef, Chief Investment Officer of Neom, presented the keynote address on the importance of investing in the future and powering the next



GPCA Leaders Forum spotlighted hydrogen as an important enabler to drive industry's sustainability agenda and shed light on projects and opportunities for transformation across GCC

DR ABDULWAHAB AL-SADOUN

transformation. Her address was followed by a leadership dialogue moderated.

This was followed by a Panel discussion on 'The hydrogen economy for the GCC' moderated by Matteo Mazzoni, Director of Energy Analytics, ICIS, in conversation with Phil Boustead, Director - Hydrogen/Green Gas Engineering, ACWA Power; and Rami Shabaneh, Research Fellow, KAPSARC. Dr. Samir J. Serhan, COO, Air Products, delivered the closing keynote, which discussed the opportunities to generate a cleaner future with hydrogen.

Dr Abdulwahab al-Sadoun, Secretary General of GPCA, said,

"The 4th GPCA Leaders Forum brought to the forefront the latest insights, challenges, and developments in the clean energy transition in the region and globally. It spotlighted hydrogen as an important enabler to drive the industry's sustainability agenda and shed light on the projects and opportunities for transformation across the GCC. Continuing the conversation from the 17th Annual GPCA Forum in December, the Leaders Forum brought together Gulf chemical leaders to deliberate on some of the most pertinent questions poised to shape the chemical industry landscape in the years to come."



US takes lead with 21% market share in global LNG trade

New York, US - The US has increased its share in the global liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade from 1% in 2016 to 21% by the end of 2023 to become the world's top LNG exporter.

According to Anadolu Agency's compilation of data from CEDIGAZ, the International Information Center on Natural Gas, the US exported 84.3mn tons of LNG to global markets last year.

Australia followed with 78.9mn tonnes and Qatar with 78.5mn tonnes.

The US made its first exports to the global LNG market in 2016, and this percentage share has increased incrementally year over year. In 2017, US exports hit a 5% share of the market, and then increased to 7% in 2018, 10% in 2019, 13% in 2020, 18% in 2021 and 20% in 2022.

With a 21% share of global LNG exports at the end of the previous year, the US was declared the world's top LNG exporter.

Last year, global LNG sup-

ply increased by 2% to 395mn tonnes, registering growth of 7.3mn tonnes compared to the previous year.

According to CEDIGAZ data, the US has been the single largest driver behind global LNG supply, not only in 2023 but also in the last five years.

In 2023 alone, the US increased its exports to 84.3mn tonnes, contributing 6.7mn to global LNG supply growth

Notably, total supply from regions outside the US remained stagnant from 2019 to 2023.

In 2023 alone, the US increased its exports to 84.3mn tonnes, contributing 6.7mn to global LNG supply growth.

The growth in US exports is largely due to the commissioning of the Freeport LNG plant in the first quarter of 2023, which had been closed due to

fire since June 2022.

Last year, the top destination for US LNG was Europe, which has reduced its natural gas purchases from Russia.

US LNG provided a solution for many countries in Europe, which had been resisting the purchase of natural gas from Russia and had imposed an 'embargo' on their exports.

Due to mild weather and waning demand, Europe has not faced supply constraints for the past two winters and has chosen to replace Russia's LNG with US LNG.

Of the LNG exported by the US, 67% was sold to Europe, while Asia accounted for 25%, South and Central America 7%, and other countries 1%.

The country importing the most LNG on the global market was China, with 70.5 million tons. Japan followed with 66.1mn tonnes and South Korea with 44.2mn tonnes.

The top LNG importers in Europe were France with 21mn tonnes, Spain with 17.2mn tonnes and the Netherlands with 15.7mn tonnes.

شركة الخدمات المالية ش.ع.م.ع FINANCIAL SERVICES COMPANY SAOG



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Dear Shareholders,
After Compliments,

We are pleased to review the audited financial results of the company for the year ended 31/12/2023, according to the performance of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), where the stock index closed at 4514.068 points compared to the previous year's level of 4857.439 points, a decrease of 7.07%, and trading volumes increased to OMR 1.13 billion in 2023 compared to OMR 940 million at the end of 2022, i.e. an increase of 20.47%, and the market cap value increased by 0.28%, reaching OMR 23.8 billion compared to OMR 23.74 billion from the previous year.

Revenues: -

Total operating income amounted to OMR 321,388 (Omani Riyals three hundred and twenty-one thousand three hundred and eighty-eight) compared to OMR 437,214 (Omani Riyals four hundred and thirty-seven thousand two hundred and fourteen) year of year a decrease of 26%.

Net profit: -

The total expenses amounted to OMR 631,489 (OMR six hundred and thirty-one thousand four hundred and eighty-nine) compared to OMR 450,274 (OMR four hundred and fifty thousand two hundred and seventy-four) for the same period of the previous year 2022, an increase of 40%. Therefore, the losses realised for this year amounted to OMR (310,101) (OMR three hundred and ten thousand one hundred and one) compared to losses of OMR (13,050) (OMR thirteen thousand and sixty) in the year 2022, an increase of 2274%.

Shareholder's equity

The Shareholders' equity amounted to OMR 3,067,968 (OMR Three Million Sixty-Seven Thousand Nine Hundred Sixty-Eight) compared to OMR 3,284,912 (OMR Three million two hundred and eighty-four thousand nine hundred and twelve) for the same period of the last year 2022, a decrease of 6.6%.

Dear Shareholders,

The Omani economy in 2023 was characterized by a strong and outstanding performance, as it witnessed remarkable growth in various economic indicators. GDP recorded a hike in oil and non-oil revenues, with inflation stabilizing at safe and acceptable levels. Public debt also witnessed a decline and improvement in the credit rating, reflecting the relentless efforts to achieve financial sustainability and enhance confidence in the Omani economy.

The government has adopted effective policies to boost revenues and reduce public debt, and government revenues and public spending have stabilized with a fiscal surplus. This remarkable performance reflects a commitment to diversifying sources of income and stimulating economic growth, in accordance with Oman's Vision 2040.

The Omani economy is expected to continue to improve during the coming period, with enhanced investments in promising sectors and a focus on achieving sustainable development goals and financial sustainability.

In this regard, we would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and the Omani Government for providing a secure and stable economic environment focused on driving growth and continued prosperity for the dear country and all. We also appreciate the efforts of the wise government in supporting all sectors in the Sultanate, including the capital market sector.

Best regards,

Omar bin Ahmed Abdullah Mahfoodh Al-Sheikh

Chairman

Statement of financial position as at 31 December 2023

	2023	2022
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Furniture and equipment	8,879	8,650
Intangible assets	13,916	11,172
Investment properties	1,770,000	1,790,000
Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	1,513,578	1,420,421
Total non-current assets	3,306,373	3,230,243
Current assets		
Investments at fair value through profit and loss	166,715	156,305
Trade and other receivables	907,510	843,480
Cash and bank balances	760,165	467,161
Total current assets	1,834,390	1,466,946
Total assets	5,140,763	4,697,189
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Capital and reserves		
Share capital	2,000,000	2,000,000
Property revaluation reserve	862,859	862,859
Investments fair value reserve	702,557	609,400
Accumulated losses	(497,448)	(187,347)
Total capital and reserves	3,067,968	3,284,912
Non-current liabilities		
Employees' benefit liabilities	8,248	6,842
Total non-current liabilities	8,248	6,842
Current liabilities		
Bank borrowings	1,303,750	625,593
Trade and other payables	760,797	779,842
Total current liabilities	2,064,547	1,405,435
Total liabilities	2,072,795	1,412,277
Total equity and liabilities	5,140,763	4,697,189
Net assets per share	0.153	0.164

Statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2023

	Year ended 31 December 2023	Year ended 31 December 2022
Brokerage commission - net	217,574	299,749
Unrealised loss on investments at fair value through profit or loss	(18,275)	(13,023)
Realised loss on sale of investments at fair value through profit or loss	(30,907)	-
Dividend income	81,032	77,596
Rental income	64,892	65,202
Other income	7,072	7,690
Total income	321,388	437,214
Expenses		
General and administrative expenses	(558,790)	(417,447)
Unrealised fair value loss on investment properties	(20,000)	-
Total expenses	(578,790)	(417,447)
Operating (loss) / profit for the year	(257,402)	19,767
Finance costs	(52,699)	(32,827)
Net loss before tax for the year	(310,101)	(13,060)
Income tax	-	-
Net loss after tax for the year	(310,101)	(13,060)
Other comprehensive income		
Items that will not be reclassified to profit or loss		
Unrealised fair value gains on investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	93,157	176,823
Total comprehensive (loss)/income for the year	(216,944)	163,763
Basic and diluted loss per share	(0.016)	(0.001)

Alizz Islamic Bank partners with U-capital



Reinforcing its position as one of Oman's most customer centric Islamic banking institutions, Alizz Islamic Bank has signed an agreement with Uthar Capital to provide investment solutions for the banks customers.

The agreement was signed on behalf of Alizz Islamic Bank, by Ali al Mani, CEO of Alizz Islamic Bank and by Abdulaziz al Saadi, CEO of Uthar Capital. Senior executives from both organisations were also present at the signing ceremony, a press release said.

Remarking on the signing of the agreement, Mani said, "At Alizz Islamic Bank we put the customers' needs at the heart of everything we do and we are honoured to partner with one of the premier investment firms in the sultanate. With this partnership, our Tharwa customers will have the opportunity to invest in the strategic financial solutions that they require.

Driven by our vision of personalising every financial experience through innovative and smart solutions we are pleased to give our customers a new investment avenue for their funds."

Saadi added, "The partnership with Alizz Islamic Bank is in line with the Oman Vision 2040 objectives to mobilise the private sector in the pursuit of Oman's economic development. At U

thmaniyah Capital, Corporate Finance & Advisory, Wealth Management, Custody and Research. It is one of the largest asset managers and a leading stock broker. It has executed some of the most notable corporate finance deals including initial public offerings (IPO's), debt placements and other advisory mandates.

Alizz Islamic Bank is dedi-

The partnership with Alizz Islamic Bank is in line with the Oman Vision 2040 objectives to mobilise the private sector in the pursuit of Oman's economic development

ABDULAZIZ AL SAADI

Chery creates impressive brand awareness

At 'Chery Tech Day 2023', Yin Tongyue, chairman of Chery Group, expressed the company's commitment to continuous learning from exemplary enterprises like Apple, Huawei, and CATL (Contemporary Amperex Technology Co. Limited).

Chery aims to conquer cutting-edge global technologies and strives for the technologies of the future. Through the outbreak of this technological innovation wave, the company aspires to achieve its strategic goal of brand enhancement, a press release said.

In February 2023, Chery unveiled the super hybrid platform, incorporating the latest third-generation hybrid technology and a fifth-generation hybrid-dedicated engine. The super hybrid platform integrates Chery's 26 years of intelligent manufacturing expertise and global top-

tier ecological resource advantages, enabling the development of powerful derivatives for various vehicle types, classes and functionalities such as SUVs, MPVs, and SDs. This platform aims to provide owners with a more upscale quality of driving and an ultimate driving experience.

In April 2023, Chery had hosted Chery New Energy Night, and announced a comprehensive new energy strategy during the launch conference. The unveiling included an impressive line-up of 135 new technologies, such as the super hybrid platform and the EOX high-performance electric platform, as well as advancements in intelligentisation and ecological technologies. The array of innovations covered the third-generation of hybrid technology, battery technology, electric drive

technology, Chery's self-developed CHERY-OS system, intelligent driving technology, and more.

In June 2023, Chery officially launched the super hybrid-dedicated engine and transmission, marking Chery's entry into the 'Hybrid Golden Era'. This technology integrates Chery's leading prowess across various technological domains, representing a comprehensive innovation.



GCC Women's Sports Hackathon from March 2

Oman Olympic Committee (OOC), represented by Oman Women's Sports and Gender Equality Committee, is organising the GCC Women's Sports Hackathon event during March 2-3 next in Muscat. This is within the framework of enhancing the role of women in the field of sports and empowering them in this field, in addition to exchanging knowledge between the GCC countries to enhance sports culture in the region, a press release said.

During the programme, four workshops will be organised and presented by specialists and experts in women's sports programmes, besides the development of creative ideas, represented by a workshop on promoting community sports for women and its sustainability, a workshop on the role of technology in promoting GCC women's sports, and a workshop on sustainable sports investment opportunities, in addition to a workshop on sustainable sports initiatives and programmes.

The event will also include a number of group sessions for participants with the assistance of specialised mentors, in addition to motivational meetings with some inspiring players. The hackathon is expected to witness wide participation from the GCC countries as all participants will be divided after screening into 7 groups with the aim of presenting an idea or an implementable proposal in the field of women's sports, and the winning project will be announced at the closing ceremony on Sunday.

Sayida Sana Hamad al Busaidi,

chairperson of Oman Women's Sports and Gender Equality Committee, said, "The GCC Women's Sports Hackathon is a specialised programme under the slogan 'Active and Sustainable Society' that includes several workshops and group sessions, and aims to build culture and public awareness in the field of women's sports,



The GCC Women's Sports Hackathon is a specialised programme under the slogan 'Active and Sustainable Society'

SAYIDA SANA AL BUSAIDI

and to empower the capabilities and build the necessary skills for the participants." She added, "The hackathon will provide an opportunity for participants to exchange experiences, ideas and projects in the field of women's sports, and develop their skills through practical workshops and interactive sessions. It will also give them the opportunity to learn about the best practices and innovations in this field."

Bank Muscat inaugurates lightening project

In commitment to its continuous support to the Corporate and Social Responsibility (CSR) and dedication to serving the youth and society, Bank Muscat continues to implement the annual Green Sports programme across the sultanate.

The Bank has recently inaugurated a lighting project for Al Shabab Sports and Cultural team in Saham, North Batinah. The event was patronised by Sheikh Mohammed bin Ali al Balushi, a member of the Shura Council, Saham, with the presence of Hamed bin Saleh al Mamari, Bank Muscat's branch manager, Saham Heights, Khalifa bin Abdullah al Bureiki, head of Al Shabab Sports team, and a number of invitees and team members, a press release said.

On the inauguration ceremony, Hamed bin Saleh al Mamari, branch manager, Bank Muscat's branch, Saham Heights, expressed his happiness about the successful execution of Al Shabab Sports team's lightening project as part of the Green Sports programme. Hamed al



Mamari congratulated Al Shabab Sports team for the successful completion of the project which will contribute to developing the main infrastructure of the team and supporting various sports events and activities.

The field will also represent a suitable venue for the team to launch events in the evening and to organise different cultural and sports activities contributing to the enhancement of their sports skills. Furthermore, a large segment of the Omani youth of different age groups are keen to join the events related to the sports and social arenas. Bank Muscat will remain committed to serving the youth through its CSR programme Green Sports to keep pace with the advancements conducive to the growth of the Omani youth and sports teams all over the sultanate.

Khalifa bin Abdullah al Bureiki, head of Al Shabab Sports and Cultural team, said, "I would like to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation to Bank Muscat

for the continuous support to enhancing the Green Sports programme which represents a major social initiative for developing the youth's talents and sports teams in the sultanate. The fields of local sports teams constitute strategic and convenient areas to organise various sports and cultural events and activities. Therefore, the new lighting project of Al Shabab Sports team was the dream of the Omani youth while it has now become a reality.

President of Somaliland to open African Islamic Finance Summit

AlHuda Centre of Islamic Banking and Economics (CIBE) has announced that the 11th African Islamic Finance Summit is scheduled to take place from March 5 to 7, at Hotel Ambassador Hargeisa, Somaliland.

Musa Beihi Abdi, President of Somaliland, will inaugurate the summit in Hargeisa, Somaliland. The event is being organised in association with the National Insurance Authority, Somaliland, and Bank of Somaliland, Republic of Somaliland.

The summit will feature a comprehensive agenda aimed at providing practical insights into global efforts and achievements in Islamic banking and Takaful, while showcasing the flexibility of Islamic financial markets, particularly amidst the recent financial crisis. The programme outline is based on all significant areas, opportunities, challenges, gaps and adoptability of the financial industry across the continent. The participants can gain full knowledge on various topics including Islamic banking and finance, Takaful (Islamic insurance), Sukuk and Islamic capital markets, Islamic microfinance, Shariah governance, and investment opportunities in Africa.

Muhammad Zubair, CEO, AlHuda Centre of Islamic Banking and Economics, said, "This summit presents a unique opportunity to explore the potential of Islamic finance in Africa and to discuss strategies for financial inclusion.

LG gears up its Residential AC lineup for 2024

LG Electronics, a leading technology manufacturer, is all set to showcase its 2024 product lineup of Residential Air Conditioners (RAC) solutions at the Dealer Convention in Oman.

The latest solutions, all on display, will highlight a more efficient, sustainable and smarter way of improving the environment around the user, be it at home or in offices, a press release said.

As residents in Oman generally deal with hotter temperatures, this new lineup of LG RAC solutions is bound to improve overall quality of life. During the event, LG will introduce its new RAC lineup, featuring the best of



LG's air conditioning solutions for homes and offices.

One main example is the LG DUALCOOL Inverter compressor, which ensures non-stop cooling, while also saving energy for a greener environment and providing greater performance.

Available in LG ARTCOOL, DUALCOOL Big, DUALCOOL Smart and DUALCOOL Pro, this inverter is the secret behind the amazing cooling.

This Inverter compressor maximises cooling performance by 60% faster cooling while also

saving 65% energy with optimised compressor operation. Additionally, residents can get 15% more cooling with the Dual Inverter Compressor, as it can run faster than conventional non-inverter compressor. It also ensures precise cooling, by maintaining the setting temperature even while running at minimal level.

LG's RAC solutions also boast a simple yet modern design across all products, making it ideal for any home or place. It encourages comfortable sleeping with a preset mode and a Comfort Air option so that outflowing air doesn't hit the users directly.

Joe Biden warns Israel of losing global support

Istanbul, Turkey - US President Joe Biden said in a statement on Tuesday that Israel will lose international support if it continues its aggression in Gaza.

"Israel has had the overwhelming support of the vast majority of nations. If it keeps this up with this incredibly conservative government they have, and (National Security Minister Itamar) Ben-Gvir and others, they're going to lose support from around the world, and that is not in Israel's interest," Biden said in a live interview on NBC.

Biden also asserted that the Muslim holy month of Ramadan will provide a chance for a temporary cease-fire.

"There's been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out," he said.

"That gives us time to begin to move in directions that a lot of Arab countries are prepared to move in," Biden further underlined, adding that 'Saudi Arabia is ready to recognise Israel' if



hostilities cease.

"The bottom line is that the only way Israel will survive in the end - and I've been criticised for saying that you don't have to be Jewish to be a Zionist. I'm a Zionist - but here's the thing: they also need to take advantage of the invitations for peace and security to the Israelis as well as to the Palestinians, which Hamas is taking advantage of," Biden said.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Presi-

dent Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi said on Wednesday that he is hopeful for a cease-fire deal in the Gaza Strip in the coming few days.

"We hope that a cease-fire will be reached in the coming days to start a real relief for our people in the Gaza Strip in all fields," Sisi said at an event in the Egyptian capital, Cairo.

Egypt, Qatar and the US are mediating between Israel and Hamas to reach a Gaza cease-fire and hostage-prisoner swap.

UNRWA unable to deliver aid

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said Wednesday it is still unable to safely deliver humanitarian aid to the northern Gaza Strip amid Israeli fire.

"We have been unable to reach northern Gaza and increasingly parts of southern Gaza, safely," UNRWA said in a statement.

"Aid convoys reportedly continue to come under fire and are denied access by the Israeli Authorities." The refugee agency said that humanitarian aid flows into Gaza have dropped by 50 per cent in February.

"The number of trucks entering Gaza remains well below the target of 500 per day, with significant difficulties bringing supplies in through both Kerem Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) and Rafah," it added.

"UNRWA trucks have struggled to enter the Gaza Strip due to security constraints and temporary closures at both crossings."

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini on Sunday warned of an imminent famine in Gaza as aid agencies struggle to deliver food to the north of the enclave.

"The last time UNRWA was able to deliver food aid to northern Gaza was on January 23," Lazzarini wrote on social media.

Recent findings by UN-affiliated partner organisations suggest that acute malnutrition has spiked in Gaza to reach 16.2 per cent, exceeding the critical threshold set by the World Health Organization at 15 per cent.

Death toll rises to 29,954

The Palestinian death toll from the ongoing Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip since October 7 has jumped to 29,954, the Health Ministry in the besieged Palestinian enclave said in a statement on Wednesday.

The statement came as the Israeli deadly onslaught against Gaza entered its 145th day.

Anadolu Agency



US, Russia engage in heated exchange at UNSC session

New York, US - The US and Russian representatives to the UN exchanged heated words on Tuesday during a Security Council session on Gaza.

In his remarks at the session, titled 'Protection of civilians in armed conflict', Russian envoy Vassily Nebenzia accused his 'Western colleagues' of allowing Israel to use hunger as a method of war.

Nebenzia slammed the US for vetoing multiple UN efforts towards a cease-fire in the Gaza conflict, which he said would 'prevent mass starvation' in the Palestinian enclave.

He said an alternative resolution drafted by the US does not 'contain an appeal for a cease-fire and is aimed at broadening the UN umbrella to the acts of Israel'.

"This is not an alternative. This is yet another license to kill," he added.

US deputy ambassador Robert Wood said: "I would just remind everyone in this room that the Russian Federation is a country that doesn't contribute to resolving humanitarian crises. It creates them."

Wood said the Ukrainian people have to 'live under the savage, barbaric bombings and killings that they have to deal with every single day'. "So Russia is in no position, frankly to criticise any country while it continues to flagrantly and relentlessly violate the UN Charter," he added.

"So when I hear Russia speak about its concerns about civilian infrastructure, etc., it is hard to take what it says seriously."

Nebenzia then took the turn to tell the US envoy: "You should be ashamed of comparing the situation in Ukraine to Gaza."

The US destroyed Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria and it 'should not be lecturing us', he said.

"So before you next try to see a mote in my eye, you should see the beam in yours," he added.

Wood again took the floor to address the Russian envoy's remarks, saying he did not make a comparison between Ukraine and Gaza.

Anadolu Agency

Israeli army strikes Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon

Jerusalem/Beirut - The Israeli army said on Wednesday that it hit Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon after detecting the launch of 10 missiles toward northern Israel.

Warplanes attacked a Hezbollah weapons depot and military structures in the vicinity of the Rameh area, southern Lebanon, the army said in a statement.

After receiving alerts in the Kiryat Shmona area, the army identified 10 missiles launched from Lebanon toward the Israeli territory, the statement added.

Air defences successfully intercepted several missiles, it noted, adding that the army responded to the sources of fire within Lebanon.

The Army radio said a missile launched from Lebanon fell on a building in Kiryat Shmona near the Lebanese border, without any casualties reported. The Israeli army also reported targeting a weapons manufacturing site for Hezbollah in the Khirbet Salim area late on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Israeli warplanes escalated their airstrikes on several towns in the south of the country on Wednesday, focusing on residential areas and open terrain, according to Anadolu.

Additionally, Israeli drones executed multiple strikes on the outskirts of the town of Ibl al-Saqi along the Rshafah Al-Fukhar area of southern Lebanon.

Tension has flared along the border between Lebanon and Israel amid an intermittent exchange of fire between Israeli forces and Hezbollah, in the deadliest clashes since the two sides fought a full-scale war in 2006.

Anadolu Agency



Tunisian presidential elections set for September-October

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisian presidential elections will take place as scheduled in September and October, the head of the country's elections authority has said.

Speaking at a news conference late on Tuesday, Farouk Bouasker, the head of the Tunisian Independent High Electoral Commission, said that after finalising the issues of setting the local councils by April, the commission will announce the schedule and arrangements related to the elections.

He added that the commission will issue all arrangements, including the requirements for candidacy, in accordance with the country's constitution of 2022.

On the local councils, Bouasker said 279 local councils will be inaugurated on March 1, and by the start of April, all local councils will be installed to have their works started.

Tunisian President Kais Saied was elected on October 13, 2019 for a five-year period, and is expected to self-nominate for the upcoming elections in September-October.

On July 25, 2022, Saied organised a referendum for the adoption of a new constitution, abolishing the country's 2014 constitution.

Tunisia has been in the throes of a deep political crisis that has aggravated the country's economic conditions since 2021 when President Kais Saied ousted the government and dissolved parliament.

Anadolu Agency



HORIZONS PREMIER FUND (HPF)

Fund's Management Body Report for the year ended 31st December, 2023.

Dear Unitholders,

On behalf of the Fund's Management Body, it gives me great pleasure to present the financial statements for the year ended 31st December 2023.

Horizons Premier Fund has delivered strong performance during the year 2023 led to a positive gain of 9.9 percent to achieve an NAV of RO 1.19653 (after the distribution of cash dividend of 50 Biazas per unit) compared with RO 1.13385 on 31st December, 2022. The fund posted annualized return of 9.6 percent in the last 3 years and 41.7 percent on cumulative basis.

GCC financial markets delivered a mixed performance during the year 2023. On one hand, the resilience of Dubai and Saudi Arabia stocks continued, and both benchmark indices like DFM General and Tadawul All Share (TASI) outperformed the majority of GCC indices with positive returns of 21.7 percent and 14.2 percent respectively. Qatar General index closed the year with marginal gains of 1.4 percent. On the other hand, Kuwait Premier Market, Oman's MSX and Abu Dhabi ADX indices all closed with a negative 7.9 percent, 7.1 percent, and 6.2 percent respectively on full year basis.

Regional market performance was mainly supported by the government's reform driven initiatives and significant level of activity witnessed in the capital markets. Saudi Arabia continues to invest funds into its non-oil economy, encouraging growth through a variety of initiatives like tourism and a rise in business activity. Having hosted the COP28, the UAE on the other hand, is leading the way in the development of non-conventional energy sources and plans to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The fiscal consolidation and diversification initiatives undertaken by the Oman's Government have enabled the economy to pursue growth. These positive initiatives together with windfall oil revenues from higher-than-budgeted oil prices have lead up to global rating agencies such as Fitch Ratings and S&P upgrading Oman's sovereign credit rating to 'BB+' from 'BB' and Moody's upgrading the rating from 'Ba2' to 'Ba1' with a 'stable' outlook.

We remain optimistic as regional governments continue to invest in strategic sectors for economic diversification and the buzzing IPO market appears a clear signal of strength. Meanwhile, murky geopolitics and tight monetary policy will continue to weigh on investor sentiments going forward. The fund strategy at current valuations is to regularly rebalance to capitalize on opportunities presented in growth oriented sectors and value pockets of strong earnings surprises, capex revival and cyclical names.

Declaration of dividends for the year 2023

The Fund Management Body of Horizons Premier Fund on 18th February 2024 has approved the distribution of cash dividend of 50 Biazas per unit and stock dividend of 10% per unit for the financial year ended 31st December 2023 to the registered unitholders as on 3rd March 2024.

Statement of financial position
as at 31 December 2023

	31 December 2023	31 December 2022
	Notes	RO
ASSETS		
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	5	1,957,150
Other receivables		447
Cash and cash equivalents	6	58,638
Total assets		2,016,235
LIABILITIES		
Accruals and other payables	7	10,233
Net assets attributable to the unitholders		2,006,002
Net assets value per unit	12	1.197

Statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income
for the year ended 31 December 2023

	Year ended 31 December 2023	Year ended 31 December 2022
	Notes	RO
INCOME		
Dividend income		68,733
Interest income		1,567
Other income		2,694
Realised (loss) / gain on disposal of financial assets at fair value through profit or loss - net	5(a)	(12,026)
Unrealised gain on remeasurement of financial assets at fair value through profit or loss - net	5(a)	164,747
Total income		225,715
EXPENSES		
Management fees	8.1	(19,232)
Transaction costs		(1,215)
Custodian and administration fees	8.2	(7,000)
Exchange loss		-
General and administrative expenses	8	(9,356)
Total expenses		(36,803)
Profit for the year		188,912
Other comprehensive income for the year		-
Total comprehensive income for the year		188,912
Earnings per unit	13	0.113

Sweden's NATO entry raises concerns

Concerns have been raised that Sweden's accession could lead to regional instability

Brussels, Belgium - The Hungarian parliament's green light on Sweden's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) cleared the final stronghold in the military bloc's comprehensive expansion in the northern direction.

However, concerns have been raised that Sweden's accession could lead to regional instability.

Sweden actively pursued membership to ensure a collective defence strategy, following in the footsteps of Finland, which joined NATO in April last year. Nevertheless, analysts have warned that Sweden, once a non-aligned Nordic country, may now face increased risks of being drawn into conflicts.

Protracted accession process

Following the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in February 2022, both Sweden and Finland abandoned their longstanding military non-alignment policy and applied for NATO membership. All member nations were required to approve the applications.

Finland completed the accession process in April 2023. However, after Turkey approved Sweden's membership in January, Hungary continued to oppose it until Monday.

Highlighting longstanding tensions with Sweden, Hungarian government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs had emphasised the need for collaboration to bridge differences.

Meanwhile, the United States and the NATO allies have been putting pressure on Hungary to expedite Sweden's accession.



Hungarian PM Viktor Orban (right) shakes hands with Swedish PM Ulf Kristersson during a bilateral meeting in Budapest, Hungary on February 23 (Xinhua)

Analysts have warned that Sweden, once a non-aligned Nordic country, may now face increased risks of being drawn into conflicts

Last week, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson visited Budapest, culminating in a bilateral agreement involving the purchase of Swedish fighter jets by Hungary.

Bloc confrontation concerns

Sweden's NATO membership means the abandonment of its historical policy of non-alignment and neutrality. Analysts argue

that NATO's continued enlargement will reshape European security dynamics, and potentially strain Russia's geopolitical position. Nicholas Lokker and Heli Hautala from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) expressed concerns that Moscow may perceive NATO's expansion as a threat, leading to short and long-term challenges.

Russian Defence Ministry publications warn of the security

implications of NATO troops and equipment on Finnish and Swedish territory.

Last year, Sweden and the United States strengthened their defence cooperation, granting access to military bases. Coupled with recent US agreements with Finland, these moves deprived the two countries of the status of buffer zones between the NATO alliance and Russia.

Jan Oberg, director of the

Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, said that Sweden's decision to join NATO may compromise the security of local citizens.

Finland and Sweden, 'instead of keeping out of war, being a potential mediator and supporting disarmament and de-nuclearisation, will be frontline states drawn into a crisis/tension situation much more easily and early than otherwise', Oberg said.

Regional insecurity

NATO's continued expansion, particularly with the inclusion of Sweden and Finland, intensifies tensions with Russia in the Nordic region, analysts stressed. Lokker and Hautala highlighted that Russia's border with NATO will extend from the Arctic Ocean to the Baltic Sea, which 'will permanently alter the European security architecture and erode Russia's geopolitical position'.

In May 2022, the Russian Foreign Ministry warned that Sweden's NATO membership could damage the security of Northern Europe. NATO military exercises across the European continent one after another near Russian territory in recent years have significantly disturbed Moscow.

Earlier this year before Sweden's entry, NATO kicked off a massive four-month-long military exercise, Steadfast Defender 2024. The alliance's largest military exercise in decades, including about 90,000 troops from 31 member states and Sweden, quickly drew criticism from Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko, who called it a return to Cold War-era tactics.

Xinhua

Number of babies born in Japan in 2023 fall to record low

Tokyo, Japan - The number of babies born in Japan in the year 2023 fell to a record low from a year earlier as the country's population shrank by its largest ever margin, government data showed, according to a report by Kyodo News

The figure for babies was down by 5.1 per cent to 758,631, according to preliminary data released by the health ministry on Tuesday. A country's birth rate is the ratio of live births to the total population in a given year. It's usually expressed as the number of live births per 1,000 people.

The figure has remained below the 800,000 mark since the year 2022.

Japan's population, including foreign residents, fell by 831,872, with deaths outnumbering births. A forecast by the Japanese government's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research has estimated births in the country to decline to below 760,000 in the year 2035.

The fast pace of dip in newborns has been attributed to late marriages and people staying single, Kyodo News reported stating that Fumio Kishida administration has termed the period leading up to 2030 as 'the last chance' to reverse the trend.

ANI

Disaster declaration in Texas as wildfires burn out of control

Houston, US - The US state of Texas issued a disaster declaration on Tuesday as massive wildfires continued to burn out of control, forcing thousands of residents to evacuate their homes.

Four of the fires in the northernmost part of the state, known as the Texas Panhandle, ignited on Monday and have already consumed 240,000 acres of land, with the largest blaze zero percent contained as of Tuesday evening, according to state forestry officials.

They said the rapid spread of the wildfires has been driven by gusty winds between 40 and 60 miles (64 and 96km) per hour and fuelled by dry, unseasonably warm conditions.

So far, 5,000 residents have been evacuated from their homes with more evacuation or-



Fires in Texas Panhandle have already consumed 240,000 acres of land

ders expected as the wildfires continue to spread.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties in the panhandle.

"I issued a disaster declaration today to ensure critical fire response resources are swiftly deployed to areas in the Texas Panhandle being impacted by

devastating wildfires," Abbott said in a statement.

"Hot and dry conditions caused by high temperatures and windy conditions are expected to continue in the region in the coming days," he said. "These conditions could increase the potential for these wildfires to grow larger and more dangerous."

Many roads and highways in the region have been shut down due to the raging fires and billowing smoke which are causing close to zero visibility.

Firefighters are currently battling a total of 13 wildfires throughout the state.

Fire warnings are in place for the states of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas for more than 11mn Americans, according to weather officials.

Anadolu Agency

Ukraine's top committee fears attempt to overthrow Zelensky

Moscow, Russia - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy may be questioned and a coup may be attempted in the spring, a high-ranking committee said on Tuesday.

Russia's 'Maidan-3' special operation will reach its climax in March-May 2024, the Intelligence Committee under the President of Ukraine said in a statement published on the Telegram channel of the Main Directorate of Intelligence (GUR) under the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine.

According to the committee, in the coming weeks, there will be 'attempts to foment conflicts both inside Ukraine and in other parts of the world', and Zelensky's legitimacy may be questioned after May 20.

The operation will allegedly be carried out in order to 'split



Volodymyr Zelensky

everyone, including representatives of the political leadership', sow panic, 'drive a wedge between the military and civilians' and disrupt military mobilisation, the statement said.

In this regard, the committee called on citizens and Western partners to strengthen 'comprehensive security measures'.

Debates are ongoing in Ukraine over the legitimacy of

the government's authority in the absence of parliamentary and presidential elections, which cannot be held during martial law.

On February 25, Ruslan Stefanchuk, the head of Ukraine's parliament and a member of Zelensky's Servant of the People party, said 'the powers of the current president expire after the newly elected head of state takes office', implying that Zelensky will continue to serve as president.

However, opposition party leaders Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko proposed forming a coalition government to avoid a crisis of legitimacy. But Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, called this proposal 'inappropriate'.

Anadolu Agency

US Army eliminating 24,000 jobs

Washington, US - The US Army is planning to eliminate roughly 24,000 jobs as it prepares to carry out a major restructuring to move the force away from counterinsurgency operations and towards large-scale wars, according to a new plan rolled out on Tuesday.

The Army is currently set up to be comprised of about 494,000 soldiers, but current levels include roughly 445,000 active-duty soldiers, according to an Army document published on the service's website. Plans will now see the maximum number set at 470,000 troops, and the military will work to fill the gap in the coming years.

The reduced upper threshold is part of the Army's plan to 'gen-



erate new capabilities and re-balance its force structure' with an eye towards shifting operations away from the counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism efforts that have defined the US's past two decades of war-fighting.

"The Army will continue to need capabilities related to these

missions. But in light of the changing security environment and evolving character of war, the Army is refocusing on conducting large scale combat operations against technologically advanced military powers," the document says.

Anadolu Agency

SPRING BLOOMS



Visitors take pictures with blooming tulips at a scenic area in southwest China's Chongqing, on Tuesday (Xinhua)

Rise of AI: Jobs at stake or to flourish

Istanbul, Turkey - Artificial intelligence has been all the talk for the past couple of years now, especially due to the unprecedented capabilities of generative AI models such as ChatGPT.

Dominating headlines all over the world, the large language model developed by US-based firm OpenAI also prompted a flashback to the 1980s and the rekindled the debate about whether robots would take over people's jobs.

While the algorithm is sure to replace some jobs that are monotonous in nature, many professions are still expected to be safe and even likely to benefit from the wonders of generative and other AI technologies.

Jobs at stake

While the human element is predicted to always be indispensable - at least until a fully sentient AI is realised - there are some jobs that are susceptible to replacement by AI tools.

That holds particularly true for jobs that are inherently routine, predictable and repetitive, including data entry, assembly line work, and even certain administrative tasks.

Driverless cabs and drone deliveries are already a reality in some parts of the world, so transportation and delivery jobs are also expected to take a hit from the rise of AI.

Truck drivers, taxi drivers and other delivery personnel are predicted to decrease in numbers as automated transportation systems have the potential to replace human operations in the future.

Even though automated customer service is currently far from being the favoured model, mainly due to their rather primitive capabilities, AI and machine learning algorithms are develop-



While the algorithm is sure to replace some jobs that are monotonous in nature, many professions are still expected to be safe and even likely to benefit from the wonders of generative and other AI technologies

ing day by day and are expected to decrease the number of people working in call centres.

AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants are already coming in handy in some sectors, and as they get more sophisticated by the day, they are poised to replace at least some of the work-

force in the field.

Another line of work that feels the AI pressure is certainly manufacturing and production, which has already seen layoffs due to ever-advancing automation and robotics technologies.

As AI gets better every day thanks to machine learning and

advances are made in robotics, more streamlined manufacturing processes are on the horizon, leaving assembly line workers and manual labourers in industries like automotive manufacturing susceptible.

Data analysis and interpretation jobs are also expected to be affected by AI algorithms as they become more and more capable in handling large volumes of data and deriving insights.

While AI has been used in Big Data management for years now, it has been on a course of further advancement and is predicted to impact professions focusing on data analysis.

Market research analysts, fi-

nancial analysts, and even legal researchers are expected to decrease in numbers.

Cashiers are also being gradually phased out all over the world due to self-checkout kiosks installed in supermarkets. Amazon has also opened cashier-less supermarkets called 'Amazon Go' in the US, an indication of what the future holds for retail.

Accounting is yet another job that is threatened by AI as even simple algorithms can perform well in the field.

Proofreaders are also feeling similar heat. Many proofreading tools are already in use and freely available, and as AI gets more

sophisticated through machine learning, so will proofreading tools, resulting in a decreased workforce in the field.

Jobs to benefit from AI

Even though AI is predicted to decrease a lot of workforces from many sectors, there are many jobs which are not threatened by AI - and are expected to benefit from its capabilities.

Chief executives are expected to be somewhat immune from AI's effects as their jobs require leadership and personal connections, which machines do not have the necessary level of sentience to do - at least for now.

Even though some of the routine stuff can be offloaded to AI, journalists, writers and editors are expected to benefit from AI as their jobs require human perspective, in-depth research and flair. Original content is already being favoured by Google algorithms and there are tools being used to detect and debuff AI-written pieces so that original content stays on top of search results.

With the rise of AI-based image creation tools such as Midjourney, the importance of authentic and genuine art has also come under the spotlight.

Graphic designers, painters and artists are expected to be immune to AI's effects - and their work is even more highly regarded nowadays as social media is flooded by unoriginal AI-produced imagery, resulting in better acknowledgement of true art.

Psychiatrists and psychologists, on the other hand, are arguably the most immune to AI.

Even though some AI-based assistants claim to offer some help to people suffering from mental distress, no machine can

replace a sentient human being.

Computer scientists, albeit ironically, are also predicted to be immune from the rise of AI as they are the ones that will develop the technology even further - and therefore they will be the ones who will always be one step ahead.

Lawyers are also expected to not take a hit from AI as courts of law will continue to require their presence in trials - and considering their ability to persuade judges by interpreting laws in their favour, it is safe to say that they are here to stay for years to come.

Judges, who decide on the fate of humans, will also be immune from the effects of AI as such important decisions are too risky to leave at the grace of a non-sentient machine.

Musicians, film directors, performance artists and other people engaged in many forms of art are also immune from the rise of AI, as the human element in their professions will remain indispensable.

Health workers such as doctors and nurses are also expected to be immune from the effects of AI as their jobs require human judgment, ethical considerations and empathy.

Their jobs are also expected to benefit from advanced technologies, and the da Vinci Surgical System, which uses a minimally invasive surgical approach, is a testament to this progress.

Athletes, whose profession is based on physical competition and sportsmanship, can also benefit from AI and their jobs are not threatened by it.

Advanced technologies to study athletes' stamina and performance are already in use, and athletes are expected to flourish even more thanks to the ever-advancing skills of AI.

Anadolu Agency

Indian, Japanese troops conduct training exercise in Rajasthan

Rajasthan, India - India-Japan Exercise Dharma Guardian is currently underway at the Mahajan field firing ranges in Rajasthan.

Troops from both Indian and Japanese contingents are actively participating in training exercises, which include navigating obstacle courses and conducting combat shooting drills.

The joint exercise signifies the deepening of military cooperation between India and Japan and underscores their commitment to enhancing interoperability and mutual understanding. The training activities aim to strengthen the capabilities of both armies in counter-terrorism and disaster response scenarios.

Exercise Dharma Guardian serves as a platform for the exchange of best practices and the cultivation of trust and camaraderie between the Indian and Japanese armed forces. Through collaborative training initiatives,



The troops of Indian Army and Japanese Ground Self Defence Forces (JGSDF) during the ongoing joint training 'Dharma Guardian', at Mahajan field firing ranges in Rajasthan, India (ANI)

both nations aim to bolster regional stability and contribute to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

As troops undergo rigorous training at the Mahajan field firing ranges, the bonds of friendship and cooperation between the two countries continue to strengthen, paving the way for

enhanced strategic partnership in the years ahead.

The military exercise, aimed at fostering military cooperation and enhancing combined capabilities to execute joint operations in a semi-urban environment, is scheduled to be conducted from February 25 to March 9.

Exercise 'Dharma Guardian' is an

annual exercise conducted alternatively in India and Japan. The contingent on both sides consists of 40 personnel each. The Japanese contingent is being represented by troops from the 34th Infantry Regiment, while the battalion from the Rajputana Rifles is representing the Indian Army contingent.

ANI

Stem Cell Congress offers new hope to cancer, diabetes patients

Dubai, UAE - The Dubai Stem Cell Congress, held in Dubai over two days, concluded with valuable scientific discussions and significant attendance from global physicians and specialists. The conference sessions focused on the latest treatments in regenerative medicine and the impact of scientific research on stem cells in developing treatment techniques for various diseases such as cancer, thalassemia, and diabetes. Additionally, the congress showcased the inspiring recovery journeys of patients who had been given new hope through stem cell therapy.

The Dubai Stem Cell Congress held special significance as it aimed to offer a potential cure for all diseases in the future.

This year, the congress aimed to elevate the level of scientific sessions by attracting 30 international speakers in the stem cell sector, including 18 speakers from the United States. This diverse exchange of ideas and in-



The Dubai Stem Cell Congress held special significance as it aimed to offer a potential cure for all diseases in the future

novations was led by key figures like Dr Essam Abdelalim, Principal Investigator at Sidra

Medicine. His work on pluripotent stem cells focused on understanding the basic physiology needed to develop diabetes and produce functional pancreatic cells for potential use in cell therapy.

During the main session, in-depth discussions delved into the biological and genetic mechanisms underlying stem cells, aiming to comprehend their developmental processes and explore enhanced therapeutic approaches for managing diabetes.

WAM



NEW DAWN, NEW HOPES

Oman’s Al Harthy ready to begin first season with BMW in FIA WEC

Losail, Qatar - Losail International Circuit in Qatar is the venue for Ahmad al Harthy's eagerly awaited first race with Team WRT and BMW on Saturday as the new FIA World Endurance Championship season gets underway with the Qatar Airways Qatar 1812km.

Oman's Al Harthy, who officially launched his exciting 2024 motor racing campaign just over a week ago, is embarking on his most ambitious and high-profile year of competition yet as teammate to global sporting icon Valentino Rossi and BMW pro driver Maxime Martin.

Partnering up in the new LMGT3 class, the trio heads into the first round of the FIA WEC season in positive mood after this week's two-day 'Prologue' test at Losail on Monday and Tuesday.

Marking Al Harthy's first official outing in the No.46 car, the team-mates utilised the time to get as settled as possible in the stunning new BMW M4 LMGT3 and to prepare well for free practice and qualifying over the next couple of days in Qatar.

"This weekend marks the start of an amazing new chapter in my career and I cannot wait to be out on track, racing the new BMW M4 LMGT3 for the first time. It's great to be starting the



This weekend marks the start of an amazing new chapter in my career and I cannot wait to be out on track

AHMAD AL HARTHY

season so close to home as well, meaning we have a huge amount of support coming to Qatar with our incredible partners, family

Oman's Ahmad Al Harthy and teammates will go for glory in their No 46 BMW M4 LMGT3 car

and friends," said Al Harthy. "It's been a very busy few weeks getting everything in place, so it was great to get behind the wheel in the Prologue this week. Now we're focused on putting together some positive free practice sessions so we can go into qualifying on Friday in the best shape possible. Everything is new for me this year, the team, my team-mates and, of course, the BMW, but it's an incredible new challenge and one I'm absolutely ready for."

Al Harthy, who is supported throughout 2024 by prestigious partners OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel and BMW Oman, enjoyed an excellent first season in FIA WEC last year where he achieved two podium results. Now, with a fantastic new challenge ahead, Al Harthy is absolutely relishing the opportunity to once again fly the flag for Oman - aiming to get the campaign underway positively in Saturday's 10-hour endurance contest. For FIA WEC round one, 18 cars are set to do battle in LMGT3 with a combined entry of close to 40 cars when including the Hypercar class. Featuring some of the globe's most highly respected and successful professional racing drivers as well, it's a very exciting prospect.

The first round of the FIA WEC season begins at 11 am local time on Saturday.

Iyer, Kishan not considered for annual BCCI contracts

New Delhi, India - Shreyas Iyer and Ishan Kishan were not considered for annual contracts for the 2023-24 season, India's cricket board (BCCI) said on Wednesday when they announced a list of 30 players who had been handed contracts.

Iyer was on a Grade B contract last year while Kishan was handed a Grade C contract but despite playing in the 50-over World Cup last year, the BCCI said both players were not considered in this round of recommendations.

Iyer, who was one of the key performers in India's run to the World Cup final last November, lost his Grade B contract despite fulfilling the minimum criteria set by the board in terms of matches played. Since last October, when the contract period started, Iyer played four Tests, 12 ODIs and two T20Is. Two of those Tests were the first two of the ongoing series against England, where he struggled for form and was left out for the remainder of the series.

Not long after that, Iyer informed the Mumbai Cricket Association that he had been suffering from back spasms, and would not be available for the Ranji Trophy quarterfinal against Baroda. Since then, Iyer has made himself available and is part of Mumbai's squad for the semi-final against Tamil

Nadu on March 2. Kishan had a Grade C contract last year. In the current contract period, he played just two ODIs and three T20Is, although he was part of various India squads, including the one at the World Cup. In December, while on tour in South Africa, he sought a personal break, which was granted by BCCI. However, since then he has not featured in any competitive cricket organised by the board. On Tuesday, he made headlines when he turning up to play at the DY Patil T20 Cup, a privately organised tournament.

BCCI PLAYER CONTRACTS

- Grade A+:** Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah and Ravindra Jadeja
- Grade A:** Ravichandran Ashwin, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, KL Rahul, Shubman Gill and Hardik Pandya
- Grade B:** Surya Kumar Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel and Yashasvi Jaiswal
- Grade C:** Rinku Singh, Tilak Verma, Ruturaj Gaekwad, Shardul Thakur, Shivam Dube, Ravi Bishnoi, Jitesh Sharma, Washington Sundar, Mukesh Kumar, Sanju Samson, Arshdeep Singh, KS Bharat, Prasidh Krishna, Avesh Khan and Rajat Patidar.



Shreyas Iyer



Ishan Kishan

OCA keen on cricket in 2026 Asian Games despite venue headache

New Delhi, India - The Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) is eager to have cricket at the 2026 Asian Games in Japan and is exploring the idea of converting a baseball stadium in Nagoya for this purpose.

Cricket featured in the Hangzhou Games in China last year but wasn't part of the 2018 Games in Jakarta and Palembang in Indonesia. "We are still working on the sports programme for the 2026

Games but yes, we would want cricket to be part of it," OCA acting president Randhir Singh said. The lack of cricket facilities in Japan, however, remains an issue. There is an international cricket stadium in Tochigi prefecture, north of Tokyo, but the OCA prefers a facility in or around Nagoya, the capital of

Aichi prefecture where the Games will be held. The Tochigi stadium would be a three-and-a-half hour drive from Nagoya, said OCA Deputy Director General Vinod Kumar Tiwari, who visited Japan last month with an OCA coordination committee to oversee preparations. "We are working with the Asian Cricket

Council on this," Tiwari said. The programme for the 2026 Games will be finalised at an OCA General Assembly in April. "It will be great to have cricket in the 2026 Games, and we at JCA will provide all kind of support," Japan Cricket Association chief executive Naoki Alex Miyaji said.

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F1 and beIN Sports in 10-year Middle East deal

Manama, Bahrain - Formula One is returning to Qatar's beIN Sports in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey after agreeing a 10-year deal with the pay-TV broadcaster who walked away in 2019 due to piracy in the region.

Liberty Media-owned Formula One and beIN announced the exclusive deal on Wednesday ahead of the season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix.

No financial details were given but one source suggested the deal could be worth \$500 million over the course of the contract.

The pay-TV broadcaster had decided not to renew its previous deal after a pirate 'BeoutQ' channel emerged in 2017.

The regional F1 rights went free-to-air in 2019 under a five-year deal with MBC Group, founded by Saudi businessman Waleed al-Ibrahim.

The new deal gives beIN rights to broadcast every race weekend, starting with Saturday's opener to the record 24 round season.

Formula One said they would work closely together to develop localised content for the region across various formats and platforms. The Middle East has four grands prix.

STOP ME IF YOU CAN

Verstappen all set to continue his dominance as F1 season opens in Bahrain

Manama, Bahrain - Max Verstappen has led the Formula One standings since May 2022 and while Red Bull's triple world champion remains favourite for Saturday's Bahrain season-opener, there is always the possibility of the record 39-race run coming to an end.

The 26-year-old and Red Bull enjoyed the most dominant campaign ever last year, the team winning all but one of the 22 races. Verstappen, who started



Red Bull's Max Verstappen won 19 out of the 22 races last season

We don't want to get ahead of ourselves and we still need to make sure we do everything right to have a strong first weekend. All in all, I am excited to get the season underway.

MAX VERSTAPPEN

2023 by leading Sergio Perez to a one-two victory at Sakhir, won 19 of them and surpassed Michael Schumacher's 2000-02 record of 37 successive races in the championship lead.

The Dutch driver signed off with seven wins in a row and the evidence from last week's pre-season testing in Bahrain suggested the streak was set to continue as the sport heads into a record 24-race championship.

"We had a good few testing days and learned a lot from the car," said Verstappen. "Of course, we don't want to get ahead of ourselves and we still need to make sure we do every-

thing right to have a strong first weekend." All in all, I am excited to get the season underway and start racing again."

Red Bull are celebrating their 20th season but the anniversary comes with a question mark over

team principal Christian Horner, who is under investigation for undisclosed allegations of misconduct toward a female colleague.

Horner has denied the allegations and his future is expected

to be decided imminently.

Rivals will be keen to seize on any weakness but are likely to be engaged in a battle to be best of the rest. Ferrari have shown encouraging speed and put in impressive mileage, with Carlos

Sainz going fastest on the second day of testing and team mate Charles Leclerc topping the final day's timesheets.

Testing timesheets are notoriously misleading, however, with teams running different pro-

grammes and fuel levels.

"We can be pleased with what we've achieved during this test," said team boss Frederic Vasseur, heading into his second season at the helm of the Italian team.

Medvedev makes solid start in Dubai

Dubai, UAE - After a month away, Daniil Medvedev returned to action in typically resolute style Tuesday at the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships.

The World No. 4 overcame Alexander Shevchenko 6-3, 7-5 to kick-start his title defence at the hard-court ATP 500 in the United Arab Emirates. Medvedev broke in three consecutive return games en route to the first set before reeling off four games in a row from 3-5 in the second set to complete an 88-minute triumph.

"When you take a week or two off, but it's something you planned, then it's kind of easy tennis-wise, just a couple of points or games to get back,"



Daniil Medvedev

said Medvedev, who had to recover from a foot injury in the weeks following his Australian Open final defeat to Jannik Sinner. "I did take a week and a half

off by myself and then when I came back I started feeling pain here and there, not practising 100 per cent.

"It's very tricky, because when

you come into a match you have to forget about it and when you think about something other than tennis you are going to lose the match. I managed to do it, I didn't feel any pain and I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

The Kazakhstani showed signs of the ability that has lifted him into the top 50 in the rankings, but was ultimately unable to wear Medvedev down.

"He played well, especially the second set, and that's why the score was tougher in the second set," reflected Medvedev. "I managed to play a very good game when he served for the set and managed to [win] the next one on my serve which was tricky."

Kirk confident of defending his title

Florida, United States - Last year's triumph at the PGA Tour's Honda Classic was a story about redemption for Chris Kirk.

Both the name of the tournament and the trajectory of Kirk's career are totally different this time around.

Kirk discussed his journey ahead of this week's Cognizant Classic, which begins Thursday at PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

"Amazing just coming back on the property and a lot of good memories from last year for sure, but also a place that I've loved coming for years and years," he told reporters Tuesday.

Djokovic thrilled to return to his 'favourite Masters'

Los Angeles, US - Novak Djokovic on Tuesday said he was excited to be back in Indian Wells to compete at the BNP Paribas Open for the first time since 2019 after U.S. travel restrictions related to COVID-19 had kept him away.

The world number one is seeking an unprecedented sixth title at the Masters 1000 event that begins next week and is regarded as the biggest tennis tournament outside of the four Grand Slams.

"It has been five years, way too long to not be part of the Tennis Paradise tournament, one of the best tournaments in the world without a doubt," Djokovic said in a video from the small, picturesque city in the Southern California desert.

"It's probably the favourite Masters tournament of so many players including myself. I can't wait to come and perform once again in front of some of the best tennis fans that we have on the tour."

The Serb won the first of his 24 Grand Slams at the Aus-



Novak Djokovic

tralian Open in 2008 and backed that up a few months later by capturing his first Indian Wells crown.

"The first time I won the title in Indian Wells, it was one of the greatest titles of my career at that point.

"I remember I played Mardy Fish in the finals," he said.

"I was fortunate to win the tournament another four times and played some epic matches in the finals against (Roger) Federer and (Rafa) Nadal and many of the great players in that era. I'm really looking forward to coming back."

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Mr Haaland's opus

Norwegian striker scores five goals to send holders City flying into FA Cup last eight

Luton, England - Erling Haaland scored five as holders Manchester City coasted into the quarter-finals of the Emirates FA Cup with a 6-2 victory over Luton Town.

Haaland became the first player to score five or more goals in an FA Cup match for a top-flight club since George Best in 1970, with the first four laid on by Kevin de Bruyne.

Elsewhere, Leicester City required extra time to beat Bournemouth, while Newcastle United knocked out Blackburn Rovers in a dramatic penalty shoot-out.

A trademark City goal opened up an early lead City would never relinquish at Kenilworth Road.

Matheus Nunes found De Bruyne with an incisive reverse pass and the Belgian's cutback was swept home on the stretch by Haaland.

City's dynamic duo combined again on 18 minutes, as Haaland brought down Stefan Ortega's pinpoint pass, laid off to De Bruyne and raced onto a quick return pass from his super sidekick to lash the ball under Tim Krul.

City were rampant and Haaland had two bites at the cherry for a third before the half hour



Manchester City's Erling Haaland celebrates with Kevin de Bruyne after scoring against Luton Town

mark but was twice denied by veteran Krul. The treble finally arrived on 40 minutes via another De Bruyne assist, this time finished off with a crisp chip over the onrushing Krul.

Luton pulled one back on the stroke of half time and it was undoubtedly the goal of the night, Jordan Clark curling a jaw-dropping effort into the top corner from 25 yards out.

From nowhere, the deficit was back to just one shortly after half time. Clark was again on target, rifling past Ortega after a dinked pass from Ross Barkley.

Leicester stun Bournemouth

Leicester City upset Premier League Bournemouth at the Vitality Stadium, snatching victory in extra time to progress to the last eight. Leicester started with a swagger befitting the Championship leaders but it was Bournemouth who fashioned the best chances in the first half hour.

January signing Enes Unal went first close on two occasions. He first saw a shot cleared off the line by Hamza Choudhury and then stabbed just wide from a Milos Kerkez cross either side of a skied close-range effort from Alex Scott.

But it was the 2021 winners who came closest to breaking the deadlock before the break. After a loose touch from Scott in midfield, Marc Albrighton raced towards goal and drilled into the post from the edge of the area. Choudhury kept the attack alive and forced a brilliant diving stop from Cup 'keeper Marc Travers as it finished all square at the break.

The Cherries then found the woodwork at the start of the second half when Marcos Senesi's swinging ball cannoned off the upright.

Chances kept coming at both ends but neither side could find their composure in front of goal - Yunus Akgun and Ricardo spurned golden chances to send the Foxes through late on.

The moment of quality which separated the sides arrived in the 105th minute, Abdul Fatawu bending a brilliant strike past Travers to see the Foxes into the quarter-finals.



Mauricio Pochettino

Mauricio Pochettino: We need time and patience to win games

London, England - Manager Mauricio Pochettino implored Chelsea's owners to be patient and afford him the time needed to get back to winning ways and turn around the Premier League club's fortunes.

The Argentine manager is under immense pressure following Sunday's 1-0 defeat to Liverpool in the League Cup final, with two-times Champions League winners Chelsea also sitting 11th in the league standings and facing a tough task to qualify for European football.

Chelsea next take on second-tier Leeds United in an FA Cup fifth-round clash later on Wednesday, and a home defeat to rivals Leeds, who are on a 12-game unbeaten streak across all competitions, could prove costly for Pochettino.

The London club has been known for its revolving door policy in the past, with managers swiftly being sacked after failing to win silverware, but Pochettino said he had faith that the owners

I cannot lie to you. When I went up the steps at Wembley, I was so upset. Nearly crying.

MAURICIO POCHETTINO

would not act hastily.

"The staff of the club, after eight months we have built a very good bond. When players really believe in the way we are working it takes time," Pochettino told reporters on Saturday.

"The problem is that we need time and patience to win games. And we need the patience from the owner to give the possibility to keep going.

"I feel the support from them. I cannot lie to you. When I went up the steps at Wembley, I was so upset. Nearly crying. But I saw Behdad (Eghbali), I saw Todd (Boehly) and I shook hands with both of them."



Kristoffer Olsson

Former Arsenal player Olsson on ventilator after falling unconscious

Jutland, Denmark - Sweden midfielder Kristoffer Olsson has been hospitalised and put on a ventilator after falling unconscious at home, his club Midtjylland said on Tuesday.

The 28-year-old former Arsenal player, who has 47 caps for Sweden, lost consciousness on Feb. 20, the Danish Superliga side said, adding that he was suffering from an acute brain-related illness. "A team of Denmark's leading medical experts is currently working hard to make a diagnosis and initiate the right treatment," Midtjylland said.

Penalty heartbreak for Blackburn as Newcastle march on

Blackburn, England - Martin Dubravka proved the hero at Ewood Park, saving twice from the spot as Newcastle beat Blackburn on penalties.

The start to the with Newcastle had earlier been delayed by 15 minutes and it was Rovers who started quicker after the delay.

Rovers, 16th in the Championship, were on the front foot for much of the first half and caused Newcastle a host of problems.

Championship top scorer Sammie Szmodic could have had a first-half hat-trick, but shot into the side netting, had another well saved by the returning Dubravka and was unable to get a touch on the rebound after Dubravka saved well from Tyrhys Dolan.

Dubravka's night only got busier after the restart, this time John Buckley was the man to be denied. The Magpies were short of their best but nearly snuck ahead when Jamaal Lascelles' header was cleared off the line.

And Blackburn were punished



Newcastle United goalkeeper Martin Dubravka saves a penalty from Dominic Hyam of Blackburn

for their profligacy on 71 minutes when Gordon shot first time from a Miguel Almiron cutback just moments after missing an easier opportunity.

Szmodics kept the hosts in the tie with his 24th goal of the season, reacting quickest after

Dubravka pushed Dilan Markanday's shot onto crossbar.

Neither side could find a winner in extra time and then Dominic Hyam was the unfortunate party as Dubravka pushed his penalty clear to send Newcastle through 4-3 on penalties.



Erik ten Hag

Ten Hag only thinking about 'progress of the team in this moment'

Manchester, England - Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag said he does not require promises of job security from new co-owner Jim Ratcliffe amid uncertainty over his future, adding that he is focused on ensuring the club continues to progress and improve.

United's season has been plagued by inconsistent performances and injury woes, with the Manchester club in sixth place after their 2-1 league loss to Fulham on Saturday.

The defeat, which came just three days after Ratcliffe vowed to bring United back to their glory days, added to the pressure on Ten Hag.

Asked whether it would benefit the club for Ratcliffe to publicly confirm Ten Hag as United's long-term manager, the Dutchman told reporters: "I'm under contract for three seasons, so I don't care. "I am in this process, I'm only focusing on the process, so I don't care what's going on around me."

Brighton's Mitoma likely to miss rest of season with injury

London, England - Brighton & Hove Albion winger Kaoru Mitoma will likely miss the rest of the season due to a back problem, manager Roberto De Zerbi said on Tuesday.

The 26-year-old Japan international had missed Brighton's 1-1 home draw against Everton in the Premier League at the weekend with the same issue.

Mitoma was also sidelined with an ankle injury in December but was called-up to the Japan squad for the Asian Cup.

Mitoma has three goals and six assists in 26 appearances across all competitions for Brighton this season.

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14

WINNERS' SPEAK
How some schools made it to the top at the Oman sustainability Fair 2024



15

IN TOWN
Locals Park opening at Hayy Al Sarooj and Chinese Lantern Festival



16

ENTERTAINMENT
A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood



OMAN SUSTAINABILITY FAIR 2024

Hubert Vaz

The beautiful lawns of W Muscat came alive on Tuesday evening with an even more beautiful array of environment-friendly projects, created by spirited teams of young school students who have undertaken a common goal of romancing the resources of the planet in a sustainable fashion.

"Sustainability is a concept that tells us that we must use the resources of this planet in a responsible manner so that future generations can enjoy the same. And we have demonstrated that in our project by reusing some resources which people usually discard," said 13-year-old Peter Mardo, from Muscat International School, which demonstrated how discarded date seeds can be reused to prepare decaffeinated coffee, cookies and soaps.

Summing up the essence of the Oman Sustainability Fair 2024, in which student teams from ten schools from Oman and Sohar participated, Peter seemed to convey the overall opinion of all the students present at their interesting work stations where they displayed thought-provoking projects centred on the buzzword of the new millennium - Sustainability!

Some teams showed how to generate electricity from waves and use it to light up coastal towns, some talked about vertical cultivation in limited space, some showed how to grow vegetables via hydroponics, besides many other interesting projects all focused on making Oman more sustainable.

Marla Valdez and Ana Boghici, the main coordinators of the event from Oman American Business Council (OABC), which has been spearheading this annual activity, said they were extremely satisfied with the way the student projects have turned up this year. The young teams have been working on their respective projects under the guidance of a Science teacher or Eco Club facilitator who helped in streamlining their participation in the event, they said.

About the message for students, the coordinators say, "Students in Oman are not too young to impact the planet, and Oman is their beautiful home. Their work and ideas are worth sharing, and they are the ones who starting now, also in the long-term, will solve problems and create a more beautiful and sustainable Oman.

The key 'challenge' for this sustainability contest was: Be inspirational, says Marla, adding that students were asked to 'pick a topic, create an idea, and then share your idea on how to raise awareness and contribute to the sustainability of Oman. It could be an awareness campaign, a behaviour-changing campaign, a science project, or just an attempt to display creative ways to adopt sustainability in one's home, school, or within the broader community.

Student teams were given broad guideline to be



TEN SCHOOLS FROM MUSCAT AND SOHAR PARTICIPATED IN THE OMAN SUSTAINABILITY FAIR 2024 WHICH TURNED THE ARC-LIGHTS ON YOUNG AND AMBITIOUS DREAMS FOR MAKING THE PLANET A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE IN

imaginative in creating their or display, posters, models, videos, presentations, exhibits, etc. For the community, this fair is a platform to get inspired while local organisations and companies have also jumped into the fray to showcase their own attempts at promoting sustainability in Oman and encouraging future generations.

Some of those who spoke on the occasion to share their own understanding about the urgent need to make

sustainability a way of life included Rebecca Olsen - CEO of OABC, Marla Valdez - OABC board member and founder of the Fair, Ulrich Emmer, General Manager of Bauer Nimr, Dr Ali Akaak, board member of Environment Society of Oman, Elaine Looker, and marine scientist at Five Oceans Environmental Services.

Marla Valdez, long-time board member at the Oman American Business Council, shared that the aim

of the Sustainability Fair was to bring together the Oman community and to give a platform for students, SMEs, environmental organisations and businesses that are committed to sustainability.

"While the students will be sharing their creative solutions for a more sustainable future, we are also showcasing, in a fun and uplifting environment, the work of environmental champions in our community. This is a unique event which we hope inspires the wider community to consider what they also can do to contribute to the protection of the environment. Oman is a special place and it deserves our care, thus our motto 'Doing our part for Oman'."

Appreciating the work of the participating teams, she further said, "The projects put up by the student teams are truly inspiring. It is commendable to see how well they have grasped the concept of sustainability and have come up with practical solutions that are focused on conserving the environment and reducing our carbon footprint on the planet."

Rebecca Olson took the opportunity to acknowledge the tremendous support the event has received from the business community in Oman, especially sponsors and the non-governmental organisations which have come together to encourage and support the students.

"OABC members and our other partners made us proud today by contributing resources and time in support of students and sustainability. But importantly, they didn't just present to the students, they took the time to listen as well. This is what's so great about this event. Students gain knowledge and inspiration from companies like Bauer Nimr, which are making an impact, but the companies also learn directly from the students. It takes a whole community to make a change. The mutual respect and ideation that happens when you combine different groups, is wonderful."

The main sponsor for the event was Bauer Nimr, which has developed the world's largest commercial constructed wetland in Oman. Five Ocean Environmental Services, an environmental consultancy and conservation organisation, and Arab Lead Company, which has state of the art facilities to recycle liquid batteries were silver sponsors for the event. The Environment Society of Oman and Oman Botanic Garden were both honorary environmental organisation supporters, and Apex Media was the media sponsor.

Lastly, the team was extremely grateful to W Hotel which extended its premises and hospitality for the event, providing refreshments for the students and attendees and creating a fantastic outdoor vibe for the event, held in its sprawling gardens.

The participating organisations included Be'ah, GUTech, Plasbin, EFP (Eco-Friendly Packaging), Move Green (music), besides Nasser al Kindi, founder, Clean Up Oman.

See also [Page 14](#)

Participating schools

1. ABA Oman International School
2. ABQ Sohar International School
3. A'soud Global School (AGS)
4. Al Sahwa Schools
5. British School Muscat (BSM)
6. Cheltenham Muscat
7. Downe House Muscat
8. Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir
9. Muscat International School
10. Pakistan School Sohar

Winners of 2024

- Most practical implementation Award:
Muscat International School
- Best presentation award:
Al Sahwa School
- Most innovative idea award:
British School Muscat
- Overall winner:
Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir

go green



TOGETHER
They shone

All the teams worked in harmony within their respective groups, dividing and delegating the tasks among themselves based on their own skillsets. Here are brief comments from the four winning teams on how they managed to get to the top:



(Photos: V K Shafer)

India School Wadi Kabir – Overall winner

NAME OF THE PROJECT
ECOSavvy – ISWK

We believe that small steps make big things. We always follow sustainable practices at our school. Hence this platform helped us to present our best practices. Each one of us took up an idea of sustainable practice in the school and collaborated it into a single presentation.

We were mentored by our teachers in-charge for this project and that helped us to exhibit our models and presentation in the best possible way. The brief points suggested by the OABC were initially discussed among our team members and we moved forward with that in mind.

Our final exams clashed with the date of the fair, yet we were able to prepare our models and charts by

dedicating one-hour each day and this helped us to complete the task in time.

This platform gave an opportunity to excel in the given topic – sustainability, to collaborate and perform team work better. At the venue, we learnt different sustainable approaches from other participants, besides about Oman Vision 2040 and how to apply it in our future endeavours.

Al Sahwa School – Best Presentation Award

NAME OF THE PROJECT
Sahwa's Sustainability Solutions

We knew the importance of encouraging sustainability in Oman. For us, we feel it starts with educating people about sustainable practices. And since education starts in school, we looked into ways to make our school more sustainable so that we can encourage other schools to do the same.

We came up with 3 main ideas:

- Working out the carbon footprint

emissions caused by our field trips and planting crops to offset this.

- Creating Raised Gardens from recycled palettes materials to grow vegetables for the cafeteria
- Upcycling our recycling bins at school and moving them into high traffic areas to encourage use

We each took responsibility for the different categories - we had practical elements and theoretical elements that had to be incorporated into our project. This was shared between each of us and all of our strengths within particular areas. We were supported by our

CAS teacher, Ms Mia and our Design teacher, Mr Oane.

We conformed very well to the brief and found the most practical ways to implement various sustainable, and affordable, practices

The main hurdle was working out the Carbon Footprint emissions that are caused from our school trips. This needed a lot of research.

Some lessons learnt were, thinking outside of the box for effectively using resources available in school - we used kitchen waste for preparing compost for our vegetable crops.



British School Muscat – Most Innovative Idea Award

NAME OF THE PROJECT
Ecovista - A Sustainable future for Oman

We belong to the Year 11 Research Group of British School Muscat and the five members of our team formed a company and collectively decided to take on the individual components of the overall project.

On being briefed by our school coordinator, we had a brainstorming

session wherein we all came up with different ideas about how to go about our project and divided the task based on our individual talents and aptitude.

The requirements of a variety of materials needed the physics department to lend a number of items and ICT communication equipment to that we could set up our project with ease.

Through this exercise we were not only able to understand the concept

of sustainability clearly but also developed a determination to learn more about the progress of sustainability in Oman.

We thoroughly enjoyed participating in the sustainability fair where we got to view different aspects of this concept as presented by different school teams. We were also able to strike good contacts with the environmental groups present, especially the BAUER Nimr LLC.

Muscat International School – Most Practical Implementation Award

NAME OF THE PROJECT
Inspiring Sustainability

We are members of the Science Environmental Club at Muscat International School (Yasmin Alhinai, Zeerak Bangash, Ilan Adam, Hazim Altarazi, Peter Mardo, and Mustafa Hassan). Together with our science teacher, Ms Katie, our aim was to create sustainable solutions for our community and present them at the Sustainability Fair in Oman.

Inspired by the abundance of dates in Oman and the Gulf, we decided to experiment with date seeds, often discarded as waste, and turn them into a coffee alternative rich in flavour and nutrients, and most importantly,

without caffeine.

Energised by the good taste of the non-acidic decaffeinated date seed coffee, we turned our attention to the issue of refined sugar. Mindful of the harm it causes to both health and the environment, we sought to produce an unrefined natural sweetener that is rich in nutrients and low in calories to enhance our coffee alternative. We also used the coarse sugar particles that we couldn't strain through the sieve to make healthy, sweet, and low-calorie cookies.

Concerned about waste, we repurposed used cooking oil into nourishing soap by combining it with ground date seeds, as it has many nutritional benefits, plus it can give the soap a

natural brown colour.

Our team members showed great effort in following Ms Katie's instructions and supporting each other. We closely adhered to the given brief and worked collaboratively, sharing ideas and providing assistance, which made our challenges and stress less. We are happy that our teamwork and dedication led to a successful outcome.

Through this project, we learned how important it is to be an inspiration to our community and how they can adopt sustainable practices. In fact, winning this award was an encouragement for us to continue inspiring people that small actions can lead to big changes.



take a break

IN TOWN

LOCALS PARK OPENING



The inauguration of 'Locals Park' was held at Hayy al Sarooj last week under the auspices of H E Bassel bin Ahmed Al Rawas, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth



Photos: V K Shafeer

Chinese Lantern Festival



Chinese Lantern Festival celebrations were held recently in Al Mouj Muscat



Photos: V K Shafeer

BOGGLER

E	Y	U	I
S	E	D	L
T	F	R	X
F	L	A	I

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY:

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

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

TRIVIA QUIZ - FOR TEENS

1. Which animal's 'laugh' is a reaction to being threatened?

A. Wild Dog
B. Hyena
C. Cheetah
D. Rabbit



2. What is the difference between fog and mist?

A. Duration
B. Region
C. Altitude
D. Visibility

3. What sort of person would be described as the bee's knees?

A. Intellectual
B. Weak natured
C. Highly admired
D. Very thin

Answers

3. C
2. D
1. B

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

There is certainly no shortage of energy inside you right now, but you're feeling surprisingly shy about showing it to the rest of the world. It's going to take a little bit of encouragement to get you to come out of your shell and do all that you could be doing. The big question right now is why you're holding back so much.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

There is no reason for you to be in a hurry to get anywhere now no matter what someone is telling you. Take all the time you need and make no apologies for it. You have the right to do the amount of research that makes you feel good about your decision. And the more you can map out your plan of action in detail, the better things will go for you.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Like it or not, you have to share the people you love with others. Loosen your grip grasp on your best friend or sweetie. Give them more space to explore other aspects of their social life. You bring a lot of value to their life and can be confident in that, so why worry that they are spending time with someone else? If you get too possessive about your relationship, send a suitable message.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're happy to have extra responsibilities now. After all, they're just extra opportunities to show the world what you can do. But this higher profile can be a double-edged sword, helping you get positive acclaim but also forcing you to act while everyone is watching. The good news is that you have supreme confidence now and can do very well under pressure.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Too shy to say what you really want to say to that incredible person you've been crushing on? Saying something out loud that reveals your inner hopes and wishes might feel like an invitation for rejection, but in reality it's an empowering act. State your truth, stand by your statement, and be ready for whatever consequences come.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

One of your friends is letting money issues get in the way of your relationship with them. Either they don't feel they can keep up with your lifestyle or they are worried you can't keep up with theirs. Either way, the two of you need to stop being afraid to talk about finances. You don't have to divulge details.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Something or someone you encounter could force you to ask yourself how open-minded you really are. You won't understand everything about what other people are doing, and it could make you angry or even afraid. But harmony is pretty easy to achieve when you think the best of other people, especially strangers. Just greet everyone with a smile instead of suspicion.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You'll see someone struggling later today, and you should do what you can to lend them a hand. Not only will it make you feel good about yourself, but it will also help you get back in touch with your selfless, compassionate side. It can be extremely empowering to sacrifice some of your time and energy for the sake of someone else, especially when that someone is vocal with their gratitude.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

An authority figure might have a tendency to micromanage you today, and their hovering presence could start to get on your nerves. This is not because you aren't doing a good job. This is because they are feeling insecure and need to justify themselves at your expense. There's no need to feel intimidated by them. Just keep doing your work like you normally do.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You know that it can often be efficient to speak directly and honestly, but your communication style today should be more subtle than straight up. Instead of responding immediately when someone says something you don't like, wait and listen to more of what they have to say. Let them explain themselves completely.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Despite all evidence to the contrary, you do not have all the answers today. Be careful not to confuse other people's confidence in you with your actual abilities. Right now, you need to work harder to find innovative and perhaps even uncomfortable ideas. Find out how you can make ideas better. What value could they add to your life?



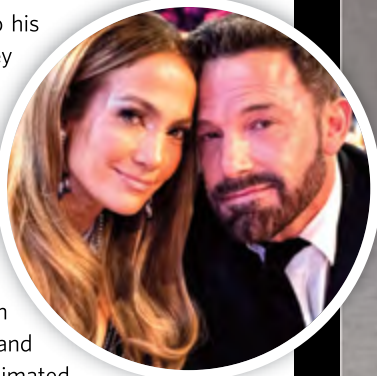
PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Charming people keep you busy and delighted. They have some big social plans, and they want you to get in on the ground floor of making them happen. You've got valuable party planning skills that they need, plus a contact list of the people they want to invite. Today is going to be a very active and interesting day for you.

entertainment

Ben Affleck and ex-wife get together on son's birthday

Days after Ben Affleck was spotted making out with his wife Jennifer Lopez, the actor was seen laughing and talking to his ex-wife Jennifer Garner as they stood outside their son Samuel's school in L A on his 12th birthday. The *Alias* star, 51, chatted with Ben while rocking a messy updo, a pair of capri jeans, and a tweed blazer on February 27. She accessorised with a smart pair of eyeglasses and black flats during the animated conversation.



Michael Jackson biopic casts its Jackson 5

Lionsgate's Michael Jackson biopic has found the rest of its Jackson 5. The company announced eight new cast members on Tuesday who are joining the biographical film Michael to fill out both the younger and older versions of Jackson's four brothers - Jermaine, Marlon, Tito and Jackie Jackson - comprising the family band that rose to prominence in the 1970s. Director Antoine Fuqua's movie is currently in production and hits theatres April 18, 2025.

Jayden Harville will portray the younger Jermaine, with Jamal R Henderson (Mindhunter) playing his older self. Marlon will be played by Jaylen Lyndon Hunter in the younger years and Tre Horton (My Enemy Alpha) later in life. Tito will be brought to life by Judah Edwards in the early years and Rhyann Hill (The Michael Blackson Show) later. Nathaniel Logan McIntyre will portray the younger Jackie, while Joseph David-Jones (Roman J Israel, Esq) will step into the older version.



Jaafar Jackson as Michael Jackson in MICHAEL

WHATS ON



Genre: Horror
Starring: ED Westwick, Lola Wayne, Rose Reynolds
Language: English

DARK GAME

A determined detective is in a race against time to stop a twisted game show on the dark web, where captives are forced to compete for their lives.



HILARIOUSLY TROLLS SCARY SPICE'S LEOPARD PRINT OBSESSION

Mel B, otherwise known as her beloved *Spice Girls* persona Scary Spice, took to TikTok on February 26, to poke fun at herself with a hilarious new video. In the clip, she stomped into a living area in a brown bodysuit and leopard print boots. "I'm Scary Spice! Of course I've got leopard print boots," she said as she kicked her heel in the air. She was then seen at an oven, rocking leopard print oven gloves. "I'm Scary Spice. Of course I've got leopard print oven gloves!" she said. While making her way to the fridge with a matching backpack, she admitted that "of course" she has a leopard print backpack. She then donned a long leopard print coat, which she flipped behind her as she stalked out the front door, showed off a leopard print hooded blanket, a leopard print water bottle, leopard print slippers, and a leopard print manicure.



PANKAJ UDHAS LAID TO REST WITH GUN SALUTE

Renowned ghazal singer, Padmashri Pankaj Udhas, whose velvet smooth voice had delighted audiences around the globe for the past four decades, was accorded a solemn funeral with a gun salute in the presence of top Indian politicians and Bollywood celebrities yesterday. Udhas, who died of cardiac arrest at the age of 72 was one of the most loved non-playback singers in India, who had popularised the Ghazal genre in a big way, making it a household name. Ahead of the funeral, the singer's body was taken out for the final journey on Tuesday. His body was covered in an Indian flag and the final journey began with a grand tribute performance by a band. The hearse, decorated with white flowers, was carried out in the streets thronged by people who loved his renditions, including live concerts (also in Oman on many occasions) for over 40 years. India President Droupadi Murmu and India Prime Minister Narendra Modi were amongst the many who mourned the singer's death.

Bradley Cooper expresses extreme affection for daughter



Bradley Cooper is opening up about how becoming a father has helped ground him in life. During an appearance on Monday's episode of the *Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard* podcast, the Maestro actor-director-producer revealed, "I'm not sure I'd be alive if I wasn't a dad." Cooper and Irina Shayk, who dated from 2015 to 2019, welcomed their daughter, Lea, in 2017.

"I just needed someone to say, like, 'We're gonna drop this massive anchor,'" the Oscar-nominated actor said. "I'm like, 'Why? We're speeding! I just got an upgrade on the boat, and I know where the wind's coming in.' They're like, 'No, no, no, there's a tsunami coming in, and you need an anchor and we're gonna drop it.' Because this is gonna dictate everything you do from now on. Your DNA is going to tell you that there's something more important than you."

In pursuit of love and fate



HOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW:
DUNE - PART 2
Genre: Action Starring: Timothee Chalamet, Josh Brolin, Rebecca Ferguson, Zendaya

Dune: Part Two is a 2024 American epic science fiction space opera film directed by Denis Villeneuve, who co-wrote the screenplay with Jon Spaihts. The sequel to *Dune* (2021), it is the second of a two-part adaptation of the 1965 novel *Dune* by Frank Herbert, and fol-

lows Paul Atreides as he unites with the Fremen people of the desert planet Arrakis to wage war against House Harkonnen - the conspirators who destroyed his family. Facing a choice between the love of his life and the fate of the known universe, he endeavours to prevent a terrible future only he can foresee.

The story unfurls as Princess Irulan Corrino secretly journals that Paul Atreides may still be alive, while her father, Emperor Shaddam IV, is dispirited after the fall of House Atreides. En route to Sietch Tabr on Arrakis, Stilgar's Fremen troop, including Paul and Jessica, faces a Harkonnen ambush but successfully overcomes it. At the Sietch, suspicions arise about Jessica and Paul being spies. Some Fremen have faith in them, believing in the prophecy of a mother and son bringing



prosperity to Arrakis. Stilgar informs Jessica that their Reverend Mother is dying, coercing her into becoming a re-

by doing so, survives and inherits the memories of every ancestor in her genetic lineage. Unbeknownst to anyone else except Paul, Jessica is pregnant with his sister and the Water of Life prematurely awakens her daughter's mind before birth. Following this, Jessica begins to have conversations with the child in her womb and believes that those in the north of Arrakis must be convinced first of the prophecy, starting with the weak-minded. Chani and her friend Shishakli think the prophecy is false, but when Paul makes a speech about not seeking power and only wanting to fight alongside them, Chani de-

velops respect for him. Paul embraces the Fremen ways and learns their language, passing tests like riding a sand-worm. He forms a romantic relationship with Chani, becomes a Fedaykin fighter, and assists during raids on Harkonnen spice harvesters, earning the mantles 'Muad'Dib' and 'Usul' by which the Fremen identify him. The rest is a roller-coaster of strife and strides for justice. Audiences consider *Dune - Part 2* a masterpiece and better than the first part, with better visuals and action, more drama and intrigue. Worth a watch.

Rating ★★★★★