

EPIC SHOWDOWN ON JABAL AKHDAR



Matteo Jorgenson clinches Tour of Oman, leading only by a second over Mauri Vansevenant

Our Correspondent Muscat

Matteo Jorgenson of Movistar team of the United States won the Tour of Oman after keeping his rivals at bay on the climb up Jabal Akhdar. Finishing with the same time as stage winner Mauri Vansevenant (Soudal Quick-Step), Jorgenson managed to hang on and keep the leader's red jersey by just one second.



A couple of days after his first professional victory, Jorgenson becomes the first American overall winner of the Tour of Oman and the youngest. Geoffrey Bouchard (AG2R Citroën) finished third on the stage 12 seconds behind and so moved up to third overall.

Jorgenson said, "Today was about the team; they were super strong and gave me super support. At the end it was about confidence and doing my best on the climb if I could."

He added, "It's been a beautiful tour. Oman has treated me super well and I was happy to see the country. I hope to be back next year. I have loved Oman."

Vansevenant was the strongest on the brutal slopes of a 5.7km ascent to take an emotional stage victory in front of his family, who came from Belgium to support him.

Vansevenant said, "For sure I am happy, but a little bit disappointed. It was all or nothing. I knew if I got a good result today, I could win the General Classification. I won the stage but didn't win the Tour. I will come back, but for now I have to focus on the next races."

Jorgenson also won 'Best Young Rider' for the second day in a row, along with the 'Individual Time' and 'Individual Points' awards. Norway's Fredrik Dversnes (Uno-X Pro Cycling) claimed 'Most Active Rider' for the second successive day.

Foreign Ministry starts weekly video meets with its embassies

Our Correspondent Muscat

With an eye on opening new opportunities and sourcing new markets for foreign direct investment (FDI) into Oman, the Foreign Ministry has started a weekly virtual meetings programme with the sultanate's ambassadors abroad.

H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, inaugurated the programme on Wednesday, which will focus on directly gauging the achievements, challenges and efforts of Omani missions abroad. 'The meetings will help in assessing the missions' tasks aimed at developing interest, opportunities and benefits with the accredited countries and discuss their plans for the year,' the ministry stated.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), the Foreign Ministry has held several meetings with Omani ambassadors abroad since 2021.

During one such meeting, H E Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, stressed the importance of such meets in introducing the economic developments, investment laws and facilities provided by the sultanate to investors.

"This will contribute to bringing more investors in various sec-



H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi

tors to the sultanate," he said, praising the role played by Oman's embassies in promoting the investment sector in the country and strengthening ties of cooperation between Oman and the countries of the world.

H E Asila bint Salim al Sam-sami, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in MoCIIP, has stated that the meetings held since 2021 are in line with Oman Vision 2040 and the belief of her ministry in the importance of integrated work between various government agencies to promote the investment sector in the sultanate and to attract and encourage businesses to invest and promote Omani products in global markets.

The meetings also aim to invite ambassadors to review the economic developments, and services and incentives offered.

Ministry of Energy launches e-platform for gas supply

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals has launched an electronic platform where requests for purchase of liquefied natural gas (LNG) for industrial use will be received and decided.

The platform services companies wishing to get gas supplies for existing or planned projects in Oman in line with the government's efforts towards digital transformation while helping the ministry provide its services in an efficient manner.

The platform will allow the submission of requests for purchase and allocation of natural gas from new investors and existing consumers for industrial use.

Details including gas allocation conditions and required approvals will be made available to investors and consumers. The

platform will also be used for follow up on the status of requests with the authorities concerned.

Qassim Mohammed al Amri, Acting Director-General of Marketing at the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, said that the launch of the new platform reflects the government's concerted efforts and its digital transformation with the aim of facilitating services to individual investors and to companies in general.

Investors can avail the platform's services in two stages - requests submitted electronically followed by the ministry's response after processing of the application. Requests are studied by specialists to verify requirements and other details.

In the last few years, LNG production has increased considerably with the sultanate signing long-term deals for exports to several countries.



Stage winner Mauri Vansevenant



(Supplied photos)

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Art exhibition 'Kullon Mena' at Muttrah fish market

Houses dating back to the 3rd millennium BC found in Ibri

Our Correspondent Muscat

The French National Centre for Scientific Research, in cooperation with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, has announced the discovery of two water channels dating back to the early Islamic era at the archaeological site of Al Arid in Ibri, Dhahirah.

The team also unearthed houses dating back to the 3rd millennium BC, with two rooms and multiple sites for lighting fire. The foundations of the houses were built of rocks, while the walls were made of mud bricks.

The site also includes remains of seven towers and close to a thousand tombs dating back to

the 3rd millennium BC. These tombs contained skeletons, shards of pottery, and an almost complete jar dating back to the era of Jemdet Nasr in Mesopotamia.

Corinne Castel, head of the archaeological team, said the finds are from the Majan civilisation.

During excavations, tombs containing utensils dating back to the Mesopotamian civilisation were also discovered. "A 100sqm workshop was devoted to copper smelting to make copper tools and weapons, validating Oman's fame for its copper industries then," Corinne said.

The team is currently excavating a structure believed to be from the 4th millennium BC at the site.

Oman's debut drag race challenge in Sur on Feb 24

Our Correspondent Muscat

Motor racing enthusiasts can look forward to a weekend of exciting drag races being held officially in the sultanate for the first time on February 24 and 25.

The Oman Drag Race Challenge is being organised by Oman Automobile Association in cooperation with Supercars Majlis, a group of enthusiasts who own supercars.

Drag racing is a type of motor racing in which automobiles or motorcycles compete, usually two at a time, to be first to cross a line. The race follows a short, straight course from a standing start over a measured distance.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Hamed Muslem al Nazouani,



(Image for illustrative purpose)

one of the race supervisors, said, "The race will be held on the runway of Ras al Hadd Airport in Sur, targeting about 300 contestants from GCC countries. The runway length is 4km, with

a width of 75m, making it an ideal spot for the sport."

He informed that organisers have obtained approval from the Civil Aviation Authority to hold the race. "Races will be held in

four categories - SUVs, sedans, supercars and motorbikes."

According to Nazouani, prize money totaling RO5,000 will be won by winners.

He added, "The race aims to promote tourism in South Sharqiyah, motivate young people to participate in motor sports, and spread the importance of following traffic rules in motors sports."

The two-day event will include several activities, such as paragliding and folk performances. "Stalls will be allocated to productive families to present their ware in order to promote and support them."

Nazouani added, "We will try to hold the race annually to continue to promote the sultanate and attract motor sports enthusiasts from around the world."

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Maritime Heritage Festival in Sur receives over 72,000 visitors

Our Correspondent
Sur

As many as 72,267 people visited the Maritime Heritage Festival in Sur, South Sharqiyah, in the first eight days of the event, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT). The festival kicked off on February 3 and will continue till February 19.

In a statement, MHT said, 'The festival aims to stimulate local tourism, promote heritage and tourism sites, consolidate Oman's position on the tourism map, and create added value for the local community by supporting small and medium enterprises while introducing and promoting the sultanate's maritime heritage.'

The festival activities and events are being conducted at the Maritime Heritage Village, all highlighting the maritime



(Supplied photo)

heritage that Sur is famous for.

The village also has a corner dedicated to handicrafts related to maritime heritage, folklore

seminars, a café, a theatre for recreational and cultural events and activities, and folk games and performances of marine-re-

lated arts.

Other programmes on the festival agenda include activities such as windsurfing, sailing, a

fishing competition, a seminar on maritime heritage, a traditional boat race, traditional Omani sports, and kite flying.

More than 300 experts to attend paediatric meet on Feb 24-25

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 300 participants are set to attend the third edition of the Oman Paediatric Society International Conference on February 24 and 25 at Sheraton Oman Hotel.

Medical practitioners from the region and Oman will share their expertise on important topics of general paediatrics.

Giving details on the conference, Dr Sumaya al Araiimi, chairperson of the society said, "The Oman Paediatric Society International Conference is working in collaboration with other institutions to share best practices and experiences through keynote introductions, workshops, symposium, lectures and more. It is an international conference with inspiring local and international speakers. It will feature speakers from the Gulf countries as well as delegates from around the world."

The theme of the conference - Together for Better Care - will focus on a multidisciplinary approach for the treatment of paediatric diseases. It will include six educational, interactive and hands-on workshops on paediatric medicine, such as non-invasive ventilation, home ventilation and care, assessment of adolescent in clinical setting, and liver diseases.

Dr Sumaya added, "Obesity is a major problem seen in children due to fast food and lifestyle issues. This conference will dis-



Obesity is a major problem seen in children due to fast food and lifestyle issues. This conference will discuss the latest recommendations and available surgical options

DR SUMAYA
AL ARAIMI

cuss the latest recommendations and available surgical options. It will offer an interdisciplinary stage to specialists and professionals to present and talk about the latest developments and trends, in addition to challenges experienced in paediatric medicine."

The conference is being organised by Oman Paediatrics Society in collaboration of Oman Medical Association and other institutions.

63 countries to take part in civil aviation forum on Feb 21

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate, represented by Civil Aviation Authority, is preparing to host the 2nd Civil Aviation Legal Advisers Forum (CALAF/2) organised by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) from February 21-23.

Sixty-three countries and three international organisations will participate in the forum, con-

vened under the auspices of H E Dr Abdullah Mohammed Said al Saidi, Minister of Justice and Legal Affairs.

CALAF/2 will facilitate a continuing focus on issues of interest to the international aviation community in the legal field.

It will feature presentations on a variety of civil aviation subjects made by more than 30 professionals from across the globe. In particular, the forum will address topics relating to recent develop-

ments and emerging issues in the field of civil aviation law, and ICAO's work in the legal field.

Some of the topics to be discussed include the outcome of the 41st ICAO Assembly, crisis management in response to the pandemic and air travel recovery, data privacy, competency framework for legal advisers, settlement of aviation disputes, enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of civil aviation legal advisers, and current issues in

aviation law and practice.

The forum will comprise a youth group session on the next generation of aviation professionals and pursuing a career as an aviation professional.

The session will be attended by the Secretary-General of ICAO and a number of high-profile figures in the aviation industry to listen to the young people interested in the field. The forum will also include an accompanying exhibition showcasing the in-

dustry's latest technologies.

Launched by ICAO, the forum is a platform for legal advisors to share views, knowledge and experience of issues in the civil aviation field, and to discuss various challenges faced by state parties, potential cooperation opportunities and possible solutions to address challenges emanating from technical, social and economic developments.

CALAF/1 was held in May 2019 in Singapore.

International meet focuses on green energy and its future in sultanate



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The University of Technology and Applied Sciences inaugurated the International Conference on Green Energy 2023 at Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment in Salalah on Wednesday.

The two-day conference was opened by Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, in the presence of several senior academics and industrialists.

The conference includes discussion sessions on a green economy and its future in the sultanate, as well as presentation of 33 research papers by academics on green hydrogen energy, hydrogen fuel stocks and conversion, and green nanotechnology.

The conference aims to promote research on sustainable energy stocks, protect the environment and preserve natural resources, support research to create renewable energy

sources that will positively affect economic development, and encourage the exchange of local and international experiences in the field of sustainable energy.

Dr Mohammed bin Rashid al Maamari, Dean of University of Technology and Applied Sciences Salalah, informed that renewable energy projects receive great and wide interest in Oman Vision 2040, which supports the gradual transition to a low-carbon economy through the launch

of a number of projects and initiatives.

He added, "The approval of 2050 by His Majesty the Sultan to achieve zero carbon neutrality is an endorsement of this vital sector and will reflect positively on the sultanate."

He noted that the conference is an opportunity to discuss the possibilities and challenges related to green energy and green hydrogen by inviting academics, experts, specialists and industrialists.

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Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Biden names Fed vice chair as top economic advisor

US President Joe Biden has chosen Federal Reserve Vice Chair Lael Brainard to be his top economic advisor, ahead of a potential reelection campaign and as the administration battles stubbornly high inflation. Brainard joins Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen among the country's key economic policy officials, as the government works on rolling out major laws such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

Brainard replaces outgoing National Economic Council director Brian Deese, who helped craft massive spending bills and steer a path out of the pandemic shutdown.

According to a White House statement, Brainard will be the second female director of the NEC.

WTO commends Oman's trade, investment policies

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, praised the efforts made by Oman's government in modernising trade and investment policies, especially in the field of green hydrogen and clean energy.

A WTO delegation led by Dr Ngozi was on an official visit to Oman.

Speaking on the sidelines of her meeting with Omani businesspersons at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) on Tuesday, Dr Ngozi appreciated the role of the sultanate as an active member of the World Trade Organization.

She said that her meeting with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik touched on many issues related to the global trade and efforts of the WTO in overcoming obstacles facing the movement of trade and ways to promote trade.

Dr Ngozi explained that her visit to Oman aimed to exchange visions with the Omani side on ways to implement the agreements of the 12th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization and to pre-



Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala speaks during a meeting at Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Tuesday (ONA)

WTO Director-General Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala appreciated the sultanate's role as an active member of the World Trade Organization

pare for the 12th Ministerial Conference to be held in the UAE's capital Abu Dhabi in the first quarter of next year.

She stressed that the WTO, in cooperation with member states, seeks to find solutions to the challenges and trade issues

facing the the world, such as the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and high food and energy prices.

Dr Ngozi noted that the WTO contributed to finding solutions to many issues during the last period, such as the lack of access to Coronavirus vaccines for some of the developing countries.

Meanwhile, the sultanate's Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources on Tuesday also organised a meeting with the WTO team. The meeting was held to exchange views on issues related to the WTO tasks and efforts in support of international trade liberalisation and economic growth.

The meeting was attended by H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, H E Dr Saud Hamoud al Habsi, Minister Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources and WTO chief Dr Ngozi.

The meeting touched on ways to support the global trade system, achieve stability in the trade movement and maintain the best rates of its flows around the world. A visual presentation on green hydrogen in Oman was presented during the meeting.



OPEC raises world oil demand forecast as China reopens

OPEC expects global oil demand to grow by 2.3mn barrels per day to an average of 101.87mn barrels per day this year, which is 100,000 barrels a day more than the previous estimate

Vienna, Austria – OPEC has raised its world oil demand forecast for 2023 after top consumer China lifted its zero-Covid policy.

The Saudi-led oil cartel expects demand to grow by 2.3mn barrels per day to an average of 101.87mn barrels per day this year.

This is 100,000 a day more than the previous estimate, which was already above pre-Covid levels.

'Key to oil demand growth in 2023 will be the return of China from its mandated mobility restrictions and the effect this will have on the country, the region and the world,' OPEC said in its monthly market report.

After almost three years of stringent health restrictions, Beijing in December abruptly ended the zero-Covid policy that had battered the economy and caused widespread protests.

World oil demand jumped to 101.17mn barrels per day in the last three months of 2022, compared to 100.79mn barrels per day in the same period before the pandemic in 2019.

Despite growing demand, 13-nation OPEC and its a 10-country group of producers led by Russia, together known as OPEC+, agreed in October to reduce output by two million barrels per day until the end of this year.

Last week, Russia said it will slash crude production by five per cent from March after Western countries imposed a price cap on its petroleum products over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

AFP



Back to future: Air India looks to take off with mega-purchase

New Delhi, India – One of India's biggest and oldest conglomerates is returning to its roots with a multi-billion-dollar bet on the country's growing middle class and its demand for air travel.

Air India was for many years under state ownership, a byword for underinvestment, crippling losses, and inefficiency.

Now back in the hands of its original private owners, it announced combined purchases of 470 aircraft from Airbus and Boeing on Tuesday, which together form one of the largest orders in aviation history.

The announcement comes a year after tea-to-software conglomerate Tata Group re-acquired the loss-making airline, founded by globetrotting Franco-Indian industrialist JRD Tata, who piloted its maiden flight in 1932.

Reports say he described its post-Independence nationalisation as the saddest day of his life, frequently lamenting the loss.

And it has haemorrhaged money in recent years, with successive Indian governments spending nearly US\$15bn to prop it up from 2009 until Tata bought it back in a US\$2.4bn deal a year ago.

"Welcome back, Air India," Tata's patriarch chairman emeritus Ratan Tata celebrated after completing the purchase.

It last bought new aircraft in

2006, but now its new old owners are looking to restore its image as the "Maharaja of the Skies", while at the same time taking on the emergent carriers of recent decades – Emirates, Qatar Airways and Turkish Airlines, whose hub and spoke models have given them an outside share of intercontinental travel.

Tuesday's announcements amounted to "not just the largest order ever made by an Indian airline, it is one of the largest single aircraft orders by any airline, anywhere, ever", CEO Campbell Wilson said in a message to staff, calling it a "major milestone... in the journey of restoring this airline to greatness".

Shakti Lumba, former head of operations at IndiGo, which long ago replaced Air India as the country's largest domestic airline, told AFP that the Tata group "can build a world-class global brand".

It needed to add capacity over several years to achieve its goal of 30 per cent market share said Lumba. "With India's captive market, there is enough domestic traffic for everyone," he added.

India is the world's fastest-growing major economy and its fifth-largest, and while inequality is rife with vast numbers of people remaining grindingly poor, it also has a growing middle class

with an increasing appetite for air travel.

Airbus forecasts its air traffic will grow at 6.6 per cent a year over the next two decades, twice the global average, and aviation experts say it needs at least 2,000 aircraft in the next decade.

The "deal and its scale reflect the state of Indian economy, its growth trajectory and the fact that more and more Indians will travel both domestically and globally in the next decade," said Anas Rahman Junaid, Mumbai-based founder of wealth analysts Hurun India.

"Tata, with its experience of running large organisations, has what it takes to take a local brand global," he added.

'Image and reputation'

Founded in 1868 by Jamsetji Tata, the eponymous group owns Jaguar Land Rover, software giant TCS, and Tata steel. Its subsidiaries include 29 listed entities with diverse interests in chemicals, hospitality, steel, automobiles and consumer goods.

Even with the new planes, Air India is only a small territory in the Tata empire, which already controlled listed businesses with around US\$250bn in combined market capitalisation before buying the airline.

AFP

Fitch affirms Sohar International's ratings at 'BB-' with stable outlook

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Fitch Ratings has affirmed Sohar International Bank's long-term issuer default ratings (IDRs) at 'BB-' with stable outlook. Fitch has also placed Sohar International Bank's 'b+' viability rating (VR) on rating watch positive (RWP).

The rating agency said that the RWP follows Sohar International Bank's announcement on February 5, 2023 that it has received approval from the Central Bank of Oman for its proposed merger with HSBC Bank Oman.

Closing of the transaction is subject to approvals by other regulatory bodies as well as the shareholders of both banks and is expected to take place in the second half of 2023. Fitch expects the transaction to have a positive impact on Sohar International Bank's credit profile.

Fitch said it will resolve the RWP upon the conclusion of the transaction and once it obtains



more clarity on the business and financial profile of the merged entity, which may extend beyond the usual six-month review cycle.

The rating agency said that the RWP on Sohar International Bank's VR reflects its view that the bank's credit profile is likely to benefit from the planned merger with HSBC Oman.

'Sohar International Bank's franchise has been growing steadily, particularly in the corporate segment, supported by

links to the government that add to business flows as the bank is often involved in government-sponsored infrastructure projects,' Fitch said.

'If the merger is completed successfully, Sohar International Bank will become the second-largest bank in Oman, with around 18 per cent of sector assets, and its franchise and business model will be materially stronger. This drives our positive outlook on the business profile

If the merger is completed successfully, Sohar International Bank will become the second-largest bank in Oman, with around 18% of sector assets

FITCH RATINGS

score,' the rating agency noted.

Meanwhile, Fitch Ratings has placed HSBC Bank Oman's long-term issuer default ratings of 'BB+' and 'bb-' Viability Rating (VR) on Rating Watch Negative (RWN). The 'bb+' Shareholder Support Rating (SSR) has also been placed on RWN.

The rating action follows the Central Bank of Oman's approval of the merger between HSBC Oman and Sohar International Bank, Fitch added.

Air Arabia posts record net profit of AED1.2bn

Sharjah, UAE - Air Arabia announced historic financial results for the full year 2022, almost doubling the profit and passenger numbers of the previous year, as the airline continued with its growth plans, delivering remarkable financial and operational performance.

Air Arabia reported a net profit of AED1.2bn for 2022, an increase of 70 per cent year-on-year. The airline's turnover reached AED5.2bn, an increase of 65 per cent year-on-year.

Air Arabia served more than 12.8mn passengers in 2022 from its seven hubs in the UAE, Morocco, Egypt, Armenia, and



Pakistan, an increase of 90 per cent compared to 6.8mn passengers carried in 2021. The average seat load factor – or passengers carried as a percentage of available seats – for the full year stood at a high 80

per cent. Air Arabia's board of directors proposed a dividend distribution of 15 per cent of share capital, which is equivalent to 15 fils per share.

Commenting on the results, Sheikh Abdullah bin Moham-

mad al Thani, chairman of Air Arabia, said, "Air Arabia's 2022 record profitability is considered the best in the company's operating history. The remarkable operational and financial performance reflect the carrier's robust business model, its management team, as well as its discerning growth strategy.

"Although the year 2022 continued to be challenging, the aviation industry has begun returning to normality as airlines and airports worldwide witnessed faster recovery following the drop in demand cause by the pandemic."

WAM

US inflation eases but Fed's battle not over

Washington, US - Rising rent and a gasoline price rebound helped keep US consumer prices elevated in January, according to government data released Tuesday, signaling that policymakers' battle against inflation is not over.

The US central bank has hiked interest rates rapidly in the past year to raise borrowing costs and cool demand in the world's biggest economy, as inflation skyrocketed.

But even as the consumer price index (CPI), an important inflation gauge, eases from decades-high levels, the numbers point to some stickier areas.

With the effects of policy rippling through the economy, the CPI rose 6.4 per cent in January from a year ago, according to Labor Department data. This was a touch below December's figure and the smallest annual increase since October 2021.

But it remains significantly above policymakers' two per cent target.

From December to January, the CPI rose 0.5 per cent, picking up from 0.1 per cent in December and indicating the Federal Reserve has some way to go in lowering costs.

"The index for shelter was by far the largest contributor... accounting for nearly half of the monthly all items increase," said the report.

The indices for food, gasoline and natural gas also contributed. Excluding the volatile food and energy components, so-called core CPI rose 5.6 percent from January 2022, also the smallest increase in around a year.

"There is still more work to do as we make this transition to more steady, stable growth, and there could be setbacks along the way," said President Joe Biden in a statement.

He added that latest data "reinforces that we have made historic progress and are on the right track, and now we need to finish the job."



US Federal Reserve Bank in Washington, DC

Wall Street stocks were muted Tuesday on the latest data.

'Higher-for-longer' rates

There was only modest improve-

ment in annual inflation, as well as in services inflation excluding volatile components and housing, said Rubela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics.

This measure of underlying services costs is closely eyed by

the Fed.

"For Fed officials, a slow grind down in inflation only supports the higher-for-longer view on interest rates," Farooqi warned.

While higher interest rates may typically be associated with

an uptick in unemployment and demand slowdown, the economy's resilience lends hope to the possibility that the United States can avoid a major downturn.

On Tuesday, New York Fed President John Williams said in a speech that he expects GDP growth to come in around one per cent this year, higher than the Fed's median projection of 0.5 per cent released in December.

"There are a few bright spots in today's inflation numbers, including the very modest 1.5 per cent increase in gasoline prices," added Neil Saunders of analytics firm GlobalData.

But many "gains made from savings on gas are having to be spent elsewhere," Saunders said.

Food prices were still around 10 per cent higher in January from a year ago, and electricity costs were up 11.9 per cent.

'Stickier' components

"You don't want to make too

much out of a single month," warned Ryan Sweet of Oxford Economics. He noted that supply chain stress and energy prices can impact monthly numbers.

"Some stickier components are what we'll be paying more attention to, for example rents," he told AFP.

He believes rental costs "won't peak until the second half of this year," while wage growth remains robust and there is still pent-up demand for services spending.

A strong labor market supports incomes and, in turn, demand.

"During the pandemic, people shifted their spending away from services because they couldn't go out to restaurants, bars, sporting events," he said.

With Covid-19 restrictions easing, people are now turning back to services, which make up the bulk of consumer spending, Sweet said.

AFP

UK inflation retreats further, but remains above 10%

London, UK - British annual inflation dropped further last month on easing transport costs, official data showed Wednesday, but remains above a historically-high 10 per cent.

Inflation around the world is easing after striking the highest levels in decades last year as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia fuelled energy and food prices.

The UK Consumer Prices Index fell to 10.1 per cent in January compared with a rate of 10.5 per cent in December, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement Wednesday.

UK inflation has dropped in recent months from a peak of above 11 per cent in October, which was reached also on shortages of supplies of goods and services as economies reopened from Covid lockdowns.

With elevated inflation eroding the value of wages, Britain is facing its biggest strikes by public and private sector workers in more than a decade.

Finance minister Jeremy Hunt welcomed the easing inflation figure but cautioned that "the fight is far from over".

He added in a statement:



The UK Consumer Prices Index fell to 10.1 per cent in January compared with a rate of 10.5 per cent in December (AFP)

"High inflation strangles growth and causes pain for families and businesses -- that's why we must stick to the plan (to) halve inflation this year, reduce debt and grow the economy."

Official data last week showed Britain narrowly avoided recession in 2022, but the risk of a prolonged contraction remains for this year according to analysts. Across the Atlantic, rising rent and rebound in gasoline prices helped keep US consumer prices elevated in January, government data showed Tuesday.

The CPI in the United States rose 6.4 per cent in January from

a year ago. This was a touch below December's figure and the smallest annual increase since October 2021.

But it remains significantly above the Federal Reserve's two percent target, a level sought also by the Bank of England.

In a bid to cool inflation, central banks have raised interest rates several times and by sizeable amounts over the past year, while more hikes are expected.

"Although still at a high level, (UK) inflation eased again in January," noted ONS chief economist Grant Fitzner.

AFP

US unveils deal with Musk on EV chargers

New York, US - Tesla's US charging network will be available to other electric vehicle brands for the first time following White House negotiations with Elon Musk, the Biden administration announced Wednesday.

Tesla has agreed to make at least 7,500 chargers nationwide open to non-Tesla EVs by the end of 2024, according to a White House fact sheet laying out its latest efforts to add 500,000 EV chargers by 2030.

The White House has fre-

quently had prickly relations with Musk but Biden administration staff said Tuesday the billionaire had been responsive when officials contacted major EV players to extend the charging network.

A lack of sufficient charging capacity has been seen as a major hurdle for the EV transition in the United States, with driver fear at the lack of available chargers called "range anxiety."

Currently, Tesla owners can purchase an adapter to charge at non-Tesla EV stations but other

brands are not able to do the same at Tesla's network.

Tesla's network of "Superchargers" is widely viewed as constituting a head start over those being built by other companies. Bipartisan 2021 legislation backed by Biden included US\$7.5bn in funding for EV chargers. Tesla's shift to allow charging of other brands with an adapter allows Musk's company to qualify for US subsidies, Biden administration officials said Tuesday.

The Biden administration's

policy update also listed charging commitments from other leading companies, including a joint venture between Hertz and BP and initiatives by General Motors, ChargePoint and others.

The administration also unveiled national standards for federally funded chargers to ensure consistency across markets. Under the policy chargers will need to meet minimum reliability levels and be locatable on smartphone apps.

AFP

Vacancies Available in Exchange Company

Job Description	Nationality	Education	Experience	Job location
Finance Supervisor	N/A	Graduate in Finance (prefer ACCA or equivalent)	Minimum 5 Years (Speaking & writing in English)	Muscat
Finance Officer	Omani	Graduate in Business studies	Minimum 3 Years (Speaking & writing in English)	Muscat
HR Supervisor	Omani	Graduate in Human resource	Minimum 3 Years (Speaking & writing in English)	Muscat
IT Manager	N/A	Graduate in IT with knowledge of software, security & network.	Minimum 7 Years (Speaking & writing in English)	Muscat
Transactions Service Officer	Bangladeshi & Indian	Graduate in business studies	(Speaking & writing in English)	Anywhere in our branches in Oman

Interested candidates should send their CV before 1st March 2023.

To below Email:

hr.compliance@omanxchg.com.om



الشركة العالمية لإدارة الفنادق ش.م.م

Hotel Management Company International SAOG

THE CHEDI, MUSCAT شيدى . مسقط

ص.ب. 964 الجوير - الرمز البريدي 133 سلطنة عمان P. O. Box 964, P.C. 133, Al Khuwair, Sultanate of Oman

BOARD OF DIRECTOR'S REPORT

On behalf of the Board of Directors, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Annual General Meeting of the Hotels Management Company International SAOG. I would also like to avail this opportunity to present to you the annual report of HMCI S.A.O.G. for the year ended December 31st, 2022.

During 2022 the Company has achieved the following accomplishments:

The company has generated total revenues of RO. 7,344 million (vs. previous year RO. 3,308 million) which shows an increase in revenue of 122%.

The company made a Net profit after taxation provision of RO. 0.180 million (vs. previous year Net loss of RO. 1.653 million) which is a increase of 111%.

Achievement

- The Chedi Muscat closed the year with a Fabulous Gala event to mark the turn of the year and celebrate the fantastic performance of 2022. The iconic Beach Resort brought in the maximum RevPAR in the country, superseding all its competitors.
- The Chedi Muscat was awarded the World's leading Luxury Beach Resort and Spa by the World Travel Awards.
- The Chedi Muscat was recognized by Conde Nast traveler Readers' Choice awards as the favorite Romantic getaway in the middle east. Conde Nast Traveler also bestowed The Chedi Muscat as the best hotel in Oman for Design in the middle east.
- The property was also recognized by Forbes travel guide 2022 as the most high-ranking hotel in the country for quality, service, and design.
- The iconic property closed the year with the excellent news of being featured in Conde Nast traveler's worldwide Gold List as one of the best hotels and resorts in the world along with other super luxurious and renowned properties worldwide!

Outlook

Oman hotel revenues continue to improve after a challenging period in 2020 and 2021. According to the latest Tourism Index Report from National Centre for Statistics and Information, Oman hotel revenues have increased by 205 per cent YOY.

Many international airlines haven't resumed their flights to Muscat after the pandemic. British Airways cancelled the entire route and do not intend to return it soon. Other major European airlines have partially restored their flights to Oman, driving high ticket prices.

Quarter one business on the books looks positive for the property, and it continues its market leadership in Average rates and RevPAR among its segments.

Looking forward to the year ahead, restrictions continue to ease around the globe, so travel demand will increase, as indicated by already increasing traveler search in the EMEA region. The Chedi will prepare for this renewed demand and how best to cater to our guests by staying true to our core value of offering an exceptional and personalized luxury service.

The biggest concern about travel is inflation. In addition, travel advisors are faced with a challenge with airlines, with their volatile pricing and cancellation policies, making it difficult to budget for their client's trips.

Appreciation.

The members of the Board of Directors join me in acknowledging sincere thanks to our valued guests and shareholders for their continuous confidence in our hotel.

We wish to convey our sincere thanks and appreciation to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Capital Marketing Authority, Muscat exchange and the Ministry of Heritage and tourism for their prudent supervising and guidance on our endeavors.

We salute and pledge our allegiance to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said as he takes the country on continued progress and prosperity.

The Chairman

AUDITED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 December 2022

	31-Des 2022	31-Des 2021
Non-current Assets	8,479,315	9,120,770
Property, plant and equipment	5,400,037	6,000,669
Fixed deposits - long term	2,600,000	2,600,000
Deferred tax Asset	479,278	520,101
Current Assets	4,388,483	3,333,918
Inventories	476,886	394,788
Debtors and Prepayments	1,297,693	1,043,353
Due from related parties	5,605	81,946
Bank and cash	2,608,299	1,813,831
Total assets	12,867,798	12,454,688
Current Liabilities	2,473,195	1,557,189
Current Portion of term loan	700,000	-
Trade and other payables	1,694,714	1,488,965
Due to related parties	78,481	68,224
Non-current liabilities	3,216,657	3,917,264
Term Loan	2,800,000	3,500,000
End of service benefits	416,657	417,264
Total liabilities	5,689,852	5,474,453
Net assets Equity	7,177,946	6,980,235
Share capital	3,000,000	3,000,000
Legal reserve	1,000,000	1,000,000
Retained earnings/(accumulated losses)	3,177,946	2,980,235
Total equity	7,177,946	6,980,235

AUDITED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME For the Period ending 31 December 2022

	31-Des 2022	31-Des 2021
Turnover/ Revenue	7,343,685	3,307,555
Operating costs	(6,358,691)	(4,825,241)
Operating profit	984,994	(1,517,686)
General administration and selling and distribution expenses	(535,230)	(337,560)
(Impairment loss)/reversal of loss on trade receivables	(1,071)	3,744
Management and licence fees	(235,277)	(86,250)
Net Operating Profit	213,416	(1,937,752)
Finance income	184,252	120,070
Finance expense	(183,750)	(123,339)
Insurance claim (net)	17,477	-
Profit on disposal of property, plant and equipment	7,139	17,983
Profit for the period	238,534	(1,923,038)
Provision for taxation	(40,823)	270,279
Profit after tax provision	197,711	(1,652,759)
Earnings per share	0.066	(0.551)

Note: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who request the company in either Arabic or English as requested within 7 days of receipt of the request.

ISWKi celebrates Annual Day 2022-23



Indian School Wadi Kabir Cambridge International (ISWKi) celebrated its Annual Day 2022-23 on Feb 9.

This young school, established in 2017 with its custom-built international standard infrastructure and a 50 strong contingent of experienced and qualified educators, caters to around 450 learners and is one of the only Indian schools in the country offering the Cambridge curriculum from K-12, a press release said.

This year's Annual Day, woven around the theme 'Globally United - The World is One', was meticulously planned by the learners, educators and administration staff of the school and was a befitting grand finale to the academic year 2022-2023.

The chief guest was Kairavi Pankaj Khimji and the guest of honour was Dr Sivakumar Manickam at the event presided by the honorary president Gargi Chugh and attended by principal D N Rao, vice principal Shashikala Prabhat and members of the School Managing Committee.

Addressing the audience,

Chugh expressed the importance of looking beyond geographical borders for the world to move into the future. She highlighted the progress made by the school, in both academics and infrastructure, in alignment with the school's mission to provide dynamic educational experiences that prepare students for life.

Rao presented the Annual Report of the past academic year showcasing growth, development, and accolades won by learners in competitions across the country, besides the regular academic and co-curricular activities organised during the current academic session.

Meritorious students were given prizes for excellence in academics while the educators who completed 5 years of service at the school were also felicitated.

Excellence in teaching

Meanwhile, the prestigious 'Navin Asher-Kazi Awards for Excellence in Teaching', instituted by the Board of Directors of Indian Schools in Oman, were conferred on teachers from Indian Schools in the Sultanate of Oman at a function on February 8 at ISWK.

H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India, was present as chief guest while the function was attended by Kiran Asher and family, patrons of the award, members of the Board of Directors, and principals.

"Awards for Excellence in Teaching' is an annual event designed to encourage, reward, and acknowledge sustained excellence in teaching. The award recognizes excellence in teaching practices that reflect the highest standards in pedagogy, a record of outstanding teaching effectiveness within and outside the classroom, the ability to inspire, promote and sustain the intellectual, emotional, and social development of students," Dr Manickam said.

The awardees included Anjali Radhakrishnan (Indian School Salalah) and Sindhu Vinod Nair (Indian School Al Seeb) in the Kindergarten category, Monika Bisht and Karin Johnson from Indian School Al Maabela in the Primary School category, Dhanya Mahesh (Indian School Al Maabela) and Gargi Ghosh (Indian School Al Ghubra) in the Middle School category, Vipindas Cheruvathamkandy (Indian School Salalah) and Vijitha Vijayan (Indian School Al Maabela) in the Senior School category, Premalata Thakur (ISWK) and Devaki Valiya Kizhakkeetil (Indian School Al Ghubra) in the Co-scholastic category. In addition to the above, seventeen teachers in different categories were given Certificates of Recognition for their outstanding contribution in the field of education.



OETC participates in Green Energy Conference 2023

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) is participating in the International Green Energy Conference 2023 in the Sultanate of Oman, organised by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Salalah, Dhofar Governorate between February 15-16. The participation comes as part of the company's efforts to contribute to global efforts to reduce carbon pollution and shift to clean energy.

A number of Omani and international researchers are participating in the conference in different fields, including in the challenges in the energy transmission and modern technologies field, and the importance of collective work and strengthening cooperation between countries in the sustainability and green energy field.

It is worth mentioning that, OETC is the only company responsible for the transmission and control of electricity in the sultanate's network, where electricity is transferred from production stations to distributed load centres in all governorates of the sultanate, and the transmission network operates at a voltage of 132 kV and above, to cover most of the governorates. In addition, OETC manages the interconnection lines between the sultanate and the Gulf interconnection network with a voltage of 220 kV.

Asyad signs partnership with GBM Oman

Asyad Group has signed an agreement with Gulf Business Machines (GBM Oman), a leading Omani digital solutions provider, to develop an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system that will accelerate the digital transformation of the Group's administrative processes and enhance its digital and operational capabilities.

This agreement is part of Asyad Group's efforts to build a comprehensive ERP system that enables optimal resource management and improve administrative services across business units, a press release said.

The new unified ERP system, powered by SAP SE's cloud technology, will encompass all Asyad business units that had each previously been operating its own independent ERP system. This standardisation will ultimately deliver a smoother and more efficient experience for all Asyad's employees and ensure better business flow and continuity, impacting customers' experience and relationship management.

Keeping with its commitment to private sector engagement, Asyad Group contracted GBM



Oman, to develop its resource management and planning systems in a bid to increase in-country value, forge strategic partnerships with local players and contribute to the national economy. Through a strategic partnership with SAP, GBM Oman will work with Asyad to implement a world-renowned latest ERP system to enable adaptable and sustainable transformation, while realizing a faster time-to-market for new capabilities and applications.

Commenting on the agreement, Asyad Group Chief Technology Officer, Eng Ghaith al Darmaki, said, "Asyad Group is constantly deploying cutting-edge technology that allows digital flexibility and ease of application to tackle challenges in logistics. In fact, digital transformation is one of Asyad Group's top priorities to achieve the highest possible levels of operational efficiency, fast decision-making, and optimized customer experience by enhancing data flow and anticipating and resolving technical difficulties."

"Pushing forward with digital transformation and fine-tuning our ERP system will further strengthen Asyad's technological and operational capabilities as a global logistics provider," Darmaki added. "This will also open new potentials in resource planning, sales, warehousing, supply chain, finance, and human resources, all while securing the integrated digital solutions that meet our Group's future needs."

Wasel Exchange opens new branch in Ruwi

Wasel Exchange announced the opening of a new branch in the commercial district of Ruwi. The fully-equipped branch upholds the highest standards of excellence, transparency, and customer service that the company is known for.

Said Ahmed Safar, chairman of the Board of Directors of Wasel Exchange, said, "Wasel Exchange has remained committed to its vision to provide prompt, secure, and highly efficient services to all its customers, whether individuals or institutions. The company also places increased emphasis on devising innovative methods to enhance its customer experience through best-in-class services. Acknowledging the need to stay relevant, dynamic, and agile,



Wasel Exchange will continuously evolve and keep pace with the new developments in exchange operations and financial transfers."

He added, "Wasel Exchange thrives on strong commercial relations with international exchange networks and foreign banks which gives it the capability to deal efficiently in money transfers. Our comprehensive

portfolio of services has been designed to suit the varying needs of Oman's diverse population with an enhanced focus on conceptualising products for the largest segments."

A prominent exchange company licensed by the Central Bank of Oman, Wasel Exchange has a well-knit network of branches spread across the sultanate, and the newly opened Ruwi branch is the company's 21st outlet. The Ruwi branch, in addition to providing currency exchange and money transfers, also offers a host of services that are available in Oman Investment and Finance Company. This includes paying bills for all public utilities such as electricity, water, telecommunications, and Internet, besides PASI payments.

DENSO TIES WITH AL ARABIA GROUP



DENSO Sales Middle East & North Africa FZE partners with Oman's Al Arabiya Group, an Oman-based automotive spare parts company. DENSO's aftermarket mission is to establish a sales and service network where end users can purchase high-quality parts and obtain high-quality service anywhere across the globe.

Israeli firm meddled in more than 30 elections: Reports

Paris, France - An Israeli firm sought to influence more than 30 elections around the world for clients by hacking, sabotage and spreading disinformation, according to an undercover media investigation published on Wednesday.

It adds to a growing body of evidence that shadowy private firms across the world are profiting from invasive hacking tools and the power of social media platforms to manipulate public opinion.

The firm was dubbed 'Team

Jorge' by investigating journalists who posed as potential clients in order to gather information on its methods and capabilities.

Its boss, Tal Hanan, is a former Israeli special forces operative who boasted of being able to control supposedly secure Telegram accounts and thousands of fake social media profiles, as well as planting news stories, the reports say.

The investigation was carried out by a consortium of journalists from 30 outlets, including

The firm was dubbed 'Team Jorge' by investigating journalists who posed as potential clients in order to gather information on its methods and capabilities

the *Guardian* in Britain, *Le Monde* in France, *Der Spiegel* in Germany and *El Pais* in Spain, under the direction of the France-based non-profit Forbidden Stories. "The methods and techniques described by Team Jorge raise new challenges for

big tech platforms," the *Guardian* wrote.

"Evidence of a global private market in disinformation aimed at elections will also ring alarm bells for democracies around the world."

Hanan did not respond to de-

tailed questions, saying only: "I deny any wrongdoing."

Fake profiles

The 50-year-old told three undercover reporters that his services, often called 'black ops' in the industry, were available to intelligence agencies, political campaigns and private companies. "We are now involved in one election in Africa... We have a team in Greece and a team in (the) Emirates... (We have completed) 33 presidential-level campaigns, 27 of which were

successful," the *Guardian* quoted him as saying.

Most of the campaigns - two-thirds - were in Africa, he claimed.

While demonstrating his technology to reporters, he appeared to hack into the Gmail inbox and Telegram account of political operatives in Kenya days before a presidential election there.

Forbidden Stories named the targets as two aides to William Ruto, who ended up winning the August 2022 ballot.

Online public influence campaigns were carried out via a software platform, known as Advanced Impact Media Solutions, that allegedly controlled nearly 40,000 social media profiles across Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, the reports say.

Hanan also claimed that his firm had planted a report on France's biggest television news channel BFM about the impact of sanctions against Russia on the yachting industry in Monaco.

AFP

Ben-Gvir targets Palestinian prisoners

The minister wants to ensure that Palestinian inmates are not treated comfortably

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - Israel's far-right national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, long accused of inflaming Jewish-Arab tensions, has set his sights on one of the conflict's most sensitive issues: Palestinian prisoners.

Since joining Israel's new government led by veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late last year, Ben-Gvir has pledged to ensure Palestinian inmates are not being treated too comfortably.

After a visit to Nafha prison in the Negev desert last month, he told Israeli media he had wanted 'to ensure that the murderers of Jews are not getting better conditions' as a result of the construction of new cells.

Ben-Gvir has also said he would make sure Palestinian prisoners no longer received 'fresh pita (bread)... every morning, as if they were in a restaurant'. "Not on my watch," he vowed, ordering the closure of what he said were bakeries being run at two Israeli jails, speaking after a Palestinian gunman killed seven people outside a synagogue in annexed east Jerusalem last month.

Israel's prison service declined



Men pose with banners showing the faces of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody during a rally in solidarity with them in Gaza City on Wednesday (AFP)

to comment on whether such facilities exist or indeed make daily pita for prisoners.

While there is doubt over whether Ben-Gvir's claims about Palestinian prisoner life match reality - and over his capacity to implement some of his proposals - his incendiary statements have provoked strong reactions. In the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, protesters have waved placards reading: 'Ben-Gvir, go to hell'.

In a letter addressed to Jerusalem-based foreign diplomats seen by AFP, the group warned that moves to curb prisoners' rights 'crossed all red lines' and labelled the issue 'a detonator'. "Every family in the West Bank has at least had one person who was detained, arrested, or brought before a military court system," said Milena Ansari, an advocacy officer at prisoner support group Addameer.

Every family in the West Bank has at least had one person who was detained, arrested, or brought before a military court system

MILENA ANSARI

"So it's an issue that deeply hits the core of the Palestinian identity," she told AFP.

Addameer estimates that some 800,000 Palestinians have been through Israeli prisons since the occupation of Palestinian territories following the 1967 Six-Day War.

Ben-Gvir, who heads the Jewish Power party, has been convicted of incitement to racism and supporting a terrorist organ-

isation over his ties to a banned Jewish extremist group. Earlier in his career, he called for Arabs to be expelled from Israel.

He has also called for Palestinians convicted to face the death penalty - a matter that falls outside his portfolio responsibilities. Some 4,700 Palestinian prisoners are currently in Israeli jails including 190 who are under 18, Addameer has reported.

AFP

Shipwreck off Libya: 73 migrants missing

Geneva, Switzerland - Dozens of migrants are believed to have died in a shipwreck off Libya, with only seven survivors found so far, the United Nations said Wednesday.

"At least 73 migrants are reported missing and presumed dead following a tragic shipwreck off the Libyan coast yesterday (Tuesday)," the UN's International Organization for Migration said.

The boat carrying 80 people had departed Qasr Al-Akhyar, some 75km (46 miles) east of the capital, Tripoli, and was heading to Europe.

So far, 11 bodies have been retrieved by the Libyan Red Crescent and the local police, IOM said.

And the UN migration agency said that 'seven survivors who made it back to Libyan shores in extremely dire conditions are currently in the hospital'.

The central Mediterranean remains the world's deadliest migratory sea crossing.

The latest tragedy brings the numbers of deaths there since the beginning of this year alone to 130, IOM said.

According to the agency's Missing Migrants Project, more than 1,450 migrant deaths were recorded on that route in 2022.

And more than 17,000 deaths and disappearances have been recorded there since 2014.

"This situation is intolerable," IOM said.

"Concrete action by states is needed to increase search and rescue capacity."

AFP

Top Armenian diplomat visits Turkey to 'build peace' after quake

Ankara, Turkey - Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan on Wednesday made a rare visit to arch-foe Turkey, underlining a desire to 'build peace' in the wake of a devastating quake that killed nearly 40,000 people.

Last week's 7.8-magnitude tremor has been followed by a revival in talks between Turkey and its historic rivals, including Armenia and Greece.

The Greek foreign minister paid a visit to quake-hit regions last weekend, and Armenia's top diplomat arrived in Ankara on Wednesday.

Turkey and Armenia never established diplomatic relations after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. "I would like to once again reaffirm the readiness and willingness of Armenia to build peace in the region, and especially to fully normalise relations with Turkey, to establish diplomatic relations and fully open the border between Armenia and Turkey," Mirzoyan said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mev-



Turkey's FM Mevlut Cavusoglu (right) and Armenia's FM Ararat Mirzoyan shake hands after a joint press conference in Ankara on Wednesday (AFP)

lut Cavusoglu said Armenia had 'extended a hand of friendship to our people', thanking Yerevan for its humanitarian aid.

It was Mirzoyan's second visit to Turkey since March 2022, when he held talks with Cavusoglu on the sidelines of a diplomatic forum in Antalya.

On Saturday, a border crossing between Armenia and Turkey opened for the first time in 35 years, to allow humanitarian aid

through.

Armenia sent a team of 28 rescuers 'who worked very hard since February 8 in Adiyaman' province in the south, Cavusoglu said, praising them for saving a young girl and a woman.

Turkey-Armenia ties are strained by World War I-era mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, atrocities Yerevan insists amount to a genocide.

AFP

Iran woos Chinese, Russian tourists as Westerners advised to stay away

Tehran, Iran - Western tourists, who flocked to Iran just a few years ago, are being advised by their governments to stay away, forcing the Islamic republic's struggling tourism industry to look elsewhere.

Hoping for better days, tourism professionals are wooing visitors from countries like China and Russia which maintain good ties with Iran.

Westerners have long been attracted to Iran's many ancient and Islamic sites, its mountain scenery and its millennia-old culture. European visitors began to return to Iran in 2015, when it emerged from decades of isolation after signing a landmark nuclear deal with major powers led by the United States.

In 2019, tourist arrivals hit eight million, as holidaymakers thronged sites such as Isfahan, Persepolis and Shiraz, the jewels of ancient Persia.

The rapid growth of the industry raised hopes that arrivals could reach 20mn a year by



A craftswoman takes part in the 16th International Exhibition of Tourism and Related Industries in Tehran on February 7 (AFP)

2025, but they were quickly dashed by a series of setbacks.

"The backsliding started after the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018' and began reimposing crippling economic sanctions, said Farzaneh Mohammadi of state-owned Iran Railways.

In 2019, anti-government demonstrations swept the country. The following year, Iranian air defences downed a Ukrainian

airliner shortly after takeoff from Tehran after mistaking it for a US cruise missile, dealing a heavy blow to confidence.

"Efforts were then launched to restore the situation, but recent events have dealt a fatal blow to tourism," Mohammadi said.

He was referring to the wave of protests that spread across the country after the death in custody last September of Mahsa Amini, 22, an Iranian Kurd ar-

rested for an alleged breach of Iran's dress code for women.

'Iranophobia'

Coverage in foreign media of the demonstrations - which Iranian authorities have generally labelled 'riots' - helped 'create an atmosphere of Iranophobia', deputy tourism minister Maryam Jalali told AFP.

"When the foreign media keep repeating that there is unrest in the country, it discourages travellers," said Amir-Hossein Rahimi, chairman of top private tour operator Alaedin Travel.

Rahimi hopes discussions to revive the 2015 nuclear deal can be relaunched soon, which would help create a more 'favourable environment'.

In the biggest blow to tourism, several European governments have issued travel advisories warning their nationals to stay away from Iran for fear of arrest during the government's crackdown on the protests.

AFP

UN appeals for \$5.6bn as aid to Ukraine

Geneva, Switzerland - The United Nations said on Wednesday that US\$5.6bn was needed this year to provide humanitarian aid in Ukraine and to the millions who have fled the war-ravaged country.

Nearly a year after Moscow launched its full-scale invasion, the need for aid was ‘enormous’, with some 21.8mn Ukrainians requiring assistance, it said.

“The war continues to cause death, destruction and displacement daily, and on a staggering scale,” said UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths.

More than 7,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine in the past year, and around 12,000 injured, according to UN estimates, which were ‘almost certainly low’, he said launching the appeal in Geneva. “The suffering of the Ukrainian people is far from over. They continue to need international support.”

The needs are so great that aid organisations cannot reach everyone, but the UN said the requested US\$5.6bn would allow it to reach the 15.3mn people in most dire need this year.

‘Massive’ displacement
A full US\$1.7bn of that amount was needed for assistance to the



Residents receive food ration boxes from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and distributed by local volunteers in Chasiv Yar on Wednesday (AFP)

more than four million Ukrainian refugees hosted in 10 eastern European countries.

Most of that would go to Poland, which is hosting more than 1.5mn Ukrainian refugees, and Moldova, the main transit

country for Ukrainians making their way further into Europe.

Women and children account for around 86 per cent of the overall refugee population, according to the UN.

There are nearly six million

people displaced inside Ukraine in addition to the some 4.8mn registered refugees, UN refugee chief Filippo Grandi said, adding that there were also many who had not registered.

The Ukraine ‘displacement

crises remains the largest in the world’, he told reporters.

“The scale of displacement continues to be quite massive.”

Grandi hailed that Europe had proven ‘capable of bold, collective action to help refugees’,

stressing though that ‘continued international support and solidarity is needed, until refugees are able to return to their homes in safety and dignity, which must also remain a priority’.

Since the war began, humanitarian organisations in Ukraine have been working to reach people across the country, with nearly 16mn receiving aid and protection services in 2022, in-

spent savings’, pointing to soaring unemployment, skyrocketing inflation and inadequate social assistance.

And while food and other necessary items were still widely available in most areas under the control of the Ukrainian government, it cautioned that such items were ‘difficult for many people to afford without cash, voucher, or livelihood assistance’.

And they ‘are much more difficult to obtain in areas experiencing constant bombardment’, it said, highlighting the ‘systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure throughout the war’.

Grandi called on the international community not to become accustomed to the destruction seen on a daily basis in Ukraine.

“It is quite appalling what the Russian invasion is doing to the country,” he told reporters.

In 2022, the UN humanitarian agencies received 80 per cent of the US\$4.3bn they had sought for their operations to address the crisis inside Ukraine, while they received just over 70 per cent of the nearly US\$1.8bn requested for the refugees.

“We were relatively well funded last year,” Grandi said.

“We count on that generosity to last.”
AFP

The suffering of Ukrainian people is far from over. They continue to need global support
MARTIN GRIFFITHS

cluding in areas outside of the Ukrainian government’s control.

‘Appalling’

Inside Ukraine, ‘the war has profoundly affected access to livelihoods and disrupted market stability particularly in southern and eastern oblasts, further aggravating humanitarian suffering’, the appeal said.

It warned that ‘a majority of Ukrainians have reportedly reduced food consumption and



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attending a banquet with his daughter is presumed to be Ju Ae to mark the 75th anniversary of the Korean People's Army (KPA), in North Korea on February 7 (AFP)

North Korea unveils stamps featuring Kim Jong Un’s daughter

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea has unveiled new postage stamps featuring leader Kim Jong Un’s daughter, in what experts described as another sign of her rise as heir apparent of the nuclear-armed nation.

North Korean state media never mentioned Kim’s children for years. But in November, at the launch of the country’s most powerful ballistic missile, Kim was pictured with his daughter in tow. There have since been several appearances by the daughter, who has never been named by Pyongyang. South Korea’s spy agency believes she is Kim’s second child, called Ju Ae.

The state-run Korea Stamp

Corporation unveiled a new series of stamps on Tuesday commemorating the November 18 missile launch - five of them featuring Kim and his daughter.

The corporation described the unnamed girl as Kim’s ‘beloved daughter’ in captions describing the stamps on its website. The series will be released on Friday.

Some experts say the daughter’s appearances indicate that she is being groomed as the next leader, and that the stamps further cement her place in the cult of personality surrounding the ruling Kim family.

The stamps ‘look like the official start of Kim Ju Ae’s life as her father’s successor’, An Chan-il,

who runs the World Institute for North Korea Studies, told AFP.

But others said it was still too early to say for sure, given that Kim is still in his 30s and the daughter’s name has never been mentioned officially. “Throughout North Korean history, whenever it officially named the country’s heir apparent, they made sure people knew the name of the person,” Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP.

“It’s still very possible that Ju Ae is just being used for (propaganda)... while Kim’s eldest son is being groomed as a successor behind closed doors.”
AFP

Police identify body parts found in Paris park

Paris, France - Police have identified a dismembered body found in a popular Paris park this week as belonging to a woman recently reported missing, prosecutors said on Wednesday.

Using the victim’s fingerprints, investigators in the French capital found that the remains belong to ‘a 46-year-old woman whose husband reported her missing on February 6’.

The pair lived in the Seine-Saint-Denis department northeast of Paris, prosecutors said.

Police investigating the disappearance had not turned up any leads until now. Park workers found the lower torso of a woman in a plastic bag hidden under leaves on Monday afternoon.

A police source said it was still clothed in blue jeans with a floral pattern.

Further remains, including the head, were found during a thorough search of the park by police on Tuesday morning.

AFP

EU chief hails Ukraine’s ‘tangible progress’ on membership bid

Strasbourg, France - European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen hailed on Wednesday what she said was Ukraine’s ‘tangible progress’ towards securing membership talks with the bloc, despite Russia’s brutal invasion.

Kyiv wants to join the 27-nation union as soon as possible and has called for formal accession talks to begin as early as this year, much faster than any recent candidate has managed.

There is scepticism in several EU capitals that this will be possible, amid demands that Ukraine first pass anti-corruption reforms and clean up its political and economic life.

But Ukraine’s struggle has also proved an inspiration to von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, as she told MEPs at a debate to mark the war’s one-year anniversary.

Addressing the European Parliament in Strasbourg, von der Leyen said she had heard heartening news from President Volodymyr Zelensky in Brussels last week and earlier on a visit with her commission to Kyiv.

“You’ve heard it from President Zelensky in this very hemisphere. I’ve seen it with my college in Kyiv. I know it from my colleagues at the commission, they confirm it every single day,” she said.

“Ukrainians are making tangi-



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France, on Wednesday (AFP)

ble progress despite the war, despite fighting the aggressor,” she said, to applause.

“They know that the accession to our union is a merit-based process. They have passed legislative reforms that others thought would take years.

“They are making this progress because they are striving for Europe with all their heart and soul.”

For a new state to join the European Union typically takes several years, often more than a decade, of negotiation and the

bids of several countries in the western Balkans are already long-delayed.

But Kyiv and its supporters think that fast-tracking its membership would be a sign of strength to President Vladimir Putin’s Moscow regime, and a tribute to Ukraine’s defenders.

Behind the scenes diplomats from some member states are playing down Ukraine’s hopes in a bid to manage expectations, but some MEPs backed von der Leyen’s optimism.

AFP

NATO debates raising defence spending target

Brussels, Belgium - NATO members relaunched debate on Wednesday on the thorny issue of ramping up national defence spending targets as Russia’s war on Ukraine has upended security.

Moscow’s nearly year-long all-out invasion of its neighbour has seen a string of European allies commit to spending billions more on their armed forces.

Some at the US-led Western military alliance are now pushing to enshrine the increases by using an upcoming summit in Vilnius in July to raise NATO’s current target of two per cent of GDP.

Most NATO members appear

to agree that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s aggression means that two per cent should become a ‘floor, not a ceiling’ for national spending.

“I believe that simply wanting to approach the two per cent target will not be enough. It must be the basis for everything else,” German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius told a meeting of NATO counterparts in Brussels on Wednesday.

But some nations are reluctant to make the target too ambitious or the commitment too concrete.

“The two per cent is okay, but we must also guarantee that we

have some flexibility because the countries are different,” said Luxembourg’s Defence Minister Francois Bausch.

I believe that simply wanting to approach the two per cent target will not be enough. It must be the basis for everything else
BORIS PISTORIUS

The Western military alliance set the two per cent guideline around 16 years ago, but the 2007-2008 economic crisis saw many cut budgets.

Russia’s annexation of

Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula in 2014 saw allies promise to halt years of decline and overall, NATO spending has increased.

But, despite pressure from the United States for European members to spend more, as of last year only nine of the 30 allies were estimated to have made the grade.

A senior US official said the alliance was split into several camps. At one end were the ‘increasers’, such as the Baltic states and Poland, closer in proximity to Russia and pushing for a more ambitious level such as 2.5 per cent.

At the other were the ‘deniers’, such as Canada, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain, which argue they are too small or that contributions such as overseas operations should be taken into account.

The official said the United States did not have a specific new figure in mind.

AFP



German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (right) speaks with French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu in Brussels on Wednesday (AFP)

Scotland's leader announces resignation

Sturgeon made the announcement in a shock move jolting UK politics on both sides of the border

Edinburgh, UK - Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced her resignation on Wednesday after more than eight years leading its devolved government, in a shock move jolting UK politics on both sides of the border.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) leader said in 'my head and in my heart' she knew the time was right to quit, after approaching a decade in power pushing for Scottish independence. The 52-year-old confirmed she would remain first minister until the SNP elects a new leader, and also stay on as a member of the Scottish Parliament until at least the next election, due in 2026. She departs after facing mounting pressure over her tactics for independence and over transgender rights.

But in a hastily arranged news conference, Sturgeon insisted that her decision to step down was 'not a reaction to short-term pressures' and 'comes from a deeper and longer-term assessment'. "I know it may seem sudden, but I have been wrestling with it - albeit with oscillating levels of intensity - for some weeks," she said. "I am a human being as well as a politician," she added.

"Giving absolutely everything of yourself to this job is the only way to do it. The country de-

I am a human being and a politician. Giving absolutely everything of yourself to this job is the only way to do it. The country deserves nothing less

NICOLA STURGEON

serves nothing less. But in truth that can only be done by anyone for so long."

'Formidable'

Political allies and opponents across the UK paid tribute, with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak praising her 'long-standing service' and wishing Sturgeon 'all the best for her next steps'.

The UK government's secretary of state for Scotland, Alister Jack, called her 'a formidable politician', while also urging her eventual successor at the SNP to 'drop its divisive obsession with independence'.

Northern Ireland's first minister-elect Michelle O'Neill, vice president of the pro-Irish party Sinn Fein, also lauded her 'friend', adding that Sturgeon 'leaves a



Scotland's First Minister, and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Nicola Sturgeon, speaks during a press conference at Bute House in Edinburgh where she announced she will stand down as First Minister, in Edinburgh on Wednesday (AFP)

legacy for which anyone in politics or public life would be rightly proud'.

Sturgeon, who became the first woman to lead Scotland when she took power in 2014, vowed to continue pushing for Scottish independence while defending her record on the touch-

stone issue.

"I firmly believe that my successor, whoever he or she may be, will lead Scotland to independence and I'll be there cheering him or her on every single step of the way," she said.

Sturgeon has overseen unprecedented electoral success for

the SNP as she pushed for another referendum. She took over in the aftermath of the last vote, which saw Scots reject breaking away from the rest of the UK by more than 10 percentage points, and has been doggedly pushing for another vote.

But she has been recently

stymied by the UK government, which must approve the holding of another referendum.

It insists that the September 2014 vote was a once-in-a-generation event and has refused to allow another, despite Scotland voting against Brexit in 2016.

In 2021, the SNP won a fourth

consecutive term in power in Edinburgh on a platform of holding a new independence referendum after Brexit, recording the largest share of the popular vote.

But it fell one short of an outright majority, and allied with the Greens to stay in power.

Scotland's parliament and its ruling executive were formed in 1999 under devolution reforms created by the Labour government in London at the time.

But since 2021, the push for independence has stalled, with a flurry of recent opinion polls showing declining support in Scotland for breaking away.

Some critics, even within the SNP, have blamed Sturgeon for failing to deliver a winning strategy on the issue after the Supreme Court in November sided with the UK government in blocking a fresh vote.

She has also faced a backlash over her support for transgender rights, after becoming embroiled in a row over whether transgender women can be housed in all-female prisons.

Despite that, as recently as last month she insisted she would remain first minister, telling the BBC she was 'nowhere near' ready to quit after Jacinda Ardern's shock departure as New Zealand prime minister.

AFP

Italy: Ex-PM acquitted in bunga bunga bribery trial

Milan, Italy - An Italian court on Wednesday acquitted billionaire former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi of bribing witnesses to lie about his notorious 'bunga bunga' parties, bringing closure to a years-long sex scandal.

The media mogul, 86, stood accused of paying young starlets and others for 'silence and lies' about his notoriously hedonistic soirées, which he has always insisted were elegant dinners.

Berlusconi, whose Forza Italia party is part of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's governing coalition, has long been dogged by legal battles, most of which he has won.

The senator, who did not attend Wednesday's hearing in Milan, had already been acquitted in two other related cases of alleged bribery, in Siena in 2021 and Rome in 2022.

His lawyer Federico Cecconi said he was 'enormously pleased', although prosecutors could still appeal.

A guilty verdict would have been embarrassing for the government, and Berlusconi's political allies were quick to congratulate him.



Silvio Berlusconi (AFP)

Meloni said the decision 'puts an end to a long judicial affair that also had important repercussions on Italian political and institutional life'.

The verdict is the culmination of a legal battle which began in 2010 when Berlusconi - then prime minister - was accused of abusing his power to protect a young Moroccan nightclub dancer, Karima El-Mahroug.

Known by her stage name 'Ruby the Heart Stealer', she had been detained by police for theft, but was released after Berlusconi claimed she was the niece of then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Berlusconi was charged with paying for sex with Ruby in 2010 when she was just 17.

Hush money

He was initially found guilty, but acquitted in 2014 after an appeals court found there was no proof he knew El-Mahroug was a minor.

Judges believed however that numerous people had lied during the trial, including El-Mahroug, who was caught on tape bragging about sex with Berlusconi.

She described orgiastic scenes at his parties, before later saying she made it all up.

Prosecutors launched an investigation that led to the Milan trial, which opened in 2017. Berlusconi, who was prime minister three times between 1994 and 2011, was accused of doling out millions of euros in hush money in the form of houses, cars and monthly payouts.

However, his defence lawyers say the money was compensation for reputational damage for those involved in the case, and insist he was being tried "for the crime of generosity".

AFP

Panama bus crash: At least 33 people dead

Panama City, Panama - At least 33 people died on Wednesday when a bus transporting migrants bound for the US crashed with a minibus in Panama, an official in the Central American country said.

Updating the death toll from 15, Panama's national director of migration Samira Gozaine told the Telemetro broadcaster that 'for now, we have information of 33 people dead'.

President Laurentino Cortizo earlier announced that 15 people had lost their lives in the early-morning crash in Gualaca, Chiriqui.

The bus had 66 occupants including the driver and an assistant when it crashed some 400km (250 miles) west of the capital Panama City, police transit operations commissioner Emiliano Otero told journalists. Authorities have yet to report the nationalities of the victims.

AFP

Income tax raids at BBC India offices enter second day

New Delhi, India - Indian tax department raids at BBC offices entered a second day on Wednesday, journalists at the broadcaster told AFP, in an action rights groups linked to critical coverage of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Press freedom in the world's biggest democracy has suffered during Modi's tenure, rights activists say.

The government has denied the raids were politically motivated but a spokesman for his ruling party accused the British outlet of engaging in 'anti-India propaganda' after the raids began.

The search comes weeks after the BBC aired a documentary on his actions during sectarian riots in 2002 that left at least 1,000 people dead, mostly minority Muslims.

Officers entered the New Delhi and Mumbai offices of the British media outlet on Tuesday morning, confiscating phones and accessing computer terminals. Authorities were questioning individual staff members on Wednesday after allowing edito-



Indo-Tibetan Border Police stand guard outside the office building where Indian tax authorities raided BBC's office in New Delhi on Wednesday (AFP)

rial staff to leave the previous evening.

"They are questioning the administrative managers after scanning all the digital devices," a journalist at the broadcaster told AFP, requesting anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the media. The BBC asked staff to work from home and only key persons were allowed to return to the office, which has been sealed to unauthorised visitors since Tuesday.

In a brief statement on Tuesday, the broadcaster said it was

'fully cooperating' with authorities. "We hope to have this situation resolved as soon as possible," it added.

The Income Tax Department said the broadcaster was in 'deliberate non-compliance' with its regulations, according to Indian media reports quoting unnamed government sources.

But the Committee to Protect Journalists said the timing of the raid just weeks after the documentary aired 'smacked of intimidation'.

AFP

Survivors plucked from rooftops as New Zealand cyclone kills four

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - Military helicopters winched stranded storm survivors to safety in New Zealand on Wednesday, after Cyclone Gabrielle killed four people and displaced 10,500 more.

With the storm now fading into the South Pacific, rescue teams are finally reaching regions cut off by days of torrential rain and gale-force winds.

The New Zealand military deployed three NH90 helicopters on reconnaissance and rescue flights to the hard-hit Hawke's Bay area, finding families, pets and workmates clustered on sodden zinc rooftops - surrounded by a sea of murky, debris-filled floodwater.

"In some cases, floodwaters

were up to the second storey of homes where people were being rescued," a military spokesperson said.

The disaster has severed roads, collapsed houses and cut power across a swathe of New Zealand's North Island, home to more than three-quarters of the country's five million residents.

The human toll continues to rise. Police said the body of a child was found in a town on the remote east coast, with the youngster 'believed to have been caught in rising floodwater'.

Three other bodies have also been recovered, including a woman killed when her house was crushed by a landslide and a victim believed to be a volunteer firefighter trapped by a collaps-



People wading through flood waters in the city of Napier, situated on the North Island's east coast on Wednesday (AFP)

ing home. "The devastation is widespread and has taken a toll beyond property and livelihoods

to people," New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said.

"There have been four con-

firmed fatalities and the grief must be unimaginable."

With the cellphone network

disrupted, police have received over 1,400 reports of people who are still 'uncontactable'.

"We expect the vast majority of these people will be accounted for," Hipkins said, "but there are several people missing for whom police hold grave concerns."

At an evacuation centre in Whangarei in the far north, Margaret, 66 - who asked for her surname not to be published - said she fled her property when floodwater poured in and the power went out.

Her daughter, who lives 600km (373 miles) away in Napier on the east coast, was also forced out of her home when a landslide hit the area.

"She'd been calling me earlier, checking I was okay and then

she's had this happen; it's unbelievable, really," she told AFP.

"She's young, so it's a big setback for her and her husband. I'll be ok, I've got people up here I can stay with and things will dry out eventually."

Emergency minister Kieran McNulty indicated that around 10,500 people had been displaced. Officials estimate 160,000 households are still without power.

McAnulty hailed the 'phenomenal' efforts of rescue workers and military personnel who plucked 'roughly 300 people from rooftops' in Hawke's Bay - a sprawling expanse of lush farmland, rugged mountains and hard-to-reach towns.

AFP

MISSION ABU DHABI

Al Zubair, Stolz and Konrad head to Yas Marina for concluding two races in the Asian Le Mans Series

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair, Germany's Luca Stolz and Austrian Martin Konrad head to the Yas Marina circuit in Abu Dhabi for the concluding two rounds of the compact 2023 Asian Le Mans Series this weekend.

Held over two back-to-back race meetings and two sets of four-hour endurance races at the Dubai Autodrome and Yas Marina, the series attracted a record 48 entries across three classes.

Al Zubair, Stolz and Konrad compete in the Al Manar Racing by Haupt Racing Team Mercedes AMG GT3 under the Omani national flag in the GT class.

They claimed a podium finish



(From right) Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair with team-mates Germany's Luca Stolz and Austrian Martin Konrad

at the first race in Dubai last Friday but confusion over the time drivers could spend in the cockpit cost them a drive-through penalty in race two and that

dropped them down to an eventual seventh place.

Al Zubair said: "I was not really happy with the result in Dubai to be honest. I think I will

come out stronger in Abu Dhabi than Dubai.

"We did really well at Yas Marina in Gulf 12. I am looking forward to the weekend. Hopefully

we can get a couple of wins."

Back-to-back wins in Dubai for the Walkenhorst Motorsport BMW M4, crewed by Chandler Hull, Nicky Catsburg and Thomas Merrill, mean that they lead the GT class standings heading to Abu Dhabi.

The Getspeed Mercedes AMG GT3 of Raffaele Marciello, Fabian Schiller and Florian Scholze finished second in both races and holds a similar position in the standings. Third and seventh places in Dubai have put the Al-Manar Racing by Haupt Racing Team Mercedes AMG GT3 in third place.

The first of two 90-minute practice sessions get underway at 13.30hrs on Friday and the second is scheduled for 17.15hrs.

GT qualifying takes centre stage from 10.40hrs on Saturday morning (February 18th) and the first of the Abu Dhabi races fires into life at 15.00hrs, starting in broad daylight and finishing in darkness.

Race two and the last round of the 2023 Asian Le Mans Series will be flagged away at the slightly later time of 16.00hrs on Sunday (February 19th).



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas returns a ball to Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori during their match at Rotterdam ATP Open on Tuesday (AFP)

Tsitsipas and Auger-Aliassime ease through in Rotterdam

Rotterdam, Netherlands - Top seed Stefanos Tsitsipas and titleholder Felix Auger-Aliassime easily qualified for the second round of the Rotterdam ATP 500 tournament on Tuesday.

Tsitsipas, who was beaten in the Australian Open final by Novak Djokovic, took just over an hour and a half to beat Finnish player Emil Ruusuvuori 7-5, 6-1.

The Greek, ranked third in the world, next faces the winner of Wednesday's match between Jannik Sinner and France's Benjamin Bonzi.

Tsitsipas admitted he had initially struggled to find his groove.

"I had an opportunity in the last game (when Ruusuvuori led 5-3) to come back. I revived from that, I regenerated some awesome tennis and I recaptured that first set, which was crucial," he said.

"I think from that point onwards it was flawless tennis. I was able to produce some really

good shots."

Auger-Aliassime, the third seed in Rotterdam, had no problem in dispatching the Italian Lorenzo Sonego 6-2, 6-3 as he hit his stride in the tournament where he beat Tsitsipas in the final last year.

In the next round the 22-year-old Canadian must overcome another French player, Gregoire Barrere, who eliminated David Goffin in the first round.

Another contender for the title, Daniil Medvedev, fought back from a set down to beat Alejandro Davidovich of Spain 4-6, 6-2, 6-2.

Poland's Hubert Hurkacz, ranked number 10 in the world, defeated veteran Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut in a three-hour contest.

Alexander Zverev, still on the comeback trail after suffering an injury in the French Open last year, overcame South Korea's Soonwoo Kwon 6-4, 7-6 (7/4).

Vanderlande win Oman Cicket B Division title

Muscat, Oman: Vanderlande defeated Manis CT by 15 runs in their final match to emerge as the champions of Oman Cricket B Division League powered by Al Ansari Group of Companies.

It was Vanderlande's sixth victory in seven games and it confirmed their berth in the A Division next season.

Put in to bat, Vanderlande were all out for 176 in 25.1 overs. Vinayagam Barathwaj (27 of 24; 4x4), Aravindh Ramesh (38 of 22; 7x4) and Aiyappan B (38 of 26; 5x4) were the main run-getters for Vanderlande.



Vanderlande players celebrate their win

Aneek Chakraborty (4/23), Rana Zeeshan (2/34) and Adnan Ul Haq (2/39) were the key wicket takers for Manis.

In response, Manis CT started off well in but despite Adnan Ul Haq's fine innings (71 of 68; 7x4) their chase ended at 161 in 29.3 overs.

Ajazmiya Shaikh (5/20) and Vinayagam B (2/16) were the key wicket-takers for Vanderlande ensuring victory to them.

Vanderlande cricket team manager Ronald Singh said, "It was an exemplary season for us winning six out of seven games.

Football captain from Thai cave rescue dies in UK

London, United Kingdom - One of 12 boys dramatically rescued from a Thai cave in 2018 has died in Britain while studying on a football scholarship, authorities said on Wednesday.

Duangpetch Promthep, 17, who was captain of the football team that was stranded in floodwaters in the northern Thailand cave, died Tuesday at a hospital in England, Brooke House College confirmed.

Ian Smith, the principal at the central English boarding school where he had been studying, said it had been left "devastated" and the college community "deeply saddened and shaken" by his passing.

"We unite in grief with all of Dom's family, friends, former teammates and those involved in all parts of his life, as well as everyone affected in any way by this loss in Thailand," he added.

The cause of death has not been revealed but Leicestershire police said it was "not being treated as suspicious".

Officers were called to the school on Sunday over concerns for the welfare of a pupil, who was subsequently taken to hospital and later died, according to the force.

It did not name Duangpetch, in line with UK policing protocols. A coroner will formally identify him and determine the cause of death.

Thailand's football legend Kiattisuk "Zico" Senamuang, whose charity helped Duangpetch secure a three-year scholarship in Britain, said a teacher had found him unconscious in his room at the school.

"A hospital treated him since Sunday and informed the Thai embassy yesterday that his heartbeat was slow and he had no response," Kiattisuk told an

online press conference, speaking from Vietnam.

"His voice is still in my ears. He had his dreams. He wanted to be a professional footballer, he wanted to be national footballer," added a tearful Kiattisuk.

Duangpetch's mother, Thanaporn Duangthep, and his father briefly joined the press conference, after a Thai reporter in the northern city of Chiang Rai was able to telephone them.



Duangpetch Promthep (C) and 11 other boys were rescued from deep inside a Thai cave after being trapped for more than a fortnight in 2018

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NUMERO UNO

India reach number one in all three cricket formats

New Delhi, India - Rohit Sharma's India have toppled Australia to take top spot in the world Test rankings, making them the number one team in all three international cricket formats as of Wednesday.

The hosts will need to win the second match against Australia starting Friday in New Delhi to stay at the top after they hammered the tourists by an innings and 132 runs in the opener.

India will have history on their side at Delhi's Arun Jaitley Stadium -- previously Feroz Shah Kotla -- where they haven't lost a Test since 1987.

But coach Rahul Dravid said they will not get carried away by records and focus on the coming five days of action.

"We don't look at previous history and go back in time," Dravid told reporters. "We cannot get carried away by that. Australia are an experienced team and have good players who know they want to come back."

India hammered Pat Cummins' Australia inside three days during the first match to move



India toppled Australia from the top of the Test rankings after thrashing them in the first Test in Nagpur (AFP)

closer to securing their berth in June's World Test Championship final at The Oval in London.

They need to win the series 3-1 or 3-0 to make the final.

India became the top-ranked one-day team in January after their 3-0 whitewash of New Zealand, to go with their number one T20 ranking.

Returning batsman Shreyas Iyer has joined the squad for the second Test after a back injury made him miss the opener.

Dravid said a completely fit Iyer will walk into the XI.

"We will assess it and tomorrow as well, when he comes in for a light hit and see how he feels," said Dravid.

"But certainly if he is ready to take the load of a five-day Test match, then without doubt, with his performances in the past, he will walk straight into the side."

Rohit led from the front in Nagpur with his 120 in India's 400, followed by key knocks from left-handed all-rounders Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel.

"Ability to put pressure back on bowlers made the difference and that's what Rohit did," Dravid said.

"That's what Axar and Jadeja did very well during that partnership. It is not the only way you can play but in these conditions, being able to put pressure back is important."

AFP

India 'confident' Mandhana will play against West Indies in T20 World Cup

Cape Town, South Africa - India's star opening batter Smriti Mandhana has recovered from a finger injury and is set to return for their T20 World Cup match against the West Indies, the Indian coaching staff said on Tuesday.

The 26-year-old left-hander, who topped the bidding in the WPL auction on Monday when Royal Chargers Bangalore signed her for 34 million Indian rupees (\$415,000), missed India's opening group match win over Pakistan because of the injured finger.

India's bowling coach Troy Cooley, however, said she had come through Tuesday's training session unscathed and would likely be taking her place in the team at Newlands.

"She has been working very hard and she will be assessed after training," said Cooley.

"She did everything that needed to be done and we are pretty confident she got through the session OK."

The Australian was also unconcerned by the form of bowler Deepti Sharma whose four overs



Smriti Mandhana

against Pakistan on Sunday went for 39 runs.

"She bowled three overs in the powerplay and one at the death with three fielders out," Cooley said. "We know those are high pressure situations but who better to give the ball to than someone like Deepti? She is an exceptional player."

"The girls are very good at reviewing their own performances and they are very open to input."

Aussies look for redemption after Nagpur debacle

New Delhi, India - Pat Cummins' Australia side have returned to the site of their humiliating innings defeat and flown in a back-up spinner in an effort to redeem themselves before this week's second Test against India begins in Delhi.

Left-arm slow bowler Matthew Kuhnemann has joined the match squad alongside left-arm quick Mitchell Starc for what is likely to be another gruelling trial by spin at the Arun Jaitley Stadium beginning Friday.

Opening batsman David Warner and company, who were routed for 91 to lose the first Test by an innings and 132 runs, went back to the dusty Nagpur pitch on Monday to practise.

Australia's fragile batting remains the major concern after



Australia captain Pat Cummins (R) and David Warner take part in a practice session at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi on Wednesday

their second innings collapse in a single session to trail 1-0 in the four-match series.

"We're still very positive among ourselves that we'll be able to bounce back in Delhi and get this series back level," said wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

"I think we're a really strong Test team. We've got all bases covered. Unfortunately it didn't go to plan this first Test."

Australia are expected to make changes with Kuhnemann likely to be part of a three-pronged spin attack alongside Todd Murphy, who bagged seven wickets on his Test debut in Nagpur, and veteran Nathan Lyon on Delhi's spin-friendly wicket.

Kuhnemann, 26, played four one-day internationals last year and replaces Mitchell Swepson,

who was due to return home for the birth of his first child.

Batsman Travis Head is expected to make a return after his surprise omission, while Cummins also left the door open for Starc and all-rounder Cameron Green, who have both been recovering from finger injuries.

"Big key is to use reverse swing when the ball is a bit harder, which is making it more difficult for the batsman," Starc, who could replace Scott Boland, said.

"Obviously spin is going to play a huge part and if we can get the ball off the straighter seam then it is going to play a huge part as well."

India, led by Rohit Sharma, will look to keep up the momentum with a line-up unlikely to change.

AFP

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MOH No. 44/2023

HIGHEST COMAN FACTOR

Kingsley Coman scores the winner as Bayern Munich edge PSG in first leg of Champions League tie

Paris, France - Kingsley Coman scored the only goal of the game as Bayern Munich beat Paris Saint-Germain 1-0 in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie on Tuesday, with substitute Kylian Mbappe denied a late equaliser by a marginal off-side call.

The unmarked Coman swept in an Alphonso Davies cross eight minutes into the second half at the Parc des Princes, just as Mbappe was preparing to enter the fray on his return from injury after PSG had appeared devoid of ideas without their top scorer.

Mbappe, and the entire stadium, thought he had equalised with eight minutes remaining when he turned in a Nuno Mendes cutback, but the goal was ruled out because the Portuguese full-back was just ahead of the last defender at the start of the move.

Bayern finished the game with 10 men after Benjamin Pavard was sent off, but it was a frustrating ending for PSG.

The French giants looked much better in the latter stages with Mbappe on the field but also needed fine saves by Gianluigi Donnarumma to prevent a bigger deficit. PSG must hope they can turn the tie around in the second leg in Munich on March 8.

"We are at a disadvantage but we saw that we were capable of causing them problems and now we just need to make sure all our players are in good health and we will go there to try to qualify," Mbappe, who had another goal ruled out for a clear offside, said.

Coman, who started his ca-



Bayern Munich's French forward Kingsley Coman looks almost apologetic after scoring against his former club Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday (AFP)

reer in Paris, did not celebrate his goal but it was a case of history repeating itself - he had been the matchwinner when Bayern beat the Qatar-owned club in the 2020 final in Lisbon to become European champions for the sixth time. "It was a bit strange. I grew up at this club, in this city, I was born here, so it was difficult to celebrate but at the end we are really pleased with the victory," Coman said.

Mbappe's fitness had dominated the build-up to the game, with the France superstar initially ruled out because of a thigh injury before making a faster-than-expected return to training and

trolled the game and restricted PSG to just one attempt in the first half. Yet the Bundesliga leaders, still without Sadio Mane as he recovers from injury, did little to trouble Donnarumma apart from a Joshua Kimmich shot that was easily saved.

Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann took off Joao Cancelo at half-time and replaced him with Canadian international Davies, a change that saw Coman move from the left flank to the right.

PSG also made a change, replacing Achraf Hakimi with France centre-back Presnel Kimpembe, but the biggest cheer of the night had been reserved for

It was a bit strange. I grew up at this club, in this city, I was born here, so it was difficult to celebrate but at the end we are really pleased with the victory

KINGSLEY COMAN



being named in the squad.

He was named among the substitutes, while Warren Zaire-Emery, at 16 years and 343 days old, became the youngest player ever to start a Champions League knockout game. But Bayern had little to be afraid of in the first half as Mbappe - scorer of seven goals in six games in the group stage - watched on, with Lionel Messi and Neymar badly missing his presence.

Big guns struggle

Instead Bayern, playing with a three-man central defence, con-

Mbappe when he came out to warm up during the break.

The 24-year-old was preparing to come on when Bayern opened the scoring as Davies crossed from the left to the far post where the unmarked Coman finished. Mbappe promptly replaced Carlos Soler but the French champions needed Donnarumma to keep them in the game, and perhaps the tie, as he produced a fingertip save to touch an Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting effort onto the woodwork.

AFP

Clash of Manchester United and Barca underlines soaring revivals

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona host Manchester United Thursday in a match-up which has twice graced the Champions League final but this week has the relative ignominy of taking place in the Europa League play-off round.

The Catalans crashed out of Europe's premier competition at the first hurdle, while Manchester United finished runners up in their Europa League group, leading their paths to cross.

Despite the tie's diminished stature, both fallen giants are on the rise and among the teams in the best form across the continent. Barcelona and Manchester United are both building under exciting coaches in Erik ten Hag and Xavi Hernandez and aiming to return to Europe's elite immnently.

The teams last met in 2019 when United's harsh decline in the barren decade after Sir Alex Ferguson's reign was in full swing and Barcelona's deep slide was about to begin.

Five-time Champions League winners Barca won the quarter-final clash 4-0 on aggregate, but their only player from their starting line-ups then likely to face United at Camp Nou is goal-



Barcelona players at a training session on the eve of their UEFA Europa League play-off match against Manchester United (AFP)

Barca and Man Utd are building under exciting coaches in Erik ten Hag and Xavi Hernandez

keeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Barcelona have gone through a profound squad renewal since - with their spending last summer increasing the criticism they received after dropping into the Europa League.

In Robert Lewandowski the Catalans signed a lethal striker, while Jules Kounde and Andreas Christensen have established themselves as key elements of Europe's best defence.

Barcelona have conceded just seven goals in La Liga this season, keeping 16 clean sheets from 21 matches, and Xavi's side are unbeaten in 16 games.

The coach, who starred for Barcelona in midfield in their 2009 and 2011 Champions League final victories over Ferguson's Red Devils, is returning his side to their former glory.

Diaz fires AC Milan to Champions League win over Tottenham

Milan, Italy - Brahim Diaz shot AC Milan to a 1-0 win over Tottenham Hotspur on Tuesday which gave the seven-time European kings control of their Champions League last-16 tie.

Diaz bundled in the only goal of the game in the seventh minute at a packed San Siro to give Milan the advantage before next month's second leg in London.

The Spaniard's strike was the first and one of very few real chances of a scrappy game which highlighted the far from sparkling form of both teams heading into match.

"I's really happy for the team, because we did great work all week," Diaz told Mediaset.

"We've been through some difficult situations but now we need to look forward... now we need to think about Serie A and then we can think about the game in London."

Milan came into their first knockout in the competition since 2014 with their season in the balance after a horrible run of results in the past month which left their Serie A title defence in



AC Milan's Brahim Diaz (C) celebrates with team-mate Theo Hernandez after scoring against Tottenham in their UEFA Champions League round of 16, first-leg match at the San Siro stadium in Milan on Tuesday (AFP)

tatters.

But the Italians have a decent chance of reaching the quarter-finals for the first time since 2012 after restricting injury-hit Spurs to very little on Antonio Conte's return to Milan.

Conte, in the Spurs dugout

two weeks after undergoing gall-bladder surgery, handed the midfield reins to youngsters Oliver Skipp and Pape Matar Sarr after losing Rodrigo Bentancur and Yves Bissouma to injury last week.

And his team failed to supply

their record scorer Harry Kane with any service, Milan having great chances in quick succession late in the second half to extend their aggregate lead which were fluffed by Charles De Ketele and Malick Thiaw.

AFP



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14

COOK-UP

When you want to enjoy fish that tastes like meat, go for shark!



15

IN TOWN

Opening of Kullon Mena in Muttrah fish market and Iran National Day



16

ENTERTAINMENT

A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood



The chairman of Muscat Municipality inaugurated a unique art exhibition – Kullon Mena (Each of us) – on the mezzanine floor of Muttrah fish market on February 14. The exhibition, curated by Rasmia al Zadjali, will be on till March 2

Hubert Vaz

The sight and stench of fish being sold and bought on the ground floor of the Muttrah fish market may not appeal to some, though scores of foreign tourists can be seen flitting in and out all day. But, just one level above the buzz of vendors busy with their daily grind, a unique proposition has just taken shape...an art exhibition that aims to simulate the tragedy of wars and its devastating effects.



'Kullon Mena', organised by the Rasma Foundation, was inaugurated by H E Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, chairman of Muscat Municipality, at this unique location for the very first time. The location was chosen to show the distinctive geographical location of the wilayat of Muttrah and to highlight the cultural and artistic activities that contribute to supporting tourism in Muscat Governorate.

Rasmia Noor Mohammed al Zadjali, curator of the exhibition which features the works of three artists – Safaa Erruas, Elmira Abolhasani and Riham Noor al Zadjali – said, "The choice of Muttrah was made due to its strategic location, the fragrance of its ancient past and the reflection of its historical and artistic culture, in addition to the presence of its distinctive traditional markets that attract visitors from all over the world, which enhances the objectives of the exhibition in the heart of Muscat.

Asked why the fish market, above all, since it does not have an art gallery as such, Rasmia asserted, "The location does not have a dedicated space, we had to convert what was basically an abandoned construction site for the purpose of the exhibition. We were looking to create a striking contrast between the human condition we aimed to depict in the exhibition and the peaceful, serene surroundings. And the Muttrah Fish Market provided the ideal setting for this dichotomy that is part of the message behind Kullon Mena."

Tourists were seen frequenting the market on the first day of the exhibition in large numbers, and most were interested in capturing the essence of the local fish vendors in their cameras rather than buying anything. However, since there wasn't any indication or board on the ground floor indicating something interesting for tourists on the mezzanine floor, many tourists missed this unique offering.

Rasmia, who has been exposed to diverse cultural influences - having lived in Muscat, Lugano (Switzerland) and London (UK) - has developed a strong ability to transform a common space into an exceptional experience through art. And the cur-

rent exhibition lodged in an unkempt premise facing the Arabian Sea, demonstrates just that.

About the exhibition, she states, that the original impetus behind Kullon Mena was sparked by the hostility of the way of the world and the collective protracted cruelty inflicted on certain groups of people.

Having witnessed first hand the seasons of affliction, a core group of artists came together seeking to represent the scares and scars of war and displacement. All three artists live with and sense the devastating toll of human suffering through their art. (More pics on page 15)



The Muttrah Fish Market provided the ideal setting for this dichotomy that is part of the message behind Kullon Mena

RASMIA NOOR MOHAMMED AL ZADJALI

THE THREE ARTISTS



SAFAA ERRUAS (Morocco)
Safaa is a multidisciplinary abstract artist whose body of work focuses on the complexity of and the permanent tension between sensation, perception and experience. Her artworks are dictated by the colour white with a contrast between soft materials and sharp objects.



ELMIRA ABOLHASANI (Iran)
Elmira is a visual artist whose artistic journey is an attempt at understanding the underlying structures of human networks and identities as well as each person's role and position as an individual node in this complex web. She chooses glass as her primary tool, to understand herself.



RIHAM AL ZADJALI (Oman)
Riham is an experimental artist who does painting, photography, and digital art. She explores the use of space, methods and aptitudes that allow artists to freely communicate ideas, stories and messages. She has been featured in Kathleen Nejad's book '100 Successful Omani Women'.

cook-up

SOMETHING FISHY

Shark therapy

When you want to enjoy fish that tastes better than meat, go for shark. Available in all Oman markets, shark provides robust protein and is a delicacy for some



Shark Steak with Ginger Sauce

- Ingredients**
- 4 shark steaks with the skin on
 - 4tbsp extra virgin olive oil
 - Paprika, sea salt & ground black pepper

Method

Dredge steaks in olive oil. Lightly sprinkle seasonings on both sides of fish, then place it tightly in plastic wrap so that the spices will impregnate the fish.

Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes (up to 2 hours). Remove from the refrigerator 15 minutes prior to cooking. Spray the steaks with cooking oil

Pan fry over a medium heat about 5-6 minutes a side, until fish is flaky but not overdone. Remove from pan and keep warm.

- For the Ginger Sauce**
- ½ cup unsalted fish/chicken stock
 - ¼ cup soy sauce
 - 1tbsp orange, finely zested
 - 1 medium garlic clove - crushed
 - 2tsp ginger paste
 - ½tsp salt
 - 1tbsp brown sugar

Method

Using the same pan that the fish was cooked in, add the above ingredients and simmer, stirring frequently. Reduce until sauce thickens slightly.

Serve the fish on the sauce and garnish with fresh lime wedges and Sriracha, if you like a bit of heat.



Shark Curry

- Ingredients**
- 500g shark - sliced
 - 15 shallots - chopped
 - 5 cloves garlic - chopped
 - 2tsp red chilli powder
 - 3tbsp coriander powder
 - 1tsp turmeric powder
 - 1tsp fennel powder
 - 1tsp cumin powder
 - 2tbsp oil
 - Salt, to taste
 - ½tsp fennel seeds
 - ½tsp mustard seeds
 - ½tsp cumin seeds
 - 1½ cups water
 - ¼ cup tamarind water
 - 1 sprig curry leaves
 - 3 dry red chillies

Method

Marinate fish with a little turmeric and salt and keep aside. Heat oil in a pan and when the oil is hot add fennel seeds, curry leaves, dry red chilli, cumin and mustard seeds and wait till they splutter. Now add chopped shallots and chopped garlic cloves. Saute until onions are transparent and pale.

Mix red chilli powder, coriander powder, cumin powder and fennel powder to the tamarind water and stir well until smooth. Add this to the pan and mix well. Add 1-1/2 cups of water, season with salt and bring the curry to boil.

When the curry starts boiling, cover with lid and simmer curry for 5 to 6 minutes. Now add the shark fish pieces to the curry and stir gently. Cook for another 5 minutes or until fish pieces are tender and oil floats. Serve hot with steamed rice or rotis.

Shark is the most fleshy fish with just one central bone that can be easily removed



Shark Cutlets

- Ingredients**
- 400g shark fillets
 - 3-4 slices bread
 - 1 cup bread crumbs
 - 1 egg - beaten
 - 2 green chillies - minced
 - ½ cup chopped coriander
 - ½tsp red chilli powder
 - ¼tsp turmeric powder
 - Oil for shallow frying
 - Salt, to taste

Method

Steam the shark fillets in some water, until tender. Cool and shred the flesh. Add the bread slices, chilli powder, turmeric, chillies, coriander, and salt to taste. Mix well, kneading with hand, and blend the bread slices evenly with the mixture. Form neat cutlets and set aside. Now place the beaten egg and bread crumbs in two plates. Dip each cutlet in the egg mixture then roll in bread crumbs and set aside on a plate. Refrigerate all cutlets for at least one hour, so that they firm up.

Heat oil for shallow frying and fry them in batches, till golden brown on both sides. Serve hot with any favourite dip.

take a break

IN TOWN

KULLON MENA - ART EXHIBITION



A unique exhibition by three artists was inaugurated by H E Ahmed bin Mohamed al Humaidi, chairman of Muscat Municipality, at the Muttrah fish market on Tuesday. Photos: V K Shafeer

Iran National Day



H E Ali Najafi, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran, hosted a reception to celebrate the 44th National Day of Iran at the Iranian Embassy on Sunday. Photos: V K Shafeer

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Accidents are called accidents for a reason -- they happen through no one person's concerted efforts, they just happen. So if you are involved in a fender bender or any other type of collision (real or metaphorical) today, avoid taking it personally. Things happen, and every time you can let the stress roll off of your back, you grow and learn.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
The art of flirtation takes a lot of time to learn, but you are becoming quite an expert, right now. It's time to stop holding back and start using those killer skills you have learned! If you have someone in your sights, romantically-speaking, today is the day to pull them aside and make that connection. Ask a slightly risqué question or two, and help them see you in a new light.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
You need to know where to go for the information that will help you the most in life. Instead of asking friends for advice on how to fatten up your rapidly-thinning piggy bank, go ask an expert. Friends are who you should talk to about your love life, work hassles and other personal dramas. But when it comes to finances, investments and your savings account, you don't want to mix them.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Get out your finest fine-toothed comb today, because you will need to go over some very finely-printed correspondence one more time. There are an awful lot of small details that could grow into big, embarrassing issues later on down the line if you don't nip them in the bud now. Probably the last thing you want to do is proofread.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Despite the fact that you are feeling better than you have felt in years, right now is not the time to go out and celebrate. You are not overly-impulsive as a rule, but today you should behave even more conservatively than usual. Bide your time and the right opportunity to have a blast will present itself soon enough.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
Today is a great day to try a new food, hobby, sport, or adventure that you have always been just a little to scared to try before. Your fears are starting to vanish and your courage is growing, in part because your mind is hungry for new stimulation -- even if that stimulation is based on fear. You will be totally fiery and full of energy, so put it good use by pushing the envelope.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
If you are stuck in the middle of a dilemma right now, doing something what you think is right (even if you are not totally sure it is right) is better than doing nothing at all. So stop trying to nail down every single detail. You can't eliminate every single potential problem. It's time to start acting!



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Can you have too many friends? The answer, you may be beginning to fear, is yes! There are only so many free hours in your week, and it might be getting tough to prioritize who gets to share them with you. A big party is a great way to spend a little social time with a lot of people at once, so consider throwing together something in order to see the folks you don't get to see too often.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Who you associate with today is very important -- some people will seem to be right on your wavelength, but others may drive you absolutely crazy! As soon as you feel that someone is rubbing you the wrong way, distance yourself from them. You are not in the right frame of mind to deal with feeding people's egos or sacrificing your own desires.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Are you running the risk of getting too big for your britches? Just in case, you should give yourself a reality check today -- before someone else does! Make an effort to get more grounded. Spend time with people who live a different lifestyle. Get a glimpse of what their biggest issues, goals, and concerns are.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
This might seem like a typical day early on, but as each hour goes by, you will start to see more and more mysterious actions and events cropping up. Who are the perpetrators? The fun people! What are they up to? If you look beneath the surface, you will start to see a pattern -- and an agenda. This is something exciting, and you should not ignore it.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
A relationship that you thought was broken beyond all repair still has some life left in it. Today, figure out how you can put it on the road to recovery. There are two people involved in this messy situation, and each of you has your own apologies to make. Be a hero and be the first one to extend an olive branch.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The sinking, approximately 200 miles off Hampton Roads, Virginia, of which steamship on 12 November 1928, with a loss of over 100 lives, particularly of women and children after it was abandoned, had a major impact on the second International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea in 1929?
A. Titanic
B. Vestris
C. Lusitania
D. Reuben James
02. Who in his last two years at ballet school choreographed the pas de deux "La Nuit" (1920), and the following year the duet, "Enigma", for bare feet rather than ballet shoes?
A. Jerome Robbins
B. George Balanchine
C. Gene Kelly
D. Sergei Diaghilev
03. Which of these is a concrete noun?
A. Reversion
B. Fraternity
C. Stew
D. Freedom

Answers: 1.B 2.B 3.C

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY:

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

Y	S	O	C
O	P	H	P
O	O	K	I
R	L	P	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

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

entertainment



MARVEL SUPERHEROES RETURN TO CHINESE CINEMAS

Marvel's superheroes began their return to China's massive movie market after an apparent ban of nearly four years on Tuesday, with fans streaming into cinemas to watch *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. The Disney-owned studio's hugely popular franchises have been absent from Chinese screens since 2019, with no explanation. Marvel blockbusters have raked in billions globally, and their return to one of the world's biggest movie markets means hundreds of millions of dollars in potential earnings for Disney.

'JOKER' SEQUEL UNVEILS FIRST LOOK AT LADY GAGA



Lady Gaga is getting her closeup in *Joker: Folie à deux*, with filmmaker Todd Phillips sharing a first-look of her in character on Instagram. Naturally, it was for Valentine's Day. Gaga is believed to be playing DC mainstay Harley Quinn in the sequel to *Joker*, the 2019 film that grossed US\$1bn and earned star Joaquin Phoenix a best actor Oscar.

BERLIN FILM FEST PROMISES STARRY NIGHTS

The Berlin film festival, Europe's first major cinema showcase of the year, opens today (Feb 16) with a focus on the fight for freedom in Ukraine and Iran and the starriest line-up since the pandemic. The 73rd Berlinale, traditionally the most politically minded of the big three European festivals, coincides with the first anniversary of the start of the Russian invasion. The event will screen nine new movies, primarily documentaries, about Ukrainian life in wartime, including Sean Penn's *Supperpower*, shot by the two-time Oscar winner in Kyiv last February.



GEORGE CLOONEY TO REMAKE 'THE BUREAU'

Hollywood star George Clooney is to direct an English-language remake of the hit French spy series *The Bureau*. The new version of the thriller that originally starred Mathieu Kassovitz will be called *The Department*, and will begin production this year, US station Showtime announced on Monday. It compared it to *Homeland*, another successful spy show that mixed espionage and geopolitics.



CRUISE OUTSHINES OSCARS RIVALS

Tom Cruise lived up to his billing as the 'last true movie star' as nearly 200 of this year's Oscar nominees gathered to celebrate - and size up their competition - at the Academy's annual luncheon on Monday. In a room packed with A-listers such as Steven Spielberg and Cate Blanchett, there was no doubt Cruise remained the biggest draw, with a crowd of wellwishers from Hollywood moguls to Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai lining up to greet him throughout the event. Cruise is nominated this year as a producer of *Top Gun: Maverick*, in which he also starred. The film is considered a growing frontrunner for the best picture Oscar - Hollywood's most prestigious prize. Seen here is actor Austin Butler (left) with Cruise at the luncheon.

RELEASING TODAY

SHE IS LOVE

Coming face-to-face after being estranged for over a decade, divorced couple, Idris and Patricia, opt to revisit the past and traverse that treacherous path together, emerging open to new beginnings.

Genre: **Comedy**
Starring: **Sam Riley, Haley Bennett, Marisa Abela**
Language: **English**

LEGENDARY SONGWRITER BURT BACHARACH DEAD

Legendary American pop composer Burt Bacharach, 94, whose prolific output provided a chart-topping playlist for the 1960s and 70s with hits like *I Say a Little Prayer*, died in Los Angeles, US media said. Bacharach worked with stars such as Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin, Dusty Springfield and Tom Jones and also wrote hits such as *Walk On By* and *Do You Know the Way to San Jose*.

BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: ANT-MAN & THE WASP: QUANTUMANIA
Genre: Action
Starring: Paul Rudd, Evangeline Lilly, Jonathan Majors

WONDERFUL AND DANGEROUS ADVENTURE

Quantumania is a forgettable movie. The third dose of its shrinking superhero series, Marvel Studios tries its best to turn what has thus far been its silliest franchise into a proper MCU blockbuster, complete with high stakes, intense drama, and important lore tied to the overarching Multiverse Saga. The film manages to supersize this adventure while still maintaining the awkward, deadpan humour that makes Paul Rudd's portrayal of Scott Lang so endearing. Yet, in its haste to do so much, some of Quantumania's characters, ideas, and plotlines feel underdeveloped - and that's not the first time it's been said about a recent MCU movie.



The saving grace is Jonathan Majors' show-stopping performance as the chilling new villain Kang. No time is wasted in establishing the drama between the various members of the Pym/Lang family unit, which is good because there's not much of it before they're whisked off

to the wondrous-yet-dangerous Quantum Realm and must sort it all out while in the midst of an action-packed adventure. Scott's relationship with his well-meaning delinquent daughter Cassie is the emotional crux, and while her reason for being mad at dear old dad may not feel warranted at first, Rudd and Kathryn Newton work well together to peel back the layers of abandonment and disappointment until they arrive at Quantumania's most heartfelt moments. That the film sticks the emotional landing is one of its greatest strengths. Nearly the entire story takes place in the Quantum Realm, a bizarre place where beings have broccoli for heads and they use flying mitochondria for transportation. While there's plenty of never-before-seen sci-fi stuff to enjoy, there is seemingly no rhyme or reason behind any of it, so it all feels like computer-generated window dressing. See it, if you are a Marvel-buff.

Rating ★★☆☆☆