

► NEWS BRIEF

HM CONGRATULATES KING SALMAN

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the success of the medical check-ups he underwent. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes of continued health and welfare to King Salman.

RAO COMMANDER RECEIVES PALESTINIAN DELEGATION

Muscat - Maj Gen Mattar Salim al Balushi, Commander of Royal Army of Oman (RAO), received in his office at Al Murtafa'a Garrison on Monday a delegation of the General Military Training Commission of the State of Palestine, headed by Maj Gen Mahmoud F Saleem.

The meeting was attended by Air Commodore Nasser Said al Sa'adi, RAO Assistant Chief of Staff for Training and Joint Drills, and the Ambassador of Palestine to Oman.

HM receives credentials of envoys



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik receives credentials from Thomas Oertle, Ambassador of Switzerland

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received separately at Al Barakah Palace on Monday credentials of several ambassadors of Arab and friendly countries accredited to the sultanate.

His Majesty the Sultan received credentials of the following ambassadors:

Filali Guenni, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Abdelmadjid Teb-

boune of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

Jota Yamamoto, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Emperor Naruhito of Japan, accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

Morgunov Ilya, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation, accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

Muhammad Imran Chaudhry, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Dr Arif Alvi of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

Kiejoo Kim, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea, accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

And Thomas Oertle, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Am-



His Majesty the Sultan receives credentials from Jota Yamamoto, Ambassador of Japan

bassador of President Ignazio Cassis of the Swiss Confederation, accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

During meetings held on the sidelines with His Majesty the Sultan, the ambassadors conveyed greetings and best wishes of their countries' leaders to His Majesty and the Omani people.

They also expressed their great honour and delight in presenting their credentials before

His Majesty the Sultan. They committed to exert sincere efforts to promote relations of their respective countries with Oman in various spheres in a manner that serves the joint interests of the Omani people and their countries' citizens.

His Majesty the Sultan welcomed the ambassadors, expressing his gratitude for their leaders' greetings and best wishes. His Majesty confirmed

that they would receive support from him, the government and the Omani people to facilitate carrying out their duties.

The credentials presentation ceremony was attended by the Minister of Diwan of Royal Court, the Foreign Minister, the Commander of the Royal Guard of Oman, the Head of Royal Protocols, and the Military Aides to His Majesty the Sultan.

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Production of petroleum industries declines

Muscat - Production of Oman's refineries and petroleum industries declined by 25 per cent by the end of March 2022 compared to March 2021, according to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Production of standard grade petrol (M-91) by Omani refineries increased by 27.2 per cent at the end of March 2022 to

2,865,100 barrels, compared to the same period in 2021 when it was 2,252,100 barrels. Sale of M-91 stood at 2,912,300 barrels, while M-91 exports dropped by 0.7 per cent to reach 363,500 barrels.

The production of M-95 fuel stood at 2,855,400 barrels, accounting for a decrease by 34.3 per cent over the same period in 2021 when it stood at 4,347,700

barrels. Sale of M-95 fuel also declined by 12.3 per cent to 2,946,800 barrels. M-95 exports also declined by 18.6 per cent to 834,300 barrels by the end of March 2021.

Gas oil (diesel) output at the end of March 2022 fell by 36.9 per cent to 5,930,900 barrels. Sale of diesel stood at 3,287,200 barrels, constituting a rise of two per cent, while its exports de-

clined by 55.8 per cent to 2,715,300 barrels.

Aviation fuel production fell by six per cent to 1,356,000 barrels compared to 2021 when production was 1,442,900 barrels. Sale of aviation fuel surged by 75.3 per cent to 587,100 barrels, while exports dropped by 17.3 per cent to 773,300 barrels.

ONA

RO357mn budget surplus reported in Q1

Muscat - Oman's general budget registered a surplus of RO357mn in the first quarter of this year, compared to a deficit of RO751mn in the same period of 2021.

The surplus will be used to stimulate the economy, increase spending on priority development projects, and reduce

risks to public debt portfolio.

The monthly bulletin issued by the Ministry of Finance informed that Oman's public revenues increased 66.3 per cent year-on-year to RO3.025bn in the first quarter of 2022. This rise in revenues is mainly due to a more than 70 per cent increase in net oil revenues dur-

ing the first quarter of 2022.

As oil prices remain higher, net oil revenues jumped to RO1.565bn in Q1 2022 against RO919mn in the corresponding period of 2021. The average price at which Oman sold its crude oil surged to US\$78 per barrel in Q1 2022.

See also [Page 04](#)



JUMAN TWO
MARSA DISTRICT



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HM receives credentials of envoys

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Morgunov Ilya, Ambassador of Russia



Kiejoo Kim, Ambassador of South Korea



Filali Guenni, Ambassador of Algeria



Muhammad Imran Chaudhry, Ambassador of Pakistan

Call for urgent revision of minimum wage



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The rise in cost of living and high inflation - close to 3.6 per cent at the end of March - needs immediate intervention and a revision of the minimum wage for citizens in the private sector, a high-ranking official of the General Federation of Oman Workers has said.

The minimum wage for the private sector was set by Ministerial Decision No 222/2013 that came into effect on July 1, 2013.

The call was made by Nabhan al Battashi, chairman of General Federation of Oman Workers, on Monday, when the federation celebrated International Workers' Day under the patronage of H E Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour, in the presence of representatives of private sector institutions and trade unions.

Battashi said, "Our celebration of International Workers' Day is a way of identifying with the struggle of workers, their continuous sacrifices, and the grave challenges and difficult conditions they face."

Elaborating on the difficulties faced by private sector workers due to rising costs, he said, "According to statistics published by the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the average wage of nearly 24 per cent of Omanis insured in the social insurance system is between RO325 to RO400.

"Nearly half of the insured Omanis get less than RO500 as salary, while the average household expenditure has risen to RO757. The situation calls for immediate solutions to improve the social security of citizens in order to ensure a decent life for them and their families."

He added that with the gradual lifting of subsidies on a number of goods and services, and high rate of inflation (according to March 2022 data), there is need to improve the bottom line wages and set up of a national social security protection system.

"We demand the establishment of a national committee that includes all concerned parties to review and amend the minimum wage, in addition to creating a special temporary system to support the wages of low-income workers. We also call on private sector institutions to set a time frame for improving workers' wages and encourage wage-raising initiatives," Battashi said.

According to H E Sheikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Labour, "we are close to reaching a consensus with stakeholders" on amending the minimum wage.

Board of Directors' Report for the three months ended 31 March 2022

Dear Shareholders,
On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to present the Bank's first Quarter financial results for 2022.

Performance Summary

Our first Quarter performance shows a 25.6% increase in net profit to RO4.4 M compared with RO4.3 M for the same period in 2021. This has been driven mainly by lower operating expenses. The economic environment continues to be challenging despite the improvement in oil prices and the outlook for the Omani economy. A number of countries around the world have started to lift Covid-19 restrictions and reopen borders to immunized travelers, but concern surrounding the spread of variants still persists which may impact the outlook of the global recovery. We will continue to monitor the situation throughout 2022.

Net interest income was up 0.8% to RO12.4 M for the period ended 31 March 2022 compared with RO12.3 M for the same period in 2021 despite the challenging environment. Net fee income was RO2.4 M for the period ended 31 March 2022 compared with RO2.5 M for the same period in 2021 due to lower fees in the trade finance business.

Net trading income was down 5.9% to RO11.8 M compared with RO12.7 M for the same period last year, owing largely to lower interest rates and swap volumes.

A net release of RO2.0 M has been reported to the Bank's ECL and other credit impairment charges compared with a net release of RO2.2 M for the same period last year. The Bank released RO1.9 M of Wholesale ECL and RO0.1 M of Retail ECL. The ECL release was driven by an improvement in the macroeconomic environment variables.

Operating expenses reduced by 11.0% to RO12.1 M compared with RO13.6 M for the same period in 2021 primarily due to lower staff cost and the non-repeat of prior year impairment charges.

Loans and advances to customers decreased by 3.1% to RO1,348.8 M compared with RO1,348.7 M as at 31 March 2021.

Customer deposits decreased by 2.1% to RO1,969.5 M compared to the same period last year. Our liquidity remains strong, as evidenced by an Advances to Deposit ratio (ADR) of 98.8% at the end of March 2022.

HSBN's Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) stood at 21.7% as at 31 March 2022 compared with 20.9% as at 31 March 2021.

Delivering the best customer experience

In Wealth and Personal Banking (WPB), the first quarter of 2022 has seen significant business momentum. We launched a new to bank customer acquisition campaign in January 2022 offering all Premier and Advance new to bank clients an upfront cash back reward. The campaign was supported by our Employee Banking Solutions program, where we held around 420 virtual meetings and 20 open days with our top corporate employers in order to gain estate share and grow our business from our top 120 employers.

Our performance on lending continued a positive trend in the first quarter of the year driven by competitive pricing on loans and mortgages, and higher productivity from our sales staff.

Our International Banking Services team enabled more than 731 clients to open banking relationships outside of Oman to fulfill their financial needs in multiple markets.

In the Wholesale business, we participated as a Mandated Lead Arranger (MLA) in the Ministry of Finance's 7 year USD4bn Syndicated Term Loan facility with an initial commitment of USD230m.

We also held sessions for top Government related entities on Sustainable Finance as this topic increasingly becomes a priority for our clients. As a Bank, we prioritise financing and investment that supports the transition to a net zero global economy.

We were voted by our corporate clients as the best bank for trade finance services in the 2022 Euro money trade finance survey. This award demonstrates our strong position and our ability to connect Omani businesses to trading partners around the globe and our commitment to invest in the digitalisation of our products and services.

Investing in our people and the community

We are pleased to have maintained an Omanisation rate of 94% as at 31 March 2022.

During the Quarter, two Omanis were appointed to Senior Management positions, Chief Financial Officer - General Manager and Head of Financial Crime Compliance - Assistant General Manager.

During the quarter, our learning activities focused on delivering programmes that will help our people to create effective development plans, clarify their aspirations and use the opportunities around them to build the skills, experience and attributes necessary to achieve their goals. Another area of focus was the wellbeing and mental health of our people, where we delivered a number of learning sessions and activities to support our employees to make positive choices about their personal and professional priorities. We organized a "Wellness Day" at the bank, where staff had the opportunity to listen to and interact with experts about mental and physical wellbeing.

We are happy to note that 4 of our staff have successfully completed the national leadership programme "Etihad", and 5 more have joined the second batch of the programme during the first quarter of this year.

As part of our Corporate Sustainability program, we signed a two-year agreement with the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) to support its efforts towards the conservation of the Arabian Sea humpback whale. Under the partnership, ESO will carry out two new projects: a Conservation Management Plan that aims to work with local authorities to implement alternative solutions to harmful marine practices that threaten the whales' survival, and a Capacity Building programme that focuses on developing the next generation of marine researchers.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to all our stakeholders and to the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority for their continuous support.

On behalf of the Board of Directors I would like to express my sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for his wise leadership, and we affirm our full support to the Omani government at all times.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles
Chairman

Interim condensed statement of comprehensive income for the three month period ended 31 March 2022 (unaudited)

	Three month period ended 31 March 2022	Three month period ended 31 March 2021
	RO'000	RO'000
Interest income	16,082	15,164
Interest expense	(3,726)	(3,685)
Net interest income	12,356	12,279
Fee income	3,199	3,263
Fee expense	(843)	(518)
Net fee income	2,356	2,465
Net trading income	1,611	1,711
Changes in fair value of financial investments measured at fair value through profit and loss (FV-PL)	-	-
Other operating income - net	228	120
Net operating income before change in expected credit losses and other credit impairment charges	16,551	15,575
Change in expected credit losses and other credit impairment charges	2,033	2,155
Net operating income	18,584	13,730
Employee compensation and benefits	(5,354)	(6,025)
General and administrative expenses	(6,241)	(6,748)
Depreciation and impairment of property, equipment and right-of-use assets	(462)	(527)
Amortisation and impairment of intangible assets	-	-
Total operating expenses	(12,057)	(13,301)
Profit before tax	6,527	3,129
Tax expense	(1,132)	(865)
Profit for the period	5,395	4,264
Other comprehensive income / (loss)		
Items that may be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss		
Debt instruments at fair value through other comprehensive income (FVOCI)		
- Fair value gain / (loss)	196	(800)
- Expected credit losses recognised in income statement	23	(97)
- Income tax	(29)	120
Other comprehensive income / (loss) for the period - net of tax	190	(777)
Total comprehensive income for the period	5,585	3,487
Earnings per share - basic and diluted		
- for the period (RO)	0.003	0.002
- annualised (RO)	0.011	0.009

Interim condensed statement of financial position as at 31 March 2022 (unaudited)

	At 31 March 2022	At 31 March 2021	Audited At 31 December 2021
	RO'000	RO'000	RO'000
Assets			
Cash and balances with central banks	245,334	229,115	252,721
Due from banks	267,178	219,977	213,700
Loans and advances to customers - net	1,304,849	1,345,652	1,347,188
Financial investments	556,784	517,121	448,962
Other assets	41,581	44,347	34,078
Intangible assets	-	-	-
Property and equipment	20,273	19,615	20,342
Deferred tax assets	2,578	4,517	2,256
Total assets	2,438,577	2,430,344	2,349,247
Liabilities and equity			
Liabilities			
Due to banks	70,258	84,538	48,444
Deposits from customers	1,959,520	2,002,074	1,901,094
Current tax liabilities	6,822	5,060	5,339
Other liabilities	61,707	57,699	48,883
Total liabilities	2,098,307	2,149,371	2,003,766
Equity			
Share capital	200,031	200,031	200,031
Legal reserve	47,777	45,844	47,777
FVOCI reserve	1,570	912	1,380
Retained earnings	90,892	84,086	95,299
Total equity	340,270	330,973	345,487
Total liabilities and equity	2,438,577	2,430,344	2,349,247



Oman bids farewell to Sheikh Rawahi

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman bid farewell on Monday to Sheikh Hilal bin Salim al Rawahi, a prominent calligrapher and writer of Royal letters for the Late Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

Sheikh Rawahi was an acclaimed calligrapher who served Sultan Qaboos and the sultanate for more than four decades. His remarkable inscriptions adorn some of the most important buildings in the country. Most importantly, the beauty of his craft has inspired the younger generation to rediscover the ancient art and tradition of calligraphy.

In 1991, Sultan Qaboos conferred the Order of Honour, Third Class, on Sheikh Rawahi in appreciation of his services.

His admirers posted heartfelt condolences and messages on social media condoling his death, which has left a void in the developing field of calligraphy in the sultanate.

They prayed to God to show his mercy and benevolence on Sheikh Rawahi's soul and to give solace and comfort to his family and relatives.

Born in 1925 in Zanzibar,



Sheikh Hilal bin Salim al Rawahi with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

where he was raised, Sheikh Rawahi began working as a calligrapher in the Diwan of Zanzibar, then as a calligrapher with

Sheikh Mohammed bin Salman al Khalifa in Bahrain, and finally as a calligrapher in the Diwan of Royal Court.

Nutella al Rawahi tweeted, "God bless you, my beloved grandfather. You have had a great impact on our souls with

your morals and important lessons in your calligraphy that you drew. In every calligraphy I find an exhortation and a lesson, for

You have had a great impact on our souls with your morals and important lessons in your calligraphy that you drew

NUTELLA AL RAWAHI

you were designing and selecting words and shapes to deliver a lofty message. Oh God, make his work an ongoing charity until the Day of Judgment."

Also on Twitter, Mohammed bin Nasser al Mandhari said, "Oman has lost a great scholar of Arabic calligraphy. Our deep condolences to the bereaved family. Thoughts and prayers on the passing of Oman's leading calligrapher."

Another twitterati Ahmed al Harthi said, "God have mercy on Sheikh Rawahi, forgive him and settle him in the expanse of your gardens. And give his family and relatives patience."

Maryam al Rawahi tweeted, "Oman bids farewell to Sheikh Rawahi after a life full of giving. May God have mercy on him."

Sultanate to host MENATox 2022

Muscat - The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Health's Directorate General of Disease Surveillance and Control, will host the 12th Middle East and North Africa Clinical Toxicology Association Congress (MENATox 2022) from May 11 to 14.

Several experts from the World Health Organization, the American Association of Poison Control Centers, European Society of Toxicology, and Asia Pacific Association of Medical Toxicology, besides participants from GCC countries, the Middle East, Asia, North America and Europe will attend the congress.

The event aims to discuss the latest research and discoveries in clinical toxicology.

It will also highlight the best national training programmes and the need to build regional and global partnerships in Oman.



120 environmental violations in Q1 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 120 environmental violations were reported in different parts of the sultanate in the first quarter of 2022, the Environment Authority (EA) has stated.

According to data released by EA, the authority's inspection teams and specialists conducted 6,212 inspection visits in the first three months of the year.

The teams recorded 120 violations, which included non-compliance with environmental requirements, use of single-use bags, dredging without permit, and disposing construction waste in wadis.

Of the 120 violations regis-

tered, 38 were recorded in the Governorate of Muscat, including 25 for using prohibited plastic bags.

As part of its efforts to spread awareness on the importance of using eco-friendly bags, EA has launched campaigns in several parts of the sultanate in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the Consumer Protection Authority, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and others.

The authority banned the use of single-use plastic bags starting January 1, 2021. Violators of the decision are liable to a fine of no less than RO100 and no more than RO2,000.

Indian spiritual guru to bike into Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Prominent Indian spiritual leader and humanitarian Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev will be stopping by in Oman on May 25 enroute his 100-day motorcycle journey from the United Kingdom to India.

Named 'A Journey to Save Soil', it will take him to 26 countries, over 30,000km, where Sadhguru will be interacting with experts, leaders and citizens to address the impending soil crisis and garner much-needed support and push for concerted action to save soil.

Sadhguru will be interacting with a live audience on May 25 at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre. "Questions may arise as to how we could improve the quality of soil when we stand in the middle of a desert. This is nothing but a lack of proper understanding. The country is among the most successful in the region in terms of boosting agricultural production," Sadhguru said of Oman.

"Latest technologies are being explored here as many Omani researchers are taking to study about soil. It is interesting to note



Latest technologies are being explored in Oman as many Omani researchers are taking to study about soil

SADHGURU JAGGI VASUDEV

that Oman had declared 2019 as the Year of Soil to highlight the declining fertility of soil.

And all these developments emphasise the urgent need to protect the sultanate's soil wealth,"

he added.

Sadhguru kicked off his motorcycle journey from the UK on March 21, 2022. "It's extremely important that we act now. I've been talking about this for over 24 years, but a solution can only happen when there is positive policy in every nation," Sadhguru told reporters assembled at the

Indian High Commission in the UK in London before setting off on his bike tour.

"It is still snowing in many parts of Europe and we'll be going through that on a two-wheeler. At this age, it's not really a joy ride. So why am I doing this? Because over 300,000 farmers have committed suicide in the last 20 years. Not just in India, across the world this is happening... one of the main concerns is soil depletion," he explained.

The 'Save Soil' movement, launched as part of the Isha Foundation's Conscious Planet initiative is aimed at turning the world's attention towards dying soil and growing desertification.

The initiative seeks to activate and demonstrate citizen support across nations, and empower governments to initiate policy-driven action to revitalise soil and halt further degradation. The initiative aims to reach 3.5bn people.

Those interested can register for free at savesoil.org/muscat for the Save Soil event with Sadhguru. For more details contact 98924655 or email middleeast@consciousplanet.org

NEW BATCH OF CITIZENS JOINS ROP



A new batch of citizens that cleared evaluation, interviews, written tests and fitness examinations and was admitted for training in the Institute of Police Recruits at Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences formally joined Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Monday. The joining of the new batch comes within the efforts of ROP, in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, to employ jobseekers and provide ROP units with qualified manpower. The new batch comprised holders of General Education Diploma (Supplied photo)

Oman's pavilion at ATM Dubai 2022 opens

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Azzan bin Qassim al Bussaidi, Undersecretary for Tourism in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), inaugurated Oman's pavilion in its new look at the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) exhibition, which kicked off on Monday at Dubai World Trade Centre.

The sultanate, represented by MHT and 14 institutions and establishments engaged in the Omani tourism sector, is participating in this year's edition of ATM being held from May 9 to 12.

On the occasion, H E Bussaidi, said, "Participation in the Arabian Travel Market exhibition is important for the ministry and the Omani tourism

sector institutions. The ministry aims to continue its efforts to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing Omani tourism products, and promoting the latest services, offers and tourist destinations."

The activities of this year's edition of ATM will shed light on a number of key elements and components of the global tourism industry and its current and future trends, focusing on innovation, sustainability and human resources, while accelerating the creation and adoption of digital and technical solutions.

According to the latest report published by BNC Network, hotel contracts worth US\$4.5bn will be awarded in GCC countries in this edition of ATM.

MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,174.29
Sensex	54,470.67

FOREX RATES
(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	201.19
Pakistani Rs	487.57
Bangladesh taka	225.49
Philippines peso	136.82
Sri Lankan Rs	935.79

* Rates as on MAY 09
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Shell profit up as high oil prices offset Russia hit

British energy giant Shell logged soaring first-quarter net profit as surging oil prices offset a sizeable charge linked to its Russia exit. Profit after tax leapt 26 per cent to US\$7.1bn from a year earlier, Shell said in a statement.

While the group took a US\$3.9bn charge on its exit from Russia after Moscow invaded Ukraine, it saw lower costs elsewhere. Underlying earnings spiked almost three-fold to a quarterly record of US\$9.1bn, sparking fresh calls in Britain for a windfall tax on energy majors.

UK consumers are enduring a cost-of-living crisis caused by the highest rate of inflation in decades, also as economies reopen from pandemic lockdowns. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has dismissed calls for a windfall levy on oil giants, arguing it would slow their efforts to invest in cleaner energy.

Shell added that revenues rallied 51 per cent to US\$84.2bn in the first three months of the year. Oil prices have surged in recent months on concerns over tight supplies following the invasion of Ukraine by major oil and gas producer Russia.

Oman records RO357mn quarterly surplus as oil and gas income rises

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman recorded a budget surplus of RO357mn in the first quarter of 2022 as higher oil and gas prices boosted the sultanate's revenues.

The surplus will be used to boost economic recovery, enhance development spending and reduce the risks of public debt portfolio, according to the Ministry of Finance. The sultanate's budget had recorded a deficit of RO751mn during the first quarter of 2021.

Total revenues grew by 66.3 per cent to RO3.025bn in the first three months of this year from RO1.819bn in the corresponding period of 2021, mainly due to higher oil and gas income.

Net oil revenue jumped by more than 70 per cent to RO1.565bn during January - March period of 2022 compared with RO919mn in the same period of last year. Gas revenue surged 124.4 per cent to RO819mn in the first quarter from RO365mn in the same period a year ago.

'This is due to an increase in average oil price to US\$78 per barrel and higher average oil production of 1.025mn barrels per day, compared to average oil price of US\$45 per barrel and average oil production of 952,000 barrels per day over the same period in 2021,' the Ministry of Finance said in its Fiscal Performance bulletin released on Monday.

The ministry attributed the sharp growth in gas revenue to the higher gas prices and an increase in average production.

Moreover, the sultanate's current revenue also increased 23.7 per cent to RO636mn in the first quarter of this year compared to the same period in 2021.

'Such increase (in current revenue) is supported by value added tax (VAT) receipts of RO69mn, excise tax of RO24mn and improved collection of government revenue,' the Ministry of Finance said.

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's government is planning to implement Treasury Single Account in as many as 57 government entities, according to the Ministry of Finance's Fiscal Performance bulletin released on Monday.

The Ministry of Finance has commenced the implementation of the first pilot phase of Treasury Single Account (TSA) in the Ministry of Labour and

Finance added.

The objectives of TSA are: Consolidate the government cash balances and provide oversight on cash flows; ensure the government cash balances are optimally managed to reduce short-term borrowing costs; enhance treasury management and improve cash flow forecasting capabilities; and live monitoring of budgeted revenues and expenses to enhance cash flow transparency.

for the first three months of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021.

At the end of the first quarter of 2022, the current expenditure

of civil ministries and units registered almost similar figures of the same period in 2021. Moreover, the public debt service expenditure registered an increase to RO291mn.

The development expenditure of civil ministries and units jumped by 130.8 per cent to RO150mn compared to the same quarter in 2021. Total amount spent represents 13.6 per cent of total development budget allocated for 2022 i.e. RO1.1bn.

Following the decision (issued in November, 2021) to stabilise vehicle fuel prices at October 2021 levels, the sultanate's oil products subsidy amounted to RO67mn in the first quarter of 2022. The government shall cover the difference resulting from any excess in oil prices up to the end of 2022, the ministry noted.

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sohar Freezone has introduced new incentives to help businesses start trading with the world immediately.

Until the end of 2022, Sohara Freezone's new and renewing tenants can purchase a General Trade Licenses (GTLs) for one, two or three years at up to 50 per cent of the usual cost, according to a press statement.

Sohar Freezone is also offering a complete working solution for companies looking to relocate to the complex through its commercial office partner, Corporate Parks, which offers a reduction of between 30-45 per cent in office rental rates for up to three years.

The new offers are designed to encourage investments in Sohara Freezone across all sectors and provide the spark for existing businesses to take the next step in their development. Companies can enjoy all of the benefits of working and trading in the Freezone with added flexibility and greater cost-efficiency.

Sohar Port and Freezone is one of the fastest-growing complexes of its kind in the world. Located at the crossroads of East and West, the complex offers unrivalled access to key markets in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, as well as across the Middle East through well-connected modern highways.

Sohar Freezone offers sector-specific zones and clusters, and integrated, bespoke logistics solutions across the value chain, with warehousing and cold storage facilities available. The Freezone is connected to Sohara Port through a bonded transport corridor and is reachable within 14 minutes, ensuring goods reach their destination in optimal condition.

Omar al Mahrizi, CEO of Sohara Freezone and deputy CEO of Sohara Port, said, "Sohara Port and Freezone is committed to supporting the growth of new and existing business throughout the complex and by offering reduced rates on GTLs and office space, we are introducing another incentive for companies to join or expand their operations within the rapidly-expanding Freezone. We also cater to the rising demand for hybrid working environments by offering cost-efficient office space within close proximity to a wide range of local and international clients for the times when face-to-face meetings are essential. Being based in Sohara offers a wealth of advantages to companies, including access to raw materials, a world class port and exceptional transport links to key markets."

With competitive rates starting from one to three years, the

companies can register for a Sohara Freezone GTL electronically from anywhere in the world and secure all required permits through the on-site one-stop shop.

Investors also enjoy zero per cent personal income tax, zero per cent import and re-export duties and a corporate tax holiday of up to 25 years.

Sohar Freezone's partnership with Corporate Parks allows businesses access to meeting room space when required, high speed internet and utilities for a single annual fee. Options start from a one-year to three years, including a reduction of 45 per cent on the normal rate offered.

Muscat Daily

Ukraine wheat harvest seen to drop by third

Paris, France - Ukraine's wheat production is likely to be down by at least a third from last year due to the Russian invasion, a data analysis firm that uses satellite imagery said. Ukraine is a major producer and exporter of wheat, but the invasion has disrupted planting, which is still underway, both due a lack of fuel for equipment and farmers having to deal bombardments and unexploded ordnance.

French firm Kayrros said near-infrared and infrared imagery allows for determination of crop coverage and can accurately predict wheat production.

"Production this year is expected to be at least 35 per cent lower than last year," analysis of the latest data showed, Kayrros said. It forecast that at this stage Ukraine will be capable of producing 21mn tonnes of wheat this year, a drop of 12mn tonnes from 2021, and a 23 per cent drop from the average harvest over the past five years.

"Given that the fighting is ongoing and that a large part of the country's wheat production comes from areas of eastern Ukraine where the conflict is most intense, the real production figures are likely to be lower than the current crop cover might suggest," the firm added.

Kayrros analysed images taken by the US space agency NASA between April 14 and 22, less than two months after the start of the conflict.

Before the war Ukraine accounted for about 12 per cent of the world's wheat exports, and the conflict has sent the prices of food commodities soaring.

Even if Ukrainian farmers manage to grow and harvest their wheat they face difficulties getting it to market given that Russia has destroyed transportation infrastructure and blockaded the port of Odessa from which most grain was exported.

AFP

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Sohar Freezone drives growth with new incentives for tenants

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sohar Freezone has introduced new incentives to help businesses start trading with the world immediately.

Until the end of 2022, Sohara Freezone's new and renewing tenants can purchase a General Trade Licenses (GTLs) for one, two or three years at up to 50 per cent of the usual cost, according to a press statement.

Sohar Freezone is also offering a complete working solution for companies looking to relocate to the complex through its commercial office partner, Corporate Parks, which offers a reduction of between 30-45 per cent in office rental rates for up to three years.

The new offers are designed to encourage investments in Sohara Freezone across all sectors and provide the spark for existing businesses to take the next step in their development. Companies can enjoy all of the benefits of working and trading in the Freezone with added flexibility and greater cost-efficiency.

Sohar Port and Freezone is one of the fastest-growing complexes of its kind in the world. Located at the crossroads of East and West, the complex offers unrivalled access to key markets in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, as well as across the Middle East through well-connected modern highways.

Sohar Freezone offers sector-specific zones and clusters, and integrated, bespoke logistics solutions across the value chain, with warehousing and cold storage facilities available. The Freezone is connected to Sohara Port through a bonded transport corridor and is reachable within 14 minutes, ensuring goods reach their destination in optimal condition.

Omar al Mahrizi, CEO of Sohara Freezone and deputy CEO of Sohara Port, said, "Sohara Port and Freezone is committed to supporting the growth of new and existing business throughout the complex and by offering reduced rates on GTLs and office space, we are introducing another incentive for companies to join or expand their operations within the rapidly-expanding Freezone. We also cater to the rising demand for hybrid working environments by offering cost-efficient office space within close proximity to a wide range of local and international clients for the times when face-to-face meetings are essential. Being based in Sohara offers a wealth of advantages to companies, including access to raw materials, a world class port and exceptional transport links to key markets."

With competitive rates starting from one to three years, the

G7 pledges to stop Russia oil imports

Washington, US – The G7 club of wealthy nations committed Sunday to phasing out its dependency on Russian oil and issued a scathing statement accusing President Vladimir Putin of bringing “shame” on Russia with his invasion of Ukraine.

The statement from the Group of Seven – France, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and the United States – did not specify exactly what commitments each country will make to move away from Russian energy. But it was an important development in the ongoing campaign to pressure Putin by crippling Russia’s economy, and underscores the unity of the international community against Moscow’s actions.

“We commit to phase out our dependency on Russian energy, including by phasing out or banning the import of Russian oil. We will ensure that we do so in a timely and orderly fashion, and in ways that provide time for the world to secure alternative supplies,” the joint statement said.

“This will hit hard at the main artery of Putin’s economy and deny him the revenue he needs to fund his war,” the White House said.



A photograph shows a general view of the video screen of G7 leaders during a video-conference on Ukraine with France’s President at the Elysee Palace in Paris, on Sunday (AFP)

The announcement came as the G7 held its third meeting of the year on Sunday via video conference, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky participating. The West has so far displayed close coordination in its announcements of sanctions against Russia, but has not moved at the same pace when it

comes to Russian oil and gas.

The United States, which was not a major consumer of Russian hydrocarbons, has already banned their import.

But Europe is far more reliant on Russian oil. The European Union has already said it is aiming to cut its reliance on Russian gas by two-thirds this year,

though Germany has opposed calls for a full boycott, with member states continuing intense negotiations Sunday.

The G7 also slammed Putin personally for his actions in Ukraine. The Russian president’s “unprovoked war of aggression” against its Eastern European neighbor has brought “shame on

Russia and the historic sacrifices of its people,” the group said in its statement.

“Russia has violated the international rules-based order, particularly the UN Charter, conceived after the Second World War to spare successive generations from the scourge of war,” the statement continued.

Fresh US sanctions

The date of Sunday’s G7 meeting is highly symbolic: Europeans commemorate the end of World War II in Europe on May 8.

Sunday’s meeting also comes on the eve of the May 9 military parade in Russia, which marks the Soviet Union’s victory over Nazi Germany.

Washington also announced a new round of sanctions against Russia in a White House statement on Sunday, focusing on two major areas: the media, and access by Russian companies and wealthy individuals to world-leading US accounting and consulting services.

The US will sanction Joint Stock Company Channel One Russia, Television Station Russia-1, and Joint Stock Company NTV Broadcasting Company. Any US company will be prohibited from financing them through advertising or selling them equipment.

“US companies should not be in the business of funding Russian propaganda,” said a senior White House official who requested anonymity, stressing that these media were directly or indirectly controlled by the Kremlin.

Another line of attack by

Washington: banning the provision of “accounting, trust and corporate formation, and management consulting services to any person in the Russian Federation,” according to the White House.

Those services are used to run multinational companies, but also potentially to circumvent sanctions or hide ill-gotten wealth, the White House official said.

The official stressed that while the Europeans had the closest industrial links with Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom dominated the world of accounting and consulting, notably through the “Big Four” – the four global audit and consulting giants Deloitte, EY, KPMG and PwC.

Washington has also announced new bans on the export of American products to Russia, covering a range of capital goods from bulldozers to ventilation systems and boilers.

The United States announced on Sunday that it would impose visa restrictions on 2,600 Russian and Belarusian officials, as well as sanctions against officials of Sberbank and Gazprombank.

AFP



Indian rupee falls to new low on US Fed action, inflation fears

Mumbai, India – The Indian rupee plunged to an all-time low against the greenback on Monday, as US monetary policy tightening roiled sentiment and foreign investors continued to dump domestic stocks.

Rising oil prices and a strengthening US dollar have weighed heavy on the rupee with a surprise rate hike by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) last week doing little to stem capital outflows.

The rupee fell past its previous record low of 76.98 against the US dollar in March to 77.56 on Monday.

The fall came as Indian stocks on the benchmark Sensex and Nifty50 indices extended losses for a fourth day, falling more than one per cent each on Monday before recovering ground later in the day.

Banks, metals and oil and gas

stocks declined the most, with market heavyweight, the conglomerate Reliance, losing more than 3.0 per cent following its quarterly results reported late on Friday.

Foreign investors have withdrawn a net 1.34tn rupees (US\$17.3bn) from Indian equities so far this year, stock exchange data showed.

The war in Ukraine and resurgence of COVID-19 restrictions in China have exacerbated outflows from emerging markets like India as foreign funds turn risk-averse.

Inflation worries on the back of rising commodity prices have also soured sentiment in Asia’s third-largest economy, which imports more than 80 per cent of its oil needs.

Consumer price inflation in India hit a 17-month high of 6.95 per cent year-on-year in March,

and economists expect data to be released later this week to show that number rising beyond 7 per cent in April.

The US Federal Reserve last week hiked the key lending rates by half a percentage point, but also held off on signalling more aggressive measures.

“After an unscheduled rate hike by the Reserve Bank of India, if India’s inflation moves higher than 7.0 per cent... the pressure will be on for the RBI to act again,” forex firm OANDA’s Jeffrey Halley said in a note.

“That may give some strength to the rupee but is unlikely to be bullish for local equities.”

India’s forex reserves declined for an eighth consecutive week, slipping below US\$600bn in the week ending April 29 as the central bank sold foreign currency in an effort to stabilise the rupee.

AFP

China's April exports slump to two year low as virus affects economy

Beijing, China – China’s export growth slumped in April to its lowest level in almost two years, customs data showed Monday, as a COVID resurgence shuttered factories, sparked transport curbs and caused congestion at key ports.

The data shows the extent of growing damage to the world’s second largest economy as millions are confined to their homes – particularly in key business hub Shanghai – to stamp out its worst COVID resurgence since the early days of the pandemic.

Beijing has persisted with a strict zero-COVID policy involving lockdowns and mass testing, but the economic costs are mounting as manufacturing hubs and supply chains atrophy under gruelling restrictions.

Export growth plunged to 3.9 per cent on-year last month, the Customs Administration said Monday.

While this was above analysts’ expectations of 2.7 per cent growth according to a Bloomberg poll, it marked the lowest rate since June 2020.

Import growth was flat in April, an improvement from a 0.1 per cent contraction in March, as Chinese consumers remain hesitant under a welter of restrictions across the country. Customs spokesman Li Kui-



wen tried to strike an upbeat note on Monday saying the economy still has room to make a turnaround and that its “positive fundamentals” remain unchanged.

But analysts are less optimistic.

“Export growth could get worse in the next couple of months due to the pandemic and China’s stringent COVID containment measures, falling external demand, and loss of orders to other regions,” Nomura chief China economist Ting Lu told AFP.

Export growth was among the key economic drivers of the

last several quarters but could turn into a “drag” on the economy, he warned.

Last month, China’s trade surplus came in at US\$51.1bn, according to official data.

In April, China’s biggest city Shanghai was almost entirely sealed off as it became the epicentre of the country’s worst coronavirus surge, with many factories halting production and trucker shortage causing goods to pile up at its port.

Restrictions also appear to be looming in other cities, including the capital Beijing.

“Lockdowns in large cities like Shanghai and rising input

costs are major reasons” behind the underwhelming trade figures, analyst Zhaopeng Xing of ANZ Research said.

While top leaders have offered words of reassurance for tech, infrastructure and jobs, experts warn that Beijing’s unswerving adherence to its zero-Covid strategy will continue to hack into growth.

“China faces a dilemma: how to contain Omicron outbreaks without causing too much damage to the economic activities,” said Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management.

AFP

Ikea to revamp its stores globally as online business grows

Stockholm, Sweden – The company that controls most Ikea branches is repurposing its stores to adapt to soaring online business.

Ingka Group said Monday it was investing US\$3.2bn by the end of 2023 to open new shops and modernise existing ones.

“The investment will allow us to renovate and repurpose already existing stores”, Tolga Oncu, retail operations manager at Ingka Group, which manages over 400 of Ikea’s 500 or so stores worldwide, told AFP.

As more and more businesses focus on online shopping, the company noted in a statement that “our stores re-

main one of our biggest strengths”.

But Oncu also stressed that physical stores were being revamped to support online purchases.

He cited the example of a branch in Kuopio, Finland, which has been upgraded to support shipping online orders.

The expenditure of three billion euros by the end of next year marks a step up for Ingka, which invested 2.1bn euros in its new and existing shops between 2019 and 2021.

Major investments of almost 1.2bn euros are planned in London, and Ingka will also continue investing in markets which are



considered mature, such as Spain and Germany.

Founded and headquartered in Sweden, Ikea is owned by a complex structure of companies and foundations based mainly in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

Traditionally, massive Ikea stores have been placed in suburbs or on the outskirts of towns, but the furniture giant started a change in strategy by opening its first city centre shop in Hamburg in 2014, and a new model with a smaller offering in Paris in 2019.

It is also planning to open new stores in or near city centres, notably in Nice this week

and in Stockholm this summer.

The pioneer of flat-pack furniture to be assembled at home was founded by Ingvar Kamprad in 1943, and has grown into a multinational giant present in some thirty countries.

At the beginning of March, Ikea announced the suspension of its major activities in Russia and Belarus following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The move affected nearly 15,000 employees, 17 stores and three production sites as well as 47 suppliers in Russia and 10 in Belarus. “Our business will remain paused until further notice,” Oncu told AFP.

AFP

Mall of Muscat announces achieving record-breaking footfalls during Eid holidays

Mall of Muscat, Oman's most luxurious mall has announced record-breaking footfalls during the recently concluded Eid holidays. More than 200,000 people visited the mall, the company said. Mall of Muscat is emerging as the new hotspot for mall-goers and shoppers, offering visitors unique experiences and creating the right mix of shopping and entertainment to attract loyal patrons to the mall. The mall already has an ongoing sales and promotional campaign 'Mall of Muscat Festival' celebrating its 3rd Anniversary which further complemented the Eid Activities. Mall of Muscat Festival is a 2-month-long promotional campaign that started on April 1 and will conclude on May 28. Some of the elements of the campaign are Shop and Win activation area, Weekend activities for kids (Thursday and Friday) including Indoor football for kids, face painting, Hula hoop show, and magic shows. During Ramadan, the mall conducted a first-of-a-kind Night Bazaar which gave local businesses a platform to showcase their products offering and offered our valued guests a unique shopping experience under the distinctive night sky at the Walk Area on the 2nd floor of the Mall.



During Eid holidays, the Mall hosted a variety of mass entertainment and international gigs which included a scintillating acrobatic show to entertain its visitors. The mall also hosted a blockbuster musical show performed by Jihad al Raisi, an emerging Omani singer who received a tremendous response. Visitors were thrilled to see these live events which displayed tal-

ents from Oman and abroad and bought cheer and festivity to one and all.

"At Mall of Muscat, we've created the right mix of shopping and entertainment that not only complement each other but has also helped us increase our footfall significantly to facilitate business growth for all our retail partners," said Hussain Jamal - head, Mall Operation, Mall of

Muscat

"We design and craft events that not only increase visitor numbers but also position us as a leading destination of leisure and shopping. This Eid has been fantastic for us and our tenants and we thank our valued customers and retail partners for making Mall of Muscat the most preferred destination for shopping and entertainment in the city," added Jamal.

The Mall organised several campaigns and hosted varied activities since the start of 2022 which included the Winter Festival, Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, and many others to name a few. Regardless of the challenges imposed by COVID-19 business restrictions during the last two years, Mall of Muscat has remained resilient and continued on a path of business excellence resulting in not only increased footfalls but more importantly increase in customer engagement and business for its valued tenants.

Winner of Oman's Most Trusted Brand award in the Shopping Malls category in January 2022, Mall of Muscat has positioned itself as a market leader introducing many significant fashion, beauty, F&B brands and setting industry standards.



Bait Al Zubair and ABQ Education Group sign cooperation deal

To strengthen cooperation and partnership between Al Zubair Foundation companies, Bait Al Zubair Foundation and ABQ Educationa Group signed a cooperation agreement covering three main sectors: Heritage, arts, and culture. This agreement comes as an enhancement of social responsibility in raising the efficiency of the educational environment, and harnessing the capabilities that serve the educational process, within the three schools: Azzan bin Qais International School, Al-Seeb International School, and Sohar International School.

The agreement included several items, including the agreement to hold permanent exhibitions in the schools of the ABQ Educational Group, whether for heritage or art collections, which are supervised

and implemented by Bait Al Zubair Foundation, from which strengthen activities such as (The Small Museum) and (The Ambassador of Bait Al Zubair) to deepen the ties between students and the terminology of heritage and arts.

The agreement also included holding interactive, artistic, and heritage educational workshops for students of ABQ Educational Group schools and other workshops that enhance the curriculum, such as science exhibitions and other extra-curricular activities. In addition to working on the summer camp programme for students, which facilitates the presentation of knowledge in an interesting and enjoyable manner.

In addition, there will be programmes for teachers to provide them with knowledge in the

fields of culture, arts, and heritage so that they can pass it on to students at different levels of study, especially new and foreign teachers.

Bait Al Zubair Foundation will provide facilities for parents to visit the museum and benefit from all its offerings.

The two institutions also plan in the future to hold more expanded events, and host educators from inside and outside the sultanate to hold workshops and seminars that enrich the educational process for students and teachers.

The agreement was signed on the part of Bait Al Zubair Foundation by Dr Mohammad al Shahi, general manager of Bait Al Zubair Foundation, and on the part of ABQ Educational Group by Ibrahim al Salmi, deputy executive director.

Ooredoo's head of CSR named Woman Achiever of the Year

In recognition of her exceptional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts, Ayesha al Shoily, Ooredoo's head of CSR, has been named *Global Business Review Magazine's* Woman Achiever of the Year - Oman 2022.

A certified coach and motivational speaker with over 28 years experience in training, marketing and sales, Ayesha has led the company's CSR initiatives through a period like no other where focus on supporting those in need took on even greater significance. She was the driving force behind Ooredoo's Cyclone Shaheen relief efforts, COVID-19 support programmes, multiple Ooredoo Goodwill Journey programmes and Spring Forward and Springboard training schemes.



The Global Business Review Magazine Awards honour and reward extraordinary performances across all sectors. Recognising and acknowledging the

key players who strive for excellence, the awards promote and encourage quality performance by highlighting exceptional service delivery of companies and individuals around the world.

Ooredoo continues to enrich the lives of communities across the country in everything the company does, whether through its products and services or by proudly partnering with charitable organisations. By utilising the latest technology, Ooredoo has been able to improve connectivity to over 99 per cent of Oman while also donating essential appliances and electronic items to support the ongoing economic and social development of underprivileged people across the country.

HSBC Ramadan Masters Golf Series concludes

The annual HSBC Ramadan Masters Golf Series concluded at Ras Al Hamra golf club on April 28 with a presentation ceremony attended by representatives from HSBC and a large number of participants who represented all of the Muscat golf clubs. Being the only floodlit golf course, Ras Al Hamra becomes the home of golf during the holy month of Ramadan and provides a great venue for all golfers from Muscat and particularly those who are observing fasting during the day and finds it difficult to pursue their passion for the game of golf while fasting.

The HSBC Ramadan Masters Golf Series is an annual recurring event at Ras Al Hamra golf club and consists of 12 events; including nine individual and three pairs events. Participants are divided into three divisions based on their handicaps and compete



within their respective divisions. Three competition takes place three times a week in different formats. The month-long series saw more than 650 rounds of golf played and an average tournament participation of around 55 players.

Carlos Moreno emerged as the overall winner of the order of merit with 78 order of merit

points. Overall Gross order of Merit winner was Ahmed al Wahabi with a combined gross score of 141 and runner-up was Hussain Dad with a score of 145. Division 1 Order of Merit winner was Ferdie Gericke with 65 points and runner-up was Juan Moreno with 56 points. Division 2 Order of Merit winner was Elana Pienaar with 60 points and

runner-up was Henry Geddum with 59 points. Division 3 Order of Merit winner was Mitrangshu Dutta with 40 points and runner-up was Wessel Pienaar with 36 points.

Simon Walker, Ras Al Hamra Golf Club captain thanked all participants and sponsors who made it possible for the club to host this great event.

Zubair Corporation's Ramadan football league comes to an end

The fifth edition of The Zubair Corporation's Ramadan Football League recently concluded in the presence of Al Zubair bin Mohammed al Zubair, Vice chairman of the board of directors of The Zubair Corporation, as well as member of the management of The Zubair Corporation and its affiliates.

The tournament which lasted three weeks, began at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, and was held at the Goal One Soccer Centres in Azaiba. The tournament organised by The Zubair Corporation, aims to promote the core values of leadership, sportsmanship, goal setting, teamwork and competition among its staff members.

The results of the Ramadan Football League were as follows - Oasis Water Company won the League, finishing in first place, while Bait Al Zubair were runners-up in the tournament, finishing second. With regards



to individual awards, Muhannad al Suliemani from Bait Al Zubair won the award for best player, while Faisal al Batashi from Bait Al Zubair received the best goalkeeper award. The award for the top scorer of the league went to

hamis al Shukili from Oasis Water Company.

Speaking about the tournament, vice chairman of the board of directors of The Zubair Corporation said, "We are pleased that the Ramadan League was

conducted this month, considering the gap that lasted over two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We congratulate the winning companies and wish the rest better luck next time. This tournament was conducted

keeping in mind that employees are the key to organisational success. Similar to a player in a football team, companies and their employees need to operate as a team to achieve collective goals. With each game, we

could see the core values needed for organisational success displayed on the pitch. We are sure this tournament also helped in strengthening the ties between the employees of The Zubair Corporation and affiliated companies."

He added, "I would like to thank all the participants for the great role they have played with regards to supervision and follow-up and for providing the necessary support to make this annual Ramadan event of The Zubair Corporation a great success."

Maqbool al Qaidhi, the tournament supervisor, said, "This year, we witnessed a greater turnout by the companies participating in the tournament. Nine participating companies were divided into two groups. The first group included Oman Oil Industry Supplies & Services Company, Oasis Water Company, Zeenah Group, ELCO and

ARA Petroleum B44. Whereas, the second group included ARA Petroleum Exploration and Production, Zubair Automotive Group, Shangri-La, Omani Computer Services and Bait Al Zubair. Each group saw teams playing against each other, with the first and second of each group qualifying for the next round. Tournaments like these are a great way to enhance communication and teamwork between employees. Through these teams, we seek to form a winning eleven team called Al Zubair Corporation team, to participate in the tournaments organised at the company and corporate level".

He added, "Congratulations to everyone especially the teams in first and second place, and I wish the rest of the teams' better luck next time. I would also like to congratulate my colleagues, the winners of individual awards."

Trio of charitable events held at Al Mouj Muscat's kindness fest

Throughout Ramadan, Al Mouj Muscat's Kindness Festival has demonstrated how simple acts of care can help improve wellbeing in the sultanate and three events organised by the leisure and lifestyle destination stand out as already having made a difference to those in need.

The trio of charitable initiatives include distributing food boxes to Al Mouj Muscat construction workers, the donation of specialist educational materials to a blind school in Seeb, and welcoming a group of children and staff from a local orphanage.

The distribution of food packages containing essential items to help construction workers prepare their suhoor and iftar meals is an annual event and this year 1,000 were gifted which was a big rise on last year.

The second event saw a group of volunteers present Omar Bin Al Khattab School for the Blind with resources in braille and, having developed a programme of games for the school, they also engaged with the children in play.

The third demonstration of care in our local and wider communities was hosting a visit from



Oman's Childhood Care Home. Staff and children from the central Muscat orphanage were treated to gifts and as well took part in educational activities, helping to make special memories for all.

Al Mouj Muscat's CEO Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani

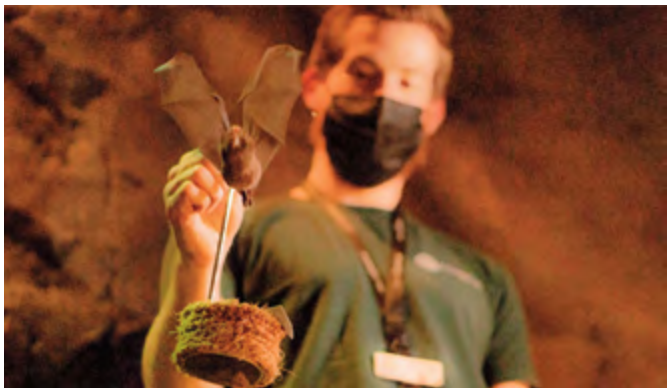
said, "Supporting others in the spirit of kindness sits at our core and I have been overwhelmed at the variety of thoughtful and imaginative initiatives organised so far."

"These three events were only made possible by the generosity of Al Mouj staff and res-

idents giving up their time, clearly demonstrating our commitment to community and wellbeing which is a mindset and culture we actively encourages all year round."

From workshops and training designed for Omanis developing and running their own sustain-

able small businesses, to creating a world-class leisure and tourism destination that supports over 2,200 permanent jobs, Al Mouj Muscat is focussed on achieving long-term sustainable growth to help ensure that communities can flourish.



Feed dozens of fruit bats at Green Planet

The Green Planet Dubai is now offering visitors the extraordinary opportunity to feed bats in the region's only immersive bat cave.

A team member from The Green Planet will accompany intrepid visitors as they enter an atmospheric cave to feed dozens of bats that live inside. Hold your nerve as more than 65 Seba's short-tailed fruit bats feast on a tasty platter of banana, protein, orange, tomato and cucumber.

The furry bats are native to central and south America and are commonly found in dense forests. In Dubai there are four native species of bats, a mammal that is vital to ecosystems by managing pest populations and helping with seed dispersal.

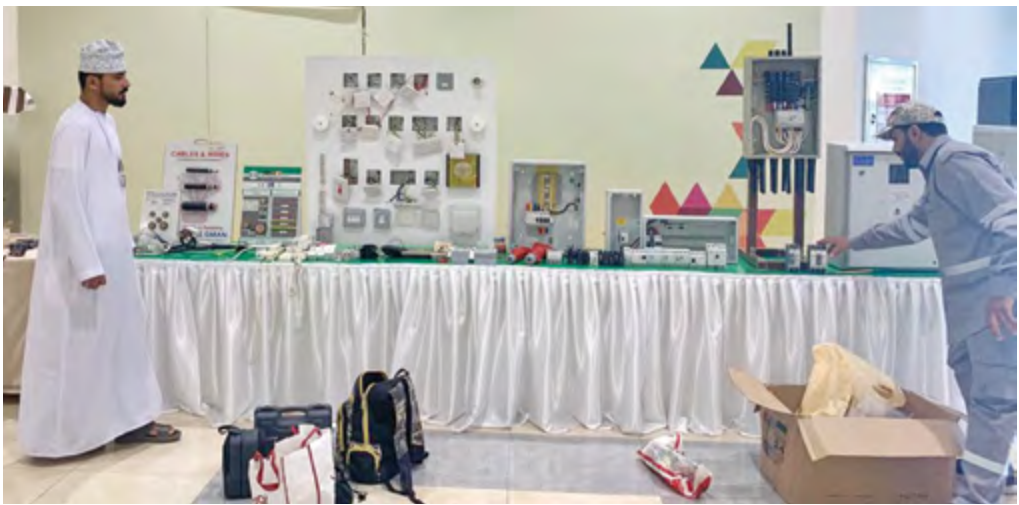
Launching over the Eid break and available seven days a week, this unforgettable wildlife experience is priced at AED30 per

person and can be enjoyed by visitors of all ages.

In addition to the bat feeding experience, visitors to The Green Planet bio-dome in City Walk can also enjoy a new fish feeding attraction. Priced at just AED15 per person, visitors of all ages can serve a meal to fresh water river tank fish such as ripsaw catfish, red tailed catfish, and pacu, a cousin of the lethal piranha.

Chickpeas, fruit and vegetables will be supplied in a box by a Green Planet guide for the fish feeding frenzy that is available on Saturday and Sundays throughout the day. Take a walk on the wild side and try these exciting new experiences at The Green Planet, the beautiful tropical indoor rainforest spread over four levels near Downtown Dubai that's filled with more than 3,000 plants and animals.

Exhibition held on dangers of illegal electricity connections



Mazoon Electricity Company, the leading electricity provider in Oman, represented by its operations department in South Sharqiyah governorate, organised an awareness exhibition on electricity safety in Jalan Bani Bu Ali, as part of a campaign on public electrical safety organised by Mazoon Electricity.

Highlighting the importance of practicing safety, the exhibition informed customers about the dangers of using illegal connections for water pumps, tents, and external water refrigerators that are placed outside homes, mosques and public places.

It also educated them on the correct and safe ways to install residual current circuit breaker

(RCBO) which will protect appliances and people in the event of an electrical short circuit.

The exhibition advised the community on the right procedure to apply for electricity connection and procedures to be followed. It also informed customers on how to apply for temporary connection to the properties under construction, as well as educated customers about safe electrical materials to be used.

The aim of the exhibition is to create a society free from electrical hazards and create a safe electrical network for all. It urged citizens and contractors to eliminate temporary connections. Mazoon Electricity plans to dis-

tribute awareness messages about dangerous connections in several languages through social media and text messages.

A large number of customers and contracting companies from the electricity sector, electricians and owners of electrical stores expressed their appreciation for organising an exhibition on this important topic.

Mazoon Electricity aims to hold similar awareness exhibition in commercial complexes, government institutions, private government colleges and Omani women's associations. To eliminate illegal connections, the company conducts periodic visits to the company's field work and various construction sites.



Chedi Muscat Hotel joins forces with NHI

The iconic Chedi Muscat Hotel has joined forces with Oman's leading vocational training provider for the hospitality sector - National Hospitality Institute - (NHI) who have recently celebrated their 25th year in operation.

Chedi Muscat has always had a great reputation for employing Omanis in its ranks and offering

various development opportunities to upskill them and retain their interest in the industry.

This policy is in complete alignment with the Oman Vision 2040 which is aiming for sustainable employment in the field of tourism and hospitality.

The hospitality industry has had a very challenging time through the COVID-19 pan-

demic and many hotels are just getting back to normal business.

It is therefore fantastic to see Chedi Muscat not only develop their existing staff to higher levels of skill but also taking in new fresh Omanis into the company.

Thomas Guss, GM of Chedi Muscat, said, "Our industry is

about people and without the right people we cannot provide the service to our guests. It is therefore essential that we focus on this asset to ensure we are at the top. Once again we are working in mutual collaboration with National Hospitality Institute who have the experience and knowledge to carry out this vital work for us."

SAUDIA launches brand new in-flight entertainment system

Saudi Arabian Airlines (SAUDIA) has officially revealed its brand-new in-flight entertainment (IFE) system, Beyond, during Arabian Travel Market (ATM) 2022, which started on Monday, at the Dubai World Trade Centre.

The new IFE system will further transform SAUDIA's onboard experience with over 5,000 hours of HD content, including, but not limited to, Western and Eastern films and tv shows, as well as a library of E-books, weather reports, shopping, meal ordering, flight information and agenda timeline.

Beyond also features the largest Islamic content in the

skies with guests notified of prayer times throughout the journey. A distinct Kid Mode allows younger guests to enjoy a selection of their favourite cartoons, movies, and games.

In addition to entertainment, Beyond offers a range of other practical features, such as the ability to check the status of the flight while en route; a real-time view of the sky during take-off and landing from cameras. Guests onboard can also enjoy shopping and browsing the latest products from the comfort of their seat.

Essam Akhonbay. SAUDIA VP marketing & product management, said, "We've never



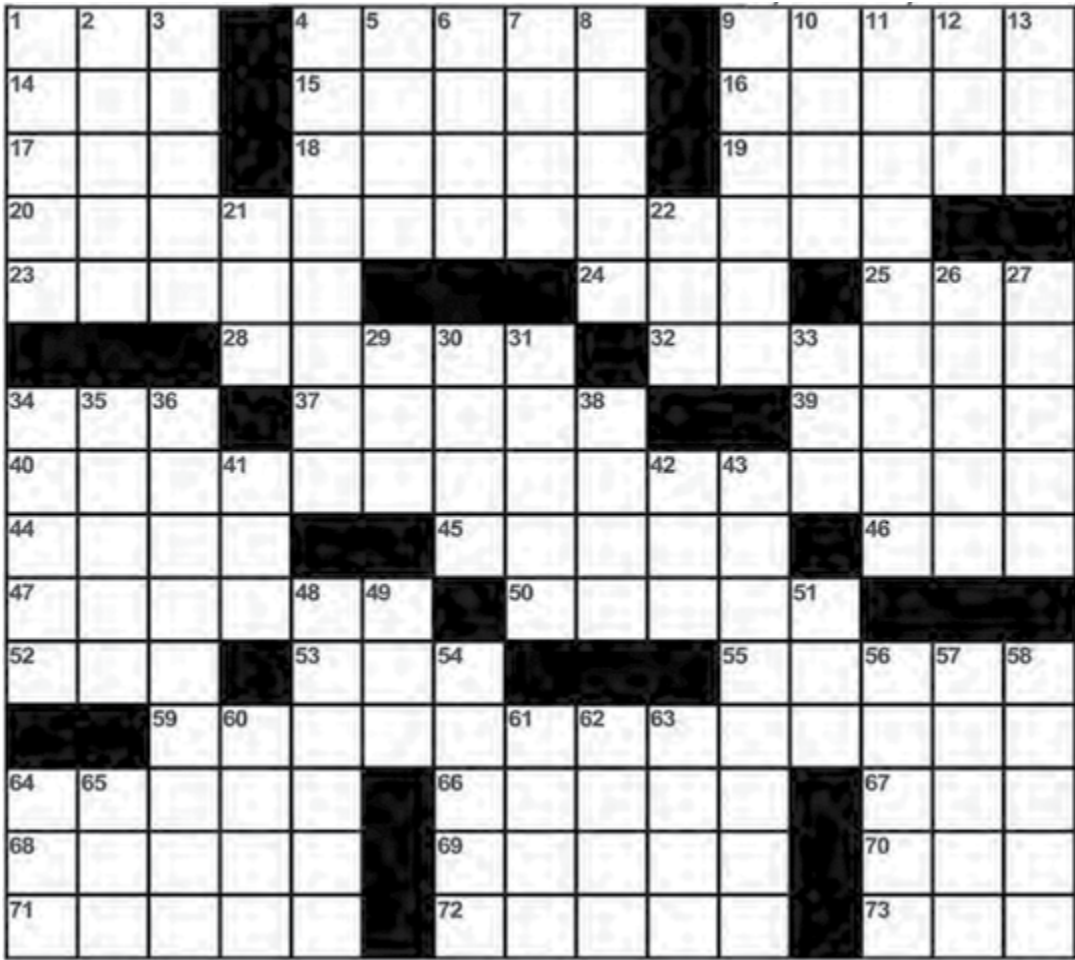
stopped improving our product. The new IFE will further transform SAUDIA's onboard experience.

The success of SAUDIA's IFE investments and strategy is demonstrated by the loyalty and positive feedback from our guests across all cabin classes. We are delighted to showcase our new IFE with visitors at the ATM."

The new IFE System Beyond will be implemented gradually across the SAUDIA fleet by the end of this year.

The SAUDIA stand is located in Hall 4 stand number ME4310 at the Arabian Travel Market.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) One Mr. Rogers
4) Frets
9) Like the color purple
14) Aboriginal food source
15) About three grains of troy weight
16) Soft palate attachment
17)_ du Flambeau, Wisc.
18) Drop, as a vowel sound
19) "Itty" follower
20) Beyond one's imagination
23) Beauty pageant wear
24) Barely make (with "out")
25) Apprehend
28) Cavalry group
32) Fit for farming
34) Volcanic spew
37) Dentist's filling
39) Beaks
40) Like an offer one should avoid
44) Round coif
45) Small finch
46) Hr. at the prime meridian

4 7) Doorframe part
50) Music-score sign
52) Place for experiments
53) Grassland
55) Mouthy exams
59) Impossible to put into words
64) Contradict
66) "L_ return"
67) "Dig in!"
68) Luxury auto, for short
69) Top Boy Scout
70) Last words of Little Jack Homer
71) Start of something
72) Hairdresser's handful
73) Supply with staff

DOWN

1) Kindled anew
2) Certain Arab
3) Southwestern desert plant
4) Screenplay outline
5) Absorbent after-bath powder
6) Lake near Niagara Falls
7) Dry riverbed
8) McQueen of "The Great Escape"
9) Kind of stamp
10) Like Lucifer
11) Noted Bible printer
12) Computer keyboard key
13) What hens do
21) Food crumb
22) Alias
26) Vinyl collectible
27) Assault
29) Lennon's bride
30) Cutlass, e.g., briefly
31) Rich spreads
33) Queen of the hill?
34)_ costs (by any means)
35) Balkan capital
36) Tropical birds with curved beaks
38) Antiquity
41) Grasped
42) Magnanimous
43) Bestows a title upon
48) Firstborn
49) "I'm Sorry" singer
Brenda
51) " ... blessing curse?"
54) LiabilityA's opposite
56) Crosswise, on deck
57) Andean animal

58)_ motion (begin)
60) African river
61) Blacken on a grill
62) Fierce anger

63) Misfortunes
64) "My man!"
65) Long, long time

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

There's quite a sociable day on your agenda thanks to a Universe intent on making things as easy on you as possible. If you've missed out on any of the good gossip that's been going around lately (not that you ordinarily indulge in such things, of course), here's your chance to catch up. Do keep in mind that there's far more than chatting on the menu. Like more than just a touch of intense romance, for example?

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If anyone loves romance, it's you. You love love and all the trappings, gestures, and additional emotions that go along with it. Infatuation, devotion, affection, and the wonderful glances from across the room that last for just a second longer than they should, for example. That said, prepare for one of those days that, in your sign's book, just couldn't be any better.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

You may decide to stay in and snuggle up with that certain someone you know wants to watch a rom-com with you in the worst possible way, with some chocolate-dipped strawberries and a primo beverage on the coffee table in front of you. Or you may decide to do a bit of traveling, say, across town to that little bookstore with the espresso bar you've been dying to try. Either way, mark this one down in advance as a very, very nice day.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

If love isn't in the air now, it never will be. It's so very much in the air that within your circles, the extraordinary mood you're in will become common knowledge within hours. Pretend you know nothing about this, and when the calls for favours start coming in, don't give in as easily as you want to. Oh, and don't forget to remind those you're doing those favours for that you might call them in one day."

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Still thinking a lot more about staying in and getting to know your sweetheart better than you have in some time? Well, then, you go right ahead. There's no reason for you to leave the nest if you don't want to, especially if you have company in the vicinity who happens to be in an equally domestic frame of mind. And who on earth would be foolish enough to turn down an offer like that from someone like you?

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Someone has much higher expectations of you than they have a right to. In order to prevent any misunderstandings, be honest and direct about what your comfort level is. And if you have to put certain tasks off for another day, then do so. There could be a lot of distracted people to deal with right now, and it could be quite difficult to separate yourself from the conflict. All of this disharmony could affect your life in an unpredictable way.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Okay, so it's not common for you to open your fridge and find a full array of carefully prepared gourmet dishes. Who has time for that when devices like phones, tablets, and computers have already been invented? You can, however, use one of those devices to order up a buffet of home-cooked delights, and, you being you, there's no doubt that you won't be munching on this comfort-food feast alone.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Love happens in the darnedest places, doesn't it? In the grocery store, at the corner bodega, and at work. So if you're just now getting used to the idea that this new position might be absolutely perfect after all, and that there's really not one more perk you could possibly have imagined, try not to be too surprised when someone you admire lets you know it's mutual, and not because your work is so exemplary.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

This is a day you can live with. The rest of the world is finally in the mood you're in on a daily basis: unpredictable, spontaneous, and highly susceptible to doing whatever strikes your fancy just as soon as it occurs to you. Better use one of those personal days you've got coming, because with the rest of us game to do whatever it takes to have some unpredictable fun, you definitely won't want to be chained to a desk.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

That may not actually be music in the air, but it's sure going to sound that way to you, and once you start talking to the person you're with, your voice will sound equally musical to them. There's absolutely no doubt about it. If there's an apology to deliver or accept or an emotional revelation to finally share with the person who needs to hear it, waiting any longer would be a mistake.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You're an emotional beast. No doubt about it. You'd never debate that fact. In fact, you're pretty darned proud of it. At the moment, however, the emotions that are usually right at the tip of your tongue, in addition to being written all over your intense little face, are even more obvious, especially to that one person in particular for whom they're intended. Easy, there. Remember, mystery is one of your most seductive traits.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

It's officially time to spend every possible second you can with one person and one person only, and the Universe is more than happy to keep the two of you connected. It might even have a plan up its sleeve to keep the magic going for at least another day. Don't you have at least one or two personal days coming? Well, how about using them now and convincing a certain someone to take the day (or so) off with you? Oh, sure you can.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which film tied with "All About Eve" (released in 1950) for the most Oscar nominations (14), and won 11 including Best Picture and Best Director, thereby tying with "Ben-Hur" (1959) for the most Oscars won by a single film?
A. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King
B. E.T. the Extra Terrestrial
C. Titanic
D. The Lion King

02. Claimed by Spain in 1606, notionally Dutch in 1660, halved between the Dutch and Great Britain in 1824 (who divided their part with Germany in 1884), the Dutch half taken by Indonesia in 1962, following which that half has been in almost continuous upheaval, what name did Indonesia give their part in 1973?
A. Sorong
B. Papua
C. Tidore
D. Irian Jaya

03. In 2015 Lacy Thibodeaux-Fields brought a lawsuit against the NFL, which sparked a wave of lawsuits alleging wage theft, unsafe working conditions, gender discrimination and harassment. What was the occupation of Thibodeaux-Fields and the other people suing?
A. Video coordinators
B. Scouts
C. Cheerleaders
D. Human resources

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

M	U	C	S
N	O	G	D
O	E	S	G
O	U	I	I

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

More violence after Israel arrests Palestinians suspected of murders

Jerusalem - Two Palestinians were shot dead and another was wounded in separate incidents in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem on Sunday, officials said, the latest in a spate of violence.

The unrest came hours after the arrest of two Palestinians suspected of axing three Israelis to death, and as a series of anti-Israeli attacks and bloody violence has left dozens dead since late March, among them Palestinian and Arab-Israeli perpetrators. In the southern West Bank, a Palestinian armed with a knife infiltrated the Tekoa settlement before being shot by a resident, the army said.

"Soldiers were dispatched to the scene and are searching the area for additional suspects," a statement from the military said.

The Palestinian health ministry said Motasem Attalah, 17, was killed.

A short time earlier, a 19-year-old Palestinian without an entry permit for Israel stabbed a police officer outside the Old City in east Jerusalem before being shot and 'neutralised' by forces at the scene, a police statement said.

The officer was taken to hospital in moderate condition, police said, with medics saying the stabber was not dead.

Earlier on Sunday, Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian who tried to enter Israel through the Jewish state's barrier in the north



Israeli forces carry out a raid on a house in the town of Rummanah, near the flashpoint town of Jenin in the occupied West Bank on Sunday (AFP)

of the occupied West Bank.

Soldiers 'identified a (person) trying to cross the security barrier' near Tulkarem, an army statement said. "The force shot at him in accordance with procedures. The suspect was taken for medical care."

A spokesman for the Sheba hospital in central Israel told AFP the Palestinian had died of his wounds, with the Palestinian health ministry identifying the deceased as Mahmud Eram.

Security forces had earlier arrested two Palestinians suspected of carrying out an axe attack in central Israel on Thursday that left three dead.

The security services - who previously identified the suspects as Assad Yussef al-Rifai, 19, and Subhi Imad Abu Shukair, 20 - said the pair were spotted hiding in a bush near a quarry, just outside the central town of Elad, where the attack took place.

The perpetrators had entered Israel through the porous barrier

with the West Bank, an Israeli military official said earlier, calling their infiltration a 'failure' of the army.

Bloody cash

Thursday's attack in Elad, populated by mainly ultra-Orthodox Jews, was the sixth deadly incident targeting Israelis since March 22.

Witnesses said two assailants leapt from a car swinging axes at passers-by, leaving three dead and four wounded, before fleeing in the same vehicle.

The manhunt included the police, domestic security agency and the army, along with helicopters and drones, the security forces said.

The Israeli military official said bloody banknotes, presumably dropped by the suspects in flight, helped lead the forces to where the pair were hiding.

Forces scanning the area noticed a bush 'that looked a bit different', said the official, who spoke to reporters on condition

of anonymity.

Israel has identified the three killed on Thursday as Yonatan Habakuk, 44, and Boaz Gol, 49, both from Elad, as well as Oren Ben Yiftach, 35.

The bloodshed unfolded as Israel marked the 74th anniversary of its founding, which has previously been a tense day in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Elad killings followed a tense period in which the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, the Jewish festival of Passover and the Christian holiday of Easter overlapped.

Tensions have boiled over into violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, a highly contested site in Jerusalem's Israeli-annexed Old City.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas had condemned the Elad attacks, warning that the murder of Israeli civilians risked fuelling a broader cycle of violence. But the Gaza Strip's Islamist rulers Hamas praised the attack - as did the Gaza-based Islamic Jihad armed group - calling it a consequence of unrest at Al-Aqsa. The Islamic Jihad called the attackers 'heroes' and said their arrest would not 'discourage' people from continuing their violent resistance.

Hamas said the attack 'demonstrates our people's anger at the occupation's attacks on holy sites'.

AFP

Will not expel Syrians: Erdogan

Istanbul, Turkey - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday pledged that Turkey would not drive Syrian refugees back to their home country despite pressure from opposition parties. Turkey is today home to more than 3.6mn Syrian refugees who fled after civil war broke out in 2011 in its southern neighbour.

Last week, the main opposition CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu said his party would return Syrian refugees to their homeland within two years if he came to power. "We will protect up to the end these brothers who fled the war and took refuge in our country" no matter what the CHP leader claims, Erdogan said in a televised address.

"We will never expel them from this land. "Our door is wide open to them. We will continue to host them. We will not throw them into the lap of murderers."

Erdogan is facing rising public anger over the refugees' and is wary of the issue dominating next year's presidential elections. Turkey has welcomed nearly five million refugees in total, including Syrians and Afghans.

AFP

Trawler sinks off Ghana, 11 missing

Accra, Ghana - Ghanaian authorities said on Monday they had rescued 15 people from a sinking trawler off the country's coast while at least 11 others were still missing, including a Chinese national.

The Ghana-owned but Chinese-operated ship known as *MV Comforter II* sank on Friday during a storm south of Ghana's second port city Takoradi, 220km from the capital Accra.

"Official records have it that there were 26 crew members on board... So far, we've rescued 15 people and 11 are still missing," said Paul Bannerman, deputy director at the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development.

Those missing are 10 Ghanaians and one Chinese, Bannerman told AFP.

"They were fishing in a stormy environment," he said.

An investigation into the incident is underway, he added, along with search and rescue efforts.

The state-owned Ghanaian Times quoted a marine police source saying the fishing vessel capsized.

"The crew was hauling a net which had caught a lot of fish and... there was also a storm and so the weight pulled the vessel the other way, and as they tried to get the fish on board it turned, causing the disaster," the source said.

In Ghana, foreign vessels have to register to the local flag and access the country's waters on local licences.

A 2018 investigation by the Environmental Justice Foundation, a UK-based charity, found that 90 per cent of Ghana's industrial fishing fleet had links to Chinese companies.

AFP

COP15 meet to fight climate emergency, land degradation

Abidjan, Ivory Coast - Nine African heads of states attended Monday's opening session of the UN's COP15 talks to fight desertification and land degradation that have devastated large swathes of the continent amid climate change.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), 196 countries plus the European Union - is meeting for the first time in three years, in Abidjan. Decades of unsustainable agriculture have depleted soils worldwide and accelerated both global warming and species loss, the UNCCD says, with an estimated 40 per cent of land degraded globally.

"Our summit is taking place in the context of the climate emergency which harshly impacts our land management policies and exacerbates drought," Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara announced.

"Our people put great hope in us. We don't have the right to



Ivorian President Ouattara (AFP)

disappoint them. "Let us act swiftly, let us act together to give new life to our lands," he urged.

Nigeria's Muhammadu Buhari, Niger's Mohamed Bazoum and DR Congo's Felix Tshisekedi were among the continent's leaders listening to the Ivorian host.

French President Emmanuel Macron was to address the gathering by videoconference later in the day.

Ouattara presented the Abidjan Initiative to raise US\$1.5bn over five years to restore Ivory

Coast's 'degraded forest ecosystems' and promote sustainable soil management.

Ivory Coast is among numerous African nations badly affected by desertification. Forest cover has fallen by 80 per cent since 1900 - from 16mn hectares to just 2.9mn last year.

"At the current rate, our forest could totally disappear by 2050," Ouattara warned. COP15 runs until May 20 and is due to hear new proposals to try to halt the spread of desertification and deteriorating land quality.

The conference will pay particular attention to the restoration of one billion hectares of degraded land by 2030, future-proofing land use and drought resilience, the UNCCD said.

Debate is expected to include the question of the 'Great Green Wall' scheme to restore 100mn hectares of arid land from Senegal in the west of Africa to Djibouti in the east by 2030.

AFP

Nearly 60% Lebanon diaspora voter turnout for May 15 polls

Beirut, Lebanon - The turnout of Lebanese diaspora voting in 58 countries ahead of May 15 parliamentary elections was nearly 60 per cent, officials said on Monday, similar figures to the last polls in 2018. Some 130,000 Lebanese expatriates out of 225,000 registered voters cast their ballots, foreign ministry official Hadi Hashem said, releasing preliminary figures.

While the number of overseas voters has more than doubled this year, they represent only a fraction of the millions of Lebanese residing abroad.

In 2018, roughly 50,000 people out of 90,000 registered voters abroad voted, a turnout of 56 per cent.

The overseas ballots will now be sent to the capital Beirut for counting when polls close after nationwide voting on May 15.

The elections are the first since mass protests erupted in late 2019 against the country's entrenched ruling elite, widely



Lebanese President Michel Aoun (left) overseeing voting process for Lebanese expatriates in the capital Beirut on Sunday (AFP)

blamed for the economic collapse. Although many Lebanese hope they can vote traditional parties out, experts have said this is unlikely as opposition candidates lack unity, funds and experience.

The economic crisis has pushed middle-class Lebanese, including families, graduates,

doctors and nurses to emigrate in search of a better future.

While opposition groups hope the diaspora will vote for change, only six per cent of overseas voters picked independents in 2018, according to a recent report by the Paris-based Arab Reform Initiative.

AFP

Iran says EU nuclear coordinator to visit this week

Tehran, Iran - The European Union's coordinator for talks between Iran and world powers over restoring a frayed 2015 nuclear deal will visit Tehran this week, Iran's foreign ministry said on Monday.

The coordinator, Enrique Mora, has played a key role as an intermediary between the US and Iran during a year of on-off talks in Vienna that seek to revive the deal.

The date of Mora's arrival in Iran's capital has not been confirmed, but local press reported he is expected on Tuesday.

"The agenda for talks in Tehran is nearly finalised," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said at a weekly press briefing.

Mora 'will meet with Ali Bagheri, the Islamic Republic of Iran's chief nuclear negotiator'.

The 2015 deal gave Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme to guarantee that it could not develop a nuclear weapon, something Tehran has always denied wanting to do.

It was agreed between Iran and the five permanent United Nations Security Council members China, Russia, the United States, United Kingdom and France, alongside Germany.

But Washington unilaterally withdrew in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and reimposed biting economic sanctions, prompting the Islamic republic to begin rolling



Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh (AFP)

back its own commitments.

The deliberations in Vienna have focused on bringing Washington back into the deal and lifting its sanctions, while ensuring Tehran's full adherence to its own commitments.

'Right direction'

Adversaries for decades, Iran and the United States have been engaged in negotiations only indirectly, exchanging views through the EU's Mora, even while Tehran has negotiated di-

rectly with the remaining parties to the deal.

"Mora's trip moves the talks in the right direction," Khatibzadeh said, noting that messages are 'constantly exchanged between Iran and the United States via the European Union'.

The Vienna talks have been stalled since March, and Iran called on April 25 for a meeting to revive the dialogue 'as soon as possible'. Among the key remaining sticking points is Iran's demand that Washington delist its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from a US terror list.

But Khatibzadeh said that the media 'must not reduce the issues between Iran and the United States to a single issue, such as the Guards'.

Khatibzadeh also said on Monday that the red 'lines set by the high authorities of the Islamic republic have been respected, and that is why we are here today', without elaborating.

"If the United States decides today to respect the rights of the Iranian people, we can go to Vienna after Mora's visit and sign the agreement," he said.

In an interview with the *Financial Times* published on Saturday, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he was seeking a 'middle way' to bridge the remaining gap between Tehran and Washington.

He said that he wanted Mora to visit Tehran, but that Iran had appeared 'very much reluctant'.

AFP

Sri Lanka PM quits for a 'new unity government'

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned on Monday after dozens of people were hospitalised when his supporters armed with sticks and clubs attacked protestors.

The country has suffered months of blackouts and dire shortages of food, fuel and medicines in its worst economic crisis since independence, sparking weeks of overwhelmingly peaceful anti-government demonstrations. Rajapaksa's spokesman Rohan Weliwita said the 76-year-old sent his letter of resignation to his younger brother, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, clearing the way for a 'new unity government'.

"I am resigning with immediate effect so that you will be able to appoint an all-party government to guide the country out of the current economic crisis," the prime minister said in the letter, seen by AFP.

The country's largest opposition party had said before the clashes that it would not join any government helmed by a member of the Rajapaksa clan.

The resignation of the prime minister automatically means the cabinet stands dissolved.

On Monday the biggest clashes since the start of the crisis erupted in Colombo when supporters of the Rajapaksa family went on the rampage, AFP re-



Paramilitary police personnel arrive at the site as demonstrators and government supporters clash outside the President's office in Colombo on Monday (AFP)

porters at the scene said.

Police fired tear gas and water cannon and declared an immediate curfew in Colombo which was later widened to include the entire South Asian island nation

of 22mn people.

At least 78 injured people were hospitalised, Colombo National Hospital spokesman Pushpa Soysa told AFP.

Officials said the army riot

squad was called in to reinforce police. Soldiers have been deployed throughout the crisis to protect deliveries of fuel and other essentials but until now not to prevent clashes.

Scores of Rajapaksa loyalists attacked unarmed protesters camping outside the president's office at the sea-front Galle Face promenade in downtown Colombo since April 9, AFP reporters said.

The violence began after several thousand supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa, brought in buses from rural areas, poured out of his nearby official residence. Rajapaksa had addressed some 3,000 supporters at his house and pledged he would 'protect the interests of the nation'.

The supporters then initially pulled down tents of protesters in front of the prime minister's Temple Trees residence and torched anti-government banners and placards.

They then marched to the nearby promenade and began destroying other tents set up by the 'Gota go home' campaign that demands the president step down.

"We were hit, the media were hit, women and children were hit," one witness told AFP, asking not to be named.

"Strongly condemn the violent acts taking place by those inciting & participating, irrespective of political allegiances. Violence won't solve the current problems," President Rajapaksa tweeted.

AFP



A worker rests along the wall of a residential area under lockdown due to the latest outbreak of COVID-19 in Beijing on Monday (AFP)

Beijing goes quiet as zero-COVID policy stalls life

Beijing, China - Millions of people in Beijing stayed home on Monday as China's capital tries to fend off a COVID-19 outbreak with creeping restrictions on movement.

Beijing residents fear they may soon find themselves in the grip of the same draconian measures that have trapped most of Shanghai's 25mn people at home for weeks.

Officials there have said the eastern powerhouse is winning its battle against the country's worst outbreak since the pandemic began.

Yet the Shanghai lockdown has intensified, causing outrage and rare protest in the last major economy still glued to a zero-COVID policy.

That policy has winded an economy which just months ago had been bouncing back from the pandemic.

Customs data released on Monday said exports in April slumped to their lowest monthly rate since June 2020, as key supply chains became knotted by restrictions. The American Chamber of Commerce in China found that many of its member companies in Shanghai were still shut, with others delaying investments across the country in the face of the disruption.

Chairman Colm Rafferty warned the business community was 'bracing for a mass exodus of foreign talent'.

There is also a pressing political dynamic to China's virus response, with President Xi Jinping pegging the legitimacy of his leadership on protecting Chinese lives from COVID.

Xi - expected to secure another five-year term later this year - has doubled down on the zero-COVID approach, despite

mounting public frustration.

In Beijing, subway stations and offices were empty during the Monday-morning rush hour across its most populous district of Chaoyang, after officials stepped up a work-from-home order over rising COVID cases.

Given the 'severe and complicated' situation in the capital, official Xu Hejian told reporters that residents should not leave the city while recent negative COVID tests will be needed to enter public places including offices and supermarkets.

Schools are teaching online and gyms and entertainment venues remain closed.

"I feel very uncomfortable seeing so few people around," Wang, a middle-aged cleaner waiting outside a restaurant for her shift to start in the popular Sanlitun area, told AFP.

Beijing has reported hundreds of infections in recent weeks, with 49 new COVID-19 infections confirmed on Monday, a tiny number by international comparisons.

"Working from home is a little annoying, but we need to respond to the needs of the community," said Fang, a 35-year-old advertising professional queueing to get swabbed. Some finance workers were staying at hotels near their offices as restrictions start to shape daily life in the city of 21mn.

A Beijing-based investment manager who has moved into a hotel near his workplace said his company had told him to 'try not to go home' to avoid infection.

"Some of my friends have been advised not to take public transport to work, and to drive or take a bicycle, so as not to be affected by the spread."

AFP

Britain, Cyprus hail 'new era' on military land

Nicosia, Cyprus - Thousands of Cypriots living on British military land will have the right to develop their properties under a deal to take effect next week, ending decades of unequal treatment, officials said on Monday.

Under the 1960 treaty granting Cyprus independence from Britain, the United Kingdom retained control of two Sovereign Base Areas covering three per cent of the island's land area.

These include not only the bases themselves but Cypriot communities home to around 12,000 people - more than the number of British military personnel and their families.



Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades (right) is seen with Luxembourg PM Xavier Bettel at a press conference in Nicosia on May 5 (AFP)

Non-military development on base land has until now been generally restricted.

Cypriot property owners on base land were subject to '62 years of distortions and imbal-

ances' which the deal to be implemented from May 16 this year will remove, Cyprus's President Nicos Anastasiades said at a ceremony.

Residential, commercial and other developments will be possible under the arrangement.

"It is a truly historic agreement", President Anastasiades told the ceremony attended by base officials.

British High Commissioner Stephen Lillie told the gathering that 'a new era of non-military development' begins next week.

"From that day, landowners in the bases will be able to submit planning applications and de-

velop their land much like they can anywhere else in Cyprus," he said, describing it as a 'levelling up'.

In a statement, British Forces Cyprus said that, for the first time, third-country nationals in addition to Cypriots will be able to own property, live, and run a business in the base areas - subject to environmental, security and zoning considerations.

Anastasiades reached an agreement in 2014 with then-British Prime Minister David Cameron paving the way for the changes being implemented from next week.

AFP

Powerful offshore quake hits Taiwan

Taipei, Taiwan - A 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Taiwan on Monday, according to the US Geological Survey, swaying high-rise buildings and delaying train services.

The offshore quake hit just before 2:30pm (0630 GMT) at a depth of 27km, according to the USGS.

It was centred about 70km southwest of Yonakuni, a Japanese island not far from Taiwan.

Taiwan's Central Weather Bureau said the shake, the fifth this year above a magnitude of 6.0, was felt across the island, though there were no immediate reports of damage.

It was followed by two aftershocks with magnitudes of 5.4 and 5.2 within 90 minutes of the initial tremor, the weather bureau said. On average, Taiwan clocks two to three tremors of 6.0-magnitude or higher a year, according to the bureau.

AFP

Western multinationals congratulate Hong Kong's new leader

Hong Kong, China - Western multinationals and local tycoons published newspaper adverts on Monday congratulating John Lee on becoming Hong Kong's next leader, following a rubber-stamp selection process condemned by critics as anti-democratic.

Lee, 64, a former security chief who oversaw the crack-down on Hong Kong's democracy movement, was anointed the business hub's new leader on Sunday in a near-unanimous vote by a small committee of Beijing loyalists.

He was the sole candidate in the race to succeed outgoing leader Carrie Lam at a time when Hong Kong is being remoulded in China's authoritarian image.

Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po, two newspapers that answer to the office which sets Beijing's Hong Kong policy, were filled with adverts on Monday from leading companies and business figures praising Lee's selection.

The majority were from Chinese and Hong Kong businesses as well as community organisations. The 'Big Four' accountancy firms - KPMG, Deloitte, EY and PwC - were among western



Pages from two pro-Beijing newspapers in Hong Kong are seen filled with advertisements from leading companies and business figures praising the selection of incoming chief executive John Lee on Monday (AFP)

multinationals placing adverts, as were city carrier Cathay Pacific and conglomerates Swire and Jardine Matheson.

Messages were also carried by Hong Kong's family tycoon-dominated property giants, including Sun Hung Kai and Henderson Land Development.

Western businesses have found themselves in an increasingly precarious position in Hong

Kong, especially as geopolitical tensions have risen with China.

Many have embraced progressive political causes in western markets, such as the anti-racism Black Lives Matter movement, same-sex equality and ridding supply chains of labour abuses.

But they usually steer clear of any criticism of China's policies towards hotspots like Hong

Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan.

Some companies such as HSBC, Standard Chartered, Swire and Jardine Matheson publicly backed Beijing's national security law, which was imposed on Hong Kong after 2019's democracy protests to curb dissent. The elevation of Lee, who is under US sanctions, places a security official in Hong Kong's top

job for the first time after a tumultuous few years for a city battered by political unrest and economically debilitating pandemic controls. Despite the city's mini-constitution promising universal suffrage, Hong Kong has never been a democracy, the source of years of protests since the 1997 handover to China.

After the 2019 rallies, Beijing responded with a crackdown and a new 'patriots only' political vetting system that eradicated the city's once outspoken political opposition. Lee faced no rivals and won 99 per cent of the votes cast by the 1,461-strong committee that picks the city's leader - roughly 0.02 per cent of the city's population. Beijing hailed the process as 'a real demonstration of democratic spirit'.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell countered that the selection process was a 'violation of democratic principles and political pluralism'. Lee, a former police officer, has vowed to strengthen Hong Kong's national security and integrate the city further with the mainland.

He wants to reboot the city's

economy and slowly reopen its pandemic sealed borders at a time when rivals have moved to living with the coronavirus. But it is unclear how he can do that given China has doubled down on its strict zero-COVID strategy.

On Monday morning, Lam met her successor Lee and both gave short speeches stressing that they would prepare for an orderly transition between their administrations.

Lee, who takes over on July 1, was Lam's security chief and then her deputy. He was asked by reporters whether Hong Kongers could criticise his administration or risk being arrested for 'speech crimes' like dozens of democracy activists in recent years. Lee took umbrage to that description.

"I think you are very wrong to describe that people are now charged simply because of their expressed opinions," he said.

"People are brought to court because of the suspicion against them and their actions contravening the law," he added. "It is their action."

AFP

Putin says Russia defending ‘Motherland’

On the ground, the key battles are being fought in Ukraine’s east, which Russia is seeking to secure

Kyiv, Ukraine - President Vladimir Putin insisted Russia’s war in Ukraine was necessary to defend the ‘Motherland’ as Moscow flexed its military muscle at a parade marking the 1945 victory over Nazi Germany.

However, Putin’s speech in Red Square made no major announcements on Russia’s next steps in the invasion, despite reports that he could unveil an escalation or a general mobilisation.

Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky, whose forces are locked in battle with Russian troops in the east, used the occasion to say he would not allow Moscow to appropriate the Soviet Union’s triumph in World War II.

Russia’s ambassador to Poland was meanwhile splattered with a red substance in Warsaw when he tried to lay a wreath to mark Victory Day, in a sign of the international opposition to a war that is now in its third month.

The conflict is mired in the history between ex-Soviet neighbours Ukraine and Russia, with Putin saying the so-called ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine is in part to ‘de-Nazify’ the country. Putin blamed the West and Ukraine for today’s conflict, telling thousands of troops in Red Square that Russia faced an ‘absolutely unacceptable threat’ and warning against the ‘horror of a global war’.

“You are fighting for the Motherland, for its future, so that



Smoke, after shelling, rises from an oil refinery near Lysychansk, eastern Ukraine, on Monday, on the 75th day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

Putin blamed the West and Ukraine for today’s conflict, telling thousands of troops in Red Square that Russia faced an ‘absolutely unacceptable threat’ and warning against the ‘horror of a global war’

no-one forgets the lessons of the Second World War,” he told Russian forces, shortly after intercontinental ballistic missiles rumbled through the square.

The celebration in Red Square also featured some 11,000 troops and more than 130 military vehicles, although a planned military flypast was cancelled.

“We will win”

On the ground, the key battles are being fought in Ukraine’s east, which Russia is seeking to secure having tried and failed to take the capital Kyiv and the north.

shelling the roads, while the Ukrainians were firing back to help cover the apparent pullout.

Officials said 60 civilians were killed in a Russian air strike on a school in the eastern village of Bilogorivka on Sunday - one of the highest single death tolls since the February 24 invasion.

Lugansk region governor Sergiy Gaiday said on Monday there were ‘very serious battles’ around Bilogorivka and Rubizhne, as Russia tries to take the Russian-speaking Donbas.

Donbas encompasses Lugansk and the neighbouring region of Donetsk.

Zelensky, who spoke in a video address about an hour before Putin, had invoked the ghosts of World War II to chide Russia. “We will not allow anyone to annex this victory. We will not allow it to be appropriated,” he said.

Hailing what he said were Ukrainian victories against Nazi German forces during World War II, he said “We won then. We will win now.”

Yet in Kyiv the commemoration day was largely shunned as life slowly returned to normal, weeks after fierce fighting raged in its suburbs.

The capital’s Maidan square was largely empty. Small patrols of police and Ukrainian armed forces kept watch with air sirens temporarily disrupting the quiet morning, as people waited for any sign from Putin of an upcoming escalation.

AFP

Havana luxury hotel blast toll rises to 35



A rescue worker carries a Cuban flag rescued from the debris of the Saratoga Hotel, in Havana, on Sunday (AFP)

Havana, Cuba - Rescue workers have pulled another four bodies from the ruins of a Havana luxury hotel wrecked in an explosion last week, raising the death toll to 35, an official said.

Crews continued to comb through the rubble of the Saratoga five-star hotel, which was being renovated and had no guests at the time of the late-morning blast last Friday that was seemingly caused by a gas leak.

The search is now focused on the basement and sub-basement of the building.

“It is at a very dangerous stage because of the concentration of rubble and the danger of collapse,” fire department head Luis Carlos Guzman told state television on Monday,

updating the death toll.

At the time of the blast, said the tourism ministry, there were 51 workers inside the hotel, which was readying for its post-refurbishment reopening this week.

The ACN state news agency said the four bodies found overnight were those of hotel workers.

“According to family members, it is estimated that there are about 12 or 13 people still trapped,” the news agency added.

On Sunday, officials said 24 people were receiving treatment in hospital.

The first four floors of the hotel were gutted in the blast that sent debris flying, smoke billowing into the air and rubble

tumbling to the ground.

The explosion tore off large parts of the facade, blew out the windows and destroyed several cars parked outside the hotel, known for having hosted celebrities such as Madonna, Beyonce, Mick Jagger and Rihanna.

The dome of a nearby Baptist church also collapsed.

A 29-year-old Spanish tourist, who had been walking nearby, was among the fatalities, who also included four children and a pregnant woman.

The tourist’s husband was injured in the blast that an official said happened while a gas tank was being refilled by a tanker truck.

AFP

Northern Ireland leader-elect ‘will not be held to ransom’ by Brexit dispute

Belfast, UK - Sinn Fein leader Michelle O'Neill, who is set to become Northern Ireland’s first minister, warned on Monday she ‘will not be held to ransom’ by Brexit disputes currently holding up the formation of a power-sharing government.

UK Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis has called on all parties in the province to form a government, after elections last week that saw the pro-Irish nationalist party win for the first time. All five main political parties met Lewis for talks at the devolved legislature in Belfast, on their first day back on the job since Sinn Fein ended a century of dominance by pro-UK unionists in Northern Ireland.

But the pro-British Democratic Unionist Party, which came second, said post-Brexit trading arrangements need to be ad-



DUP and British government must accept and respect the democratic outcome of this election

MICHELLE O'NEILL

dressed first before it joins a new executive, in a move that could hold up its formation for months.

O'Neill said on Monday that ‘the DUP, but also the British government, must accept and re-

spect the democratic outcome of this election’. The DUP collapsed the last power-sharing government in Belfast in February by withdrawing its first minister because of its opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

The arrangement, signed as part the UK’s exit from the European Union, provides sweeping checks on goods heading to Northern Ireland from the British mainland and keeps the province largely under European trading rules. The DUP fears that by creating an effective border in the Irish Sea, Northern Ireland is being cast adrift from the rest of the UK and makes a united Ireland more likely.

London has repeatedly said it is prepared to trigger the Northern Ireland agreement’s Article 16 suspension clause unless the deal it signed up to is changed - a

move the EU has warned could lead to a wider trade war.

“Brinkmanship will not be tolerated, where the north of Ireland becomes collateral damage in a game of chicken with the European Commission,” said O'Neill.

“Make no mistake, we and our business community here will not be held to ransom.”

UK minister Lewis earlier urged ‘a stable and accountable devolved government’ and said all parties should ‘fulfil their responsibilities and form an executive as soon as possible’.

“We have to address the outstanding issues relating to the Northern Ireland Protocol and we want to do that by agreement with the EU, but as we have always made clear, we will not shy away from taking further steps if necessary,” he added.

AFP

Marcos holds lead in Philippine presidential poll

Batac City, Philippines - The son of late Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos commanded a massive early lead in the presidential election Monday, according to an unofficial tally of results that pointed to a historic landslide victory.

Nearly 40 years after his namesake father was deposed by a popular revolt and his family chased into exile, Ferdinand Marcos Jr was seen doubling the tally of his nearest rival.

With more than 60 per cent of the country’s precincts reporting, Marcos had garnered more than 20mn votes, to liberal candidate Leni Robredo’s 9.4mn.

In the Philippines, the winner only has to get more votes than anyone else.

But if sustained, the tally - published by local media from Commission on Elections figures



Supporters of Ferdinand Marcos Jr cheer at his party headquarters to show their support at Mandaluyong City on Monday (AFP)

- would make Marcos the first Philippine president since his father’s ouster to be elected with an absolute majority.

It would also signal an astonishing turnaround for the fortunes of the Marcos clan, who have come from pariahs to the

presidential palace in a generation. “This will be a historic election,” said Cleve Arguelles, an assistant lecturer in political science at De La Salle University in Manila.

Commission on Elections chief George Garcia told

AFP: “Until the last vote is counted, it’s not yet the end of everything.”

But the writing appeared to be on the wall for Marcos’s nine rivals, vying to succeed President Rodrigo Duterte in elections seen by many as a make-or-break moment for the Philippines’ fragile democracy.

The results would be a crushing blow for supporters of Robredo, the incumbent vice president who turned her campaign into a movement to defend democracy and brought almost a million people onto the streets in one recent rally.

From before dawn, mask-clad voters formed long queues to cast their ballots in 70,000 polling stations across the archipelago. Polls officially closed at 7:00pm (1100 GMT).

AFP

COUNTDOWN BEGINS

QATAR'S QUEST

Eight shiny stadiums are almost ready for the Qatar 2022 World Cup, beginning in November, but questions continue to mount about the logistics

Migrant labourers are working through the night near the World Cup clock that started counting down 200 days from May 5, with hosts Qatar facing mounting questions over costs and conditions for fans.

Eight shiny, air-conditioned stadiums are ready for the tournament's start on November 21, but every night the army of South Asian workers who underpin Qatar's energy-rich economy swarm over unfinished roads and building sites around Doha.

Dozens of gigantic cranes tower over the capital's skyscrapers while organisers juggle with the dilemma of welcoming an estimated 1.4 million fans wanting entertainment in the tiny, conservative Islamic state.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has promised the 'best ever' World Cup and a FIFA spokesperson told AFP that the global body had been quite impressed by Qatar's infrastructure programme.

Many fans, however, worry about the cost of travel and accommodation for the Qatar World Cup, the first of its kind in an Arab country. Ronan Evain, head of Football Supporters Europe, a lobbying group, said transport and beds were fans' main concerns.

"This is the most complicated World Cup of the modern era for logistics," he told AFP. "Fans see prices rising

and don't know when it will stop."

As prices soar post-COVID-19, Madrid-Doha return air tickets in November have already reached more than US\$1,680, almost three times the cost in 2021.

Many fans still do not know if they have match tickets - which are a third more expensive on average than for 2018 - and they cannot book accommodation on the official website without a seat number.

Qatar says there will be 130,000 rooms in hotels, apartments, cruise ships and desert camps. It has promised shared rooms for US\$85 a night.

Getting information a nightmare

Ambassadors from many of the 32 competing nations have told AFP of their concerns over the lack of information about issues ranging from alcohol consumption to the treatment of the LGBT community in Qatar, in view of perceived restrictions.

"There is no problem with the concrete and steel," said one ambassador, speaking on condition of anonymity. "But they are not telling us enough about how it will all be policed. There are no details."

"Getting information from the organising committee is a nightmare," said Fabien Bonnel, a spokesperson for Irresistibles Francais, the biggest French supporters association. He predicted fewer French fans than before.

Before other World Cups the talk was often about



People attend an event marking 200 days to go until 2022 FIFA World Cup, in the Qatari capital Doha on May 6



stadiums not being ready but 2022 is different, said Danyel Reiche, author of 'Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Politics, Controversy, Change'.

"There are many indicators that this will be an excellent World Cup," said Reiche. "The challenge here is to meet the needs of Western fans (since alcohol consumption is permitted in the West during matches) whilst respecting the local culture. Pragmatic compromises need to be found to respect both sides."

FIFA and the Qatar organisers, the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, have sought to reassure fans about accommodation, rights and drinking. Beverages are likely to be sold at fan zones and special areas near stadiums, as during the 2019 Club World Cup and last year's Formula One race, organising sources said.

"Many countries have restrictions on the public consumption of alcohol. Qatar is no different and simply asks fans to respect the country's conservative culture," said a Supreme Committee spokesperson.

FIFA had insisted that law enforcement around the World Cup be 'non-discriminatory, and strictly necessary and proportionate' including allowing LGBTQ symbols and colours at stadiums, he said, adding that FIFA is confident all measures will be in place for them.

AFP

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EMBASSY OF THE FEDERATIVE REPUBLIC OF BRAZIL IN MUSCAT

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The Embassy of Brazil in Muscat, located at Way 1521, Villa 1424, Madinat Al Ilam, will sell a BMW 525i vehicle, year 2009/2010, black, 4 doors, being driven 98,874 km. Rules and regulations of this bidding, to take place at 2 pm on May 10, 2022, are available at

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MET GALA

COSTUME

Parade



Kim Kardashian at the 2022 Met Gala at The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Shou Zi Chew and Vivian Kao



Miranda Kerr



Sigourney Weaver



First lady of the United States, Jill Biden, speaks during a press conference for the Met Gala



Shawn Mendes (2nd from left) and (right) Pete Davidson

Stars sparkle at the 2022 Met Gala in New York, considered 'the party of the year' among high society socialites

A-listers dressed to the theme of 'gilded glamour' sparkled on the red carpet as the annual Met Gala extravaganza known as 'the party of the year' returned to its pre-pandemic schedule in New York last week. Co-host Blake Lively wowed in a beaded Versace gown with an oversized satin bow that unfurled to reveal a light-blue train while singer Billie Eilish wore an ornate Gucci bodice with green lace sleeves.

Actress Lively, whose husband actor Ryan Reynolds wore a brown velvet tuxedo, described her dress as an 'homage' to New York City architecture, including the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and Grand Central station.

Singer Alicia Keys also paid tribute to Big Apple buildings, with a black Ralph Lauren cape that portrayed the city's skyline in silver beading.

Some 400 famous names from the worlds of music, film, fashion, and sports strutted their stuff at the over-the-top costume parade on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's carpeted steps.

Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, who oversees the philanthropic party that raises millions of dollars for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, was one of the first attendees to arrive.

The high priestess of fashion matched a Chanel dress with a tiara as the fundraiser returned to its usual early-May slot after the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of the 2020 event and delayed last year's edition to the autumn.

Grammy-winning singer Lizzo made a dramatic entrance in an intricate hand-embroidered gold-and-black coat over a black Thom Browne gown, stopping to play her flute on the steps.

Rapper Cardi B shone in a glittering gold chain gown by Versace with matching gloves while singer Olivia Rodrigo also opted for Versace, sparkling in a lavender mesh dress.

Actress and model Cara Delevingne took the Met's 'gilded' theme literally, shedding the jacket of her red Dior suit on the steps to reveal she was wearing just gold body paint underneath.

Olympic gold medalist and snowboarder Chloe Kim made her Met Gala debut in a feathered tulle ballgown, while actress Michelle Yeoh sported a flowing green Prabal Gurung gown. Actor Riz Ahmed took a different approach to the theme, wearing a black open shirt with a white undershirt, and leather boots.

"This is an homage to the immigrant workers who kept the Gilded Age golden," he said.

The invite-only guest list is a closely guarded secret. Those in attendance included singers Jon Batiste, Shawn Mendes, Janelle Monae and Gwen Stefani, tennis star Venus Williams and 'The Crown' actress Emma Corrin.

Hillary Clinton wore a red Joseph Altuzarra gown. Embroidered along the neckline were the names of 60 women who had inspired her, including Rosa Parks.

Actress Julianne Moore and reality TV star Kris Jenner honoured Jackie Kennedy while Glenn Close shone in Valentino Pink.

Sarah Jessica Parker wore a Christopher John Rogers design that honoured Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, who, as Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker, was the first Black female fashion designer in the White House.

"The idea was to highlight the dichotomy between the extravagant, over-the-top proportions of the time period, and the disparity that was happening in America at the time," she said.

Oscar-winner Jessica Chastain wore a glittering red sequined Gucci gown with trailing sleeves and matching turban.

A platinum blonde Kim Kardashian shone in the stunning skintight gown Marilyn Monroe wore in 1962 to sing 'Happy Birthday, Mr President' to John F Kennedy.

End gun violence

At last year's event, held in September, left-wing politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez had caused a stir by wearing a dress emblazoned with the slogan 'Tax the Rich'. This time, New York City Mayor Eric Adams struck a political chord with a jacket on the back of which were the words 'End gun violence'.

On the red carpet, billionaire Elon Musk was asked about his \$44 billion takeover offer for Twitter.

"My goal, assuming everything gets done, would be to make Twitter as inclusive as possible and have as broad a swath of the country and the rest of the world on Twitter," said Musk, accompanied by his super-model mother Maye Musk wearing a red velvet Dior gown.

Last year, the gala brought home more than US\$16.4mn for the Met's Costume Institute.

The dress code comes from the annual exhibit that the party coincides with. This year's is 'In America: An Anthology of Fashion', a retrospective from the late 19th century to the present.

Monday's Met Gala was also co-hosted by Oscar-winning actress Regina King and Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of Broadway hit 'Hamilton'.

The gala was first held in 1948 and was for a long time reserved for New York high society. Wintour took over the running in 1995, transforming the party into a catwalk for the rich and famous.

AFP

Blake Lively

CARLITO'S WAY!

Teenager Carlos Alcaraz has eyes on Roland Garros after his astonishing Madrid Open triumph

Madrid, Spain - Teenager Carlos Alcaraz continued his blazing rise by demolishing Alexander Zverev in the Madrid final on Sunday and then said "I really want to prove my level in a Grand Slam".

Two weeks before the start of the French Open, the young Spaniard brushed aside his third-ranked foe 6-3, 6-1 in 62 minutes to continue a run that signals tennis has a new power.

"I really want to go to Paris to win a Grand Slam, to show my level in a Grand Slam," said Alcaraz at a press conference after winning the second Masters 1000 of his career.

"People are going to take me as a favourite, but I take that as motivation," added Alcaraz.

He said he will miss the Rome claycourt tournament this week after injuring an ankle in beating Rafael Nadal in the quarterfinals on Friday.

"This morning, because of the fall against Rafa, I woke up with a more swollen ankle and I also had a blister that had become infected," he said.

"It was a little difficult to walk, but... we were able to do a few things to be at 100 percent for the match."

Before the Madrid tournament last year, Alcaraz was ranked 120th in the world. On Monday he will reach number six.

"I have five more to go to be the best in the world," he said.

He became the youngest US Open quarter-finalist of the



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz celebrates a point against Germany's Alexander Zverev in the Madrid Open final on Sunday (AFP)

Open era last September, then won his first Masters 1000 title in Miami in early April.

Victory on Sunday brought a second Masters 1000 title. The only younger player to reach that milestone was Nadal, who won in Monte Carlo and Rome when he was 18.

Alcaraz turned 19 on Thursday and over the next two days battled past Nadal in two hours and 28 minutes and Novak Djokovic in 3hr 36min.

"I am 19 years old, which I think is the key to be able to play long and tough matches in a row.

world No 1," said the German.

The atmosphere on Sunday did not reach the fervour of the day before, as Alcaraz grabbed control early and cruised to his quickest victory of the week.

Even so, "it was a spectacular atmosphere," he told the crowd at the end.

"This tournament is special for me because it's the first tournament I watched when I was seven or eight," said Alcaraz.

"Watching Rafa lift this trophy so often, gave me a lot of power to work hard for this moment."

Zverev complained that he

It's great to see for tennis that we have such a new superstar who is going to win so many Grand Slams and is going to be world No 1. Carlitos, right now you are the best player in the world.

ALEXANDER ZVEREV

I am feeling great physically," he said

"It feels great to be able to beat these players. To beat two of the best players in history and then Zverev, the world No. 3. He is a great player. I would say this is the best week of my life," he said.

'Good shots'

Zverev had no doubt where the teenager's trajectory is heading.

"It's great to see for tennis that we have such a new superstar who is going to win so many Grand Slams and is going to be

was "dead" because he had played the latest matches the previous two nights, yet he was impressed with Alcaraz.

"Carlitos, right now you are the best player in the world. Even though you are still five years old you are still beating us all," he told Alcaraz on court after the match.

Alcaraz said he had some way to go.

"I still have to improve in everything," he said. "I have very good shots, but they can be improved and can be much better."

AFP

Osaka pulls out of Italian Open with injury

Rome, Italy - Naomi Osaka has withdrawn from the Italian Open in Rome to rest an Achilles injury ahead of the French Open, the WTA said on Monday.

The four-time Grand Slam champion suffered the injury in her opening match in Madrid earlier this month, before struggling in a second-round loss to Sara Sorribes Tormo.

"Unfortunately I'm going to have to withdraw from Rome as the injury which I picked up last week in Madrid hasn't healed yet," the Japanese star said in a statement.

"It's an Achilles injury so I need to be careful, especially in advance of Roland Garros."



Naomi Osaka

"I felt something in my Achilles after my last match, and like, I wasn't really able to hit yesterday because I wanted it to go away," she said.

The former world number one has never reached the final of a clay-court tournament, but will be hoping to put that record straight at the French Open which starts on May 22. Osaka, currently ranked 38th, has shown signs of a return to form this year.

The 24-year-old reached the Miami Open final, where she lost to world number one Iga Swiatek, in April. She has been replaced in the Rome draw by Spain's Nuria Parrizas Dias.

AFP

Zurich and Brussels win hosting rights for Diamond League final

Paris, France - The Diamond League final between 2024-27 will be held alternately in Zurich and Brussels, organisers announced Monday.

Hosting rights for the two-day season finale - at which all 32 Diamond League champions are crowned - have been awarded to Brussels for 2024 and 2026, and to Zurich for 2025 and 2027.

This season will see Zurich host the final on September 7-8, before moving to the Prefontaine Classic in Eugene in 2023.

Zurich was also the host in 2021, becoming the first city to hold the final as a two-day event featuring all 32 Diamond League disciplines.

Brussels and Zurich were also both joint hosts between 2010-19, when the final was split between two separate meetings.

AFP

Frustrated Hamilton queries Mercedes team strategy

Miami Gardens, United States - A frustrated Lewis Hamilton questioned his Mercedes team's strategy on Sunday after he finished sixth behind team-mate George Russell at the Miami Grand Prix.

After the fifth race of the year, Hamilton is sixth in the drivers' standings on 36 points, with fellow Briton fourth on 59.

The seven-time world champion said he was surprised to be asked if he wanted to pit for fresh tyres during a Safety Car period after 41 laps of the inaugural 67-lap race at the Miami International Autodrome, won by Max Verstappen.

"I really don't know, in that scenario I have no clue where everyone is," he explained when asked about the incident.

"When the team say 'it's your choice' - I don't have the information to make the decision.

"That's what your job is! Make



Lewis Hamilton

the decision for me. You've got all the details right there in front of you. I don't.

"That's what you rely on the guys for, but today they gave it to me and I didn't understand it."

The team decided not to pit Hamilton.

"It's just a bit unfortunate on the Safety Car, but at least we got points today," he said.

"We're finishing and reliability is good. We just have to keep try-

ing. I'm excited to, at one stage, take a step forward, which we haven't yet."

He had finished a forlorn 13th two weeks previously at the Emilia Romagna Grand Prix.

Team-mate Russell made the most of the Safety Car to pit for fresh tyres and, with that advantage, was able to pass Hamilton to finish fifth.

"It's good when you battle with our team-mate," Hamilton said. "You show more respect, give more space and I enjoyed it. I think there's good respect between us and I was pushing as hard as I could."

He added that despite their improved result, the team were still struggling to unlock the performance potential of their car.

"We have a fast car in there, but we don't have the key to unlock it. There's more to come and it's frustrating."

AFP



Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen celebrates on the podium after winning the Miami Grand Prix (AFP)

Verstappen triumphs in sweltering Miami

Miami Gardens, United States - World champion Max Verstappen resisted a late attack from series leader Charles Leclerc of Ferrari to claim an accomplished victory for Red Bull in sweltering conditions at the inaugural Miami Grand Prix on Sunday.

In a physically exhausting race for the drivers and teams at the Miami International Autodrome, the 24-year-old Dutchman produced a mature performance to make the most of superior straight-line speed in a largely processional race until a late Safety Car intervention.

His second win in succession and third of the season enabled him to trim Leclerc's advantage to 19 points in the drivers' championship. Leclerc has 104 and Verstappen 85. It

was the 23rd win of the Dutchman's career.

"It was an incredible Grand Prix, very physical as well, but I think we kept it exciting until the end," said Verstappen, interviewed by retired American driver Willy T. Ribbs after the race.

When Ribbs suggested he looked ready to "get into a boxing ring", Verstappen retorted: "I think I'll stick to racing, but I appreciate boxing a lot. It felt a bit like that out there in terms of how we feel now."

"I'm incredibly happy with winning here in Miami and it was an incredible Sunday for us."

Leclerc said he felt that the Red Bull was clearly a faster car than his Ferrari in a hot and punishing race.

"It was such a difficult race,

physically," said Leclerc. "We struggled quite a bit with the medium tyres, especially in the first stint, and was overtaken there. That made our race a bit more difficult from that moment onwards."

"On the hard tyre, we were very competitive and towards the end I thought I could get Max at one point, but today they had the advantage in terms of pace."

He said he hoped Ferrari would make a 'step up' with upgrades for the Spanish Grand Prix later this month, but added that he had enjoyed the atmosphere generated by a sell-out crowd that was sprinkled with celebrities.

"It was fun and it's amazing to see so many people again," he said."

AFP



IPL 2022



KKR V MI

Bumrah's magic spell in vain as Kolkata register easy win



BRIEF SCORES:

Kolkata Knight Riders 165 for 9 in 20 overs (Venkatesh Iyer 43 (24) 3x4, 4x6, Nitish Rana 43 (26) 3x4, 4x6; Jasprit Bumrah 5 for 10) beat Mumbai Indians 113 all out in 17.3 overs (Ishan Kishan 51 (43) 5x4, 1x6; Pat Cummins 3 for 22, Andre Russell 2 for 22) by 52 runs

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)

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Suryakumar Yadav sustained a muscle strain on his left fore arm

Mumbai's Suryakumar ruled out of IPL with injury

Mumbai, India - Mumbai Indians batsman Suryakumar Yadav has been ruled out of the Indian Premier League with an arm injury, organisers said Monday.

The 31-year-old, one of the leading run-scorers for Mumbai, who have been knocked out of the play-offs race, suffered the blow in his team's victory over Gujarat Titans on Friday.

"Mumbai Indians batter Suryakumar Yadav has been ruled out of the IPL 2022 owing to a left forearm muscle injury," the league said in a statement.

The top-order batsman, who was one of four players including

skipper Rohit Sharma to be retained by the franchise ahead of this year's auction, has scored 303 runs including three half-centuries in eight matches.

He has played seven one-day internationals and 14 Twenty20 matches for India since making his debut last year.

Mumbai, the richest and most successful side in IPL history with five titles, were winless in their first eight matches this edition.

They won their last two matches but became the first team to bow out of final-four contention.

AFP

I feel we played a perfect game today, says MS Dhoni

Mumbai, India - Chennai Super Kings have finally played the perfect game today, something they hadn't done in a long time, but they are not going to get carried away about where this leaves their playoff chances, said their captain MS Dhoni at the post-match presentation, after his team thrashed Delhi Capitals by 91 runs.

"I feel we played a perfect game today," Dhoni said. "I don't know how many times we would have been in a position to say that we had a perfect game."

"The batters did really well. This is one of those tosses where you want to win the toss and you want to field first but in your heart you are also saying never mind if you lose the toss. Because the last game also that we played the ball actually stops a bit even in the second half. It only gets better after the 13th-14th over onwards. Which means you still have to behave and bat a bit nicely [even in the chase]."

"The batters gave us those



What is important is the more they play the better they will get at game sense

MS DHONI

extra few runs than whatever the par [score] was. The way the openers batted and after that everybody contributed a bit. Overall runs on the board really helps. Then making sure the big-

hitters don't go after you. It doesn't matter if you get 200 or 210, once they get going, you can't save the game."

Dhoni would not be drawn into getting carried away in his praise of Super Kings' young fast bowlers Mukesh Choudhary and Simarjeet Singh, who set up their defence of 208 nicely. "What I personally feel, both Simarjeet and Mukesh have taken time to mature," Dhoni said. "It is different with every individual. There are some who are good right from the first game. There are some who take a few games. Whether is two, three, four or it can be seven or ten games."

"What is good to see is they have the capability. What is important is the more they play the better they will get at game sense."

CSK have stayed alive in the tournament but they will need to win their remaining games and also have other results go their way to make the playoffs.

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Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp at a team training session

It is clear that it is not over: Klopp still has belief

Liverpool, United Kingdom - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said he maintains belief that the Reds can beat Manchester City to the Premier League title and keep their hopes of a historic quadruple alive.

City extended their lead at the top of the table to three points and also boosted their goal difference to four better than Liverpool's with a 5-0 thrashing of Newcastle on Sunday.

The Reds stumbled a day earlier when they were held 1-1 at home by Tottenham.

However, Klopp shrugged off suggestions that he should now focus on saving his players' energies for facing Chelsea in the FA Cup final on Saturday and the Champions League final against Real Madrid on May 28.

"Until it's not reachable anymore, why should we stop believing? That's what we do," said Klopp at his pre-match press conference ahead of Tuesday's trip to Aston Villa.

"It is clear that it is not over, whatever happened, because we both have three games to play. And my concern is actually: how can we win our games?"

"In an ideal world you win all the games and you are always in a great mood. A lot of times we have to respond on setbacks and that's what we have to do."

City boss Pep Guardiola claimed he felt the whole of England is behind Liverpool's title bid.

Speaking shortly after the win over Newcastle, Guardiola said: "Everyone in this country supports Liverpool, the media and everyone."

However, Klopp said he does not get that feeling with the hostile environment his side face on the road. "I have no idea if the whole country is supporting us," added Klopp. "It is not the feeling I get when we go to other places and play there, it is actually the opposite, but maybe he knows more about that than me."

AFP

Back to normality

Manchester City thrash Newcastle United to take a grip of Premier League title race after their Champions League semifinal heartbreak

Manchester, United Kingdom - Pep Guardiola said he never doubted Manchester City's response to Champions League heartbreak after thrashing Newcastle 5-0 to take a firm grip of the Premier League title race.

Raheem Sterling's double and goals from Aymeric Laporte, Rodri and Phil Foden moved Guardiola's men three points clear of Liverpool with three games left to play.

City also edged four goals ahead of the Reds on goal difference, which could still decide the title if the defending champions lose one of their remaining games against Wolves, West Ham and Aston Villa.

"If some people doubted us they don't know this team," said Guardiola. "It's one of the best groups I ever trained in my life."

"It was a perfect afternoon. Before the start of the game I felt our crowd were disappointed but not upset and angry about who we are as a team and what we have done the last five years."

The title is the only trophy left for City to fight for after blowing the chance to reach a second consecutive Champions League final, against Real Madrid on Wednesday.

The Spanish giants came from two goals down in the dying stages to win a classic semifinal 6-5 on aggregate and set up a meeting with Liverpool in Paris.

Guardiola was quick to point out that what happened in Madrid is a lesson that there is



Manchester City's Aymeric Laporte scores against Newcastle United in their Premier League match at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester (AFP)

Everything can happen, if it happened in 56 seconds (against Madrid), it can happen in three games. So calm and prepare for Wolves on Wednesday.

PEP GUARDIOLA



still a long way to go in the final three games.

But this has the potential to be the decisive weekend in the title race after Liverpool were held 1-1 at home by Tottenham on Satur-

day.

City showed no signs of physical fatigue or a mental hangover as they took full advantage, but they do have injury problems for the run-in.

Kyle Walker and John Stones were absent from the starting line-up and captain Ruben Dias was forced off at half-time.

Guardiola confirmed all three are out for the season with Nathan Ake also nursing an ankle problem.

"Everything can happen, if it happened in 56 seconds (against Madrid), it can happen in three games. So calm and prepare for Wolves on Wednesday."

Guardiola freshened his side up with four changes to the side that started in the Bernabeu with

Bernardo Silva, Foden and Riyad Mahrez were left on the bench.

City's strength in depth shone through as Sterling, Jack Grealish, Ilkay Gundogan and Oleksandr Zinchenko all starred in a brilliant team performance.

Sterling has been a peripheral figure in recent months, but scored his first league goals since February at a vital time.

The England international opened the scoring by nodding home Joao Cancelo's header across the box.

AFP

Milan close in on title glory after Tonali double sinks Verona

Milan, Italy - Sandro Tonali fired AC Milan closer to the Serie A title with a brace in Sunday's 3-1 win at Verona which maintained their two-point lead over Inter Milan at the top of the league.

Italy midfielder Tonali struck with almost identical goals created by Rafael Leao either side of half-time before Alessandro Florenzi completed the scoring near the end to leave Milan needing four points from their final two

games to claim a first Scudetto since 2011.

Their superior record in this season's Milan derbies gives the seven-time European champions an advantage which would keep them ahead of champions Inter should the two local rivals end the season level on points.

"I'm in love with my players," said coach Stefano Pioli to DAZN.

"I see the effort they put in

every day and I know the journey we've been on... we've got to keep this concentration, determination and belief in the final two games."

Milan overcame the toughest test of their run-in against ninth-placed Verona and now host Europe-chasing Atalanta next weekend before travelling to Sassuolo on the closing weekend of what has been an enthralling campaign.

Inter meanwhile are in Sardinia on Sunday against a Cagliari team fighting for its Serie A life, with their final opponents Sampdoria and the small matter of the Italian Cup final against Juventus on Wednesday further complicating matters.

Tonali's double was the second time in three matches he has been crucial to Milan's title charge after also netting a late winner at Lazio a fortnight ago.

Meanwhile, Giorgio Altare's thumping header in stoppage time handed Cagliari a dramatic 1-1 draw at Salernitana which kept their survival hopes alive.

The 23-year-old's last-gasp effort, which came just moments after his team had a penalty revoked following a long VAR check, ensured that Cagliari stay a single point behind 17th-placed Salernitana.

AFP



AC Milan's Sandro Tonali (R) celebrates with Alessandro Florenzi (AFP)

Atletico edge past weakened Real Madrid, Sevilla peg back Villarreal

Madrid, Spain - Atletico Madrid won a La Liga derby against Real Madrid for the first time in six years on Sunday as a 1-0 victory left Diego Simeone's side on the cusp of securing Champions League qualification.

Yannick Carrasco's first-half penalty proved enough at the Wanda Metropolitano against a heavily weakened Real Madrid, who took the chance to rotate after their incredible Champions League semi-final comeback against Manchester City on Wednesday.

With Karim Benzema, Luka Modric and Thibaut Courtois among those on the bench for the already-crowned champions, Atletico took advantage, even if they missed a string of chances that made the contest far more uncomfortable than it needed to be.

Carlo Ancelotti made a raft of changes to his starting line-up as only Toni Kroos, Casemiro and Eder Militao remained from the team that pulled off the sensa-



Atletico Madrid's Sime Vrsaljko (L) fights for the ball with Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior (AFP)

tional victory over City.

Their better head-to-head record over Betis means they will be guaranteed to finish in the top four if Betis fail to win away at Valencia on Tuesday.

If Betis beat Valencia, Atletico

can make sure of their spot themselves by winning away at Elche on Wednesday.

"It is very important to qualify and we have to get one more win in three games to achieve it," said Atletico captain Koke. "If we

work like this, we'll get there."

Sevilla's place also looks almost sealed after a 1-1 draw away at Villarreal earlier on Sunday gave them a seven-point cushion over Betis.

AFP

Marseille on track for Champions League spot with win at Lorient

Paris, France - Marseille grabbed back second place in Ligue 1 on Sunday with a 3-0 win at Lorient that puts them firmly on track for Champions League football next season.

Jorge Sampaoli-coached Marseille were denied a place in the Europa Conference League final by Feyenoord on Thursday, but they are eyeing a direct ticket to the Champions League group stage next season after opening up a three-point lead over Monaco.

Goals from Bamba Dieng, Matteo Guendouzi and Gerson gave Marseille a straightforward win in Brittany.

"We're very happy with this result today, which wasn't easy but was really important," Sampaoli said.

"I think that after a match like the one against Feyenoord, we found the right sort of play to give our response."

PSG, already crowned champions, were held 2-2 by Troyes, who are owned by the same Abu Dhabi group as Manchester City, in the late game.



Lorient's Fabien Lemoine (R) and Marseille's Matteo Guendouzi battle for the ball during their Ligue 1 match on Sunday (AFP)

"We maybe lacked a bit of tension which comes with competition, but more generally I thought the team deserved the victory," PSG boss Mauricio Pochettino told reporters.

"We have won the title, our objective has been fulfilled, now we have to respect the competition, and I think we did that," he added.

Kylian Mbappe played the full 90 minutes for PSG as discussions about his future persist with

Real Madrid reportedly interested in the World Cup winner but PSG desperate to keep him.

Mbappe's mother Fayza Lamari on Thursday denied a French report that he had agreed in principle to remain at PSG for up to three years.

She tweeted that there was no agreement "with Paris Saint-Germain (or with any other club)" and that "discussions... are continuing calmly".

AFP