

► NEWS BRIEF

BATTASHI ELECTED CHAIRMAN OF GFOW FOR THIRD TIME

Muscat - Nabhan al Battashi has been re-elected chairman of the Board of Directors of General Federation of Oman Workers (GFOW) for the third time.

The election was held during the fourth conference of the GFOW on Wednesday.

As many as 291 members of worker unions elected the chairman and members of the GFOW Board of Directors for the 2023-2027 term. The process was carried out through an e-election system.

The new board includes Ibrahim al Balushi, Aida al Hashemi, Is'haq al Kharousi, Ammar al Ghufaili, Hamid al Ma'mari, Mahboob al Rahili, Suad al Sulaimi, Mohammed al Hinai, Taiba al Hasani and Nasser al Araiimi.

09



Islamic Jihad announces truce in Gaza

GCC expands financial footprint in MENA

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Building on their long-standing history of supporting the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Pakistan, the GCC countries have significantly expanded and diversified their financial ties with the region in recent years through official financing (deposits and loans), investment and remittances, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Wednesday.

In the last four years (2018-2022), GCC countries provided about US\$54bn in balance of payments and budget financing to the MENA emerging market and middle-income economies and Pakistan, with additional support planned, the IMF noted in its Regional Economic Outlook - Middle East and Central Asia report released on Wednesday.

"They (GCC states) have also supported the region's low-income countries and fragile and conflict-affected states through debt relief, including the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative and the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative," the IMF said. The fund noted that GCC debt relief to some MENA



GCC debt relief to some MENA countries (Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia) and Pakistan totalled about US\$1.3bn at the end of 2022

IMF

countries (Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia) and Pakistan totalled about US\$1.3bn at the end of 2022.

In response to higher international food prices, GCC members committed humanitarian support to countries facing food insecurity, including a US\$10bn package launched by the Arab Coordination Group, the IMF said.

"They (GCC states) have also expanded their financial support by contributing to multilateral

institutions, including IMF loan facilities (Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust) and partnerships between the World Bank and GCC bilateral and multilateral financial institutions. As more financial support is channelled through or in collaboration with multilateral institutions, GCC financing is expected to support economic reforms in recipient countries," the fund added.

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US envoy for Yemen in region to bolster peace negotiations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking is in the region to advance ongoing efforts to secure a new Yemeni agreement and launch a comprehensive peace process.

Special Envoy Lenderking will be travelling to Oman and Saudi Arabia during his visit to the region, the US Department of State has stated. He will meet with Yemeni, Omani, Saudi and international partners to discuss their coordinated efforts to further ongoing talks.

"The United States is working closely with the UN, Saudi Arabia, Oman and other partners to build on the UN-mediated truce, which has delivered the longest period of calm since the war began, to support an inclusive, Yemeni-led political process that permits Yemenis to shape a brighter future for their country."

In a briefing to the United Nations Security Council last month, the special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said it has been one year since the parties agreed to a truce under UN auspices. "Yemen is again at a critical juncture. The truce has continued to deliver well beyond its expiration six months ago. And the parties are engaging on next steps. I believe we have not



Tim Lenderking

seen such a serious opportunity for making progress towards ending the conflict in eight years."

He added that the parties have recently shown that negotiations can deliver results. In March, the parties agreed in Switzerland under the auspices of the United Nations to release almost 900 conflict-related detainees from all sides. They also agreed to meet again in May to make further progress on their commitment as part of the Stockholm Agreement to release all conflict-related detainees.

Grundberg informed that discussions are also ongoing among regional and Yemeni stakeholders. "Representatives of Saudi Arabia and Oman have recently been in Sana'a, where they engaged in constructive dialogue. Saudi representatives have also held productive discussions with members of the Presidential Leadership Council in Riyadh."

Sudanese residents stuck back home hopeful of early return

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The conflict in Sudan has displaced hundreds of thousands of people as they try to reach safe borders. While a few Sudanese residents of Oman have been able to return to the sultanate, there are many who are praying the war in Sudan ends soon so they can return to their adopted country.

The fighting - which began on April 15 - arose from a bitter power struggle between the leaders of Sudan's regular army and a rival paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Due to the situation, many Sudanese residents of the sultanate have not been able return to Oman.

Muscat Daily spoke to a few Sudanese expatriates, who said their families are stuck back home but they are hopeful of their early return. Abu Tibian said that many of his countrymen working in the sultanate are still stuck back home. "My family - wife and four children - are in Sudan. I thank God that they



Evacuees arriving at a naval base in Jeddah on April 26 (AFP)

were able to leave the conflict zone in the capital Khartoum. We are now communicating with the Sudanese Embassy in the sultanate for their return soon."

He wished that the Arab countries cooperate and push "for an end to the deadly conflict so that peace and security can prevail again throughout Sudan".

Another Sudanese resident Ahmed said his wife and daughter went on a vacation to Sudan and have not been able to return. He described the situation in the country as still worrying as danger lurks everywhere. "I am in touch with the Sudanese com-

munity and the Sudanese Embassy in Oman to help them return soon."

He appealed to all the countries surrounding Sudan, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, "to help our families and friends who are stuck in Sudan and for peace to prevail between the warring factions".

An official at the Sudanese Embassy in the sultanate said it, in cooperation with the Sudanese community in Muscat, formed a committee to find out the number of people stuck in Sudan, following which it contacted the Omani Embassy in Khartoum to evacuate the stranded.

"The embassy has already succeeded in evacuating some of the stranded and bring them to Oman. Now, the embassy in cooperation with the embassies of Ethiopia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, is arranging the return of more than 560 people soon to Oman. These include employees and families residing in the sultanate."

Meanwhile, at least 334,000 people have become internally displaced in Sudan since fighting broke out, according to the UN.

RAISI ON LANDMARK VISIT TO SYRIA



Visiting Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi hailed Syria's Bashar al Assad on Wednesday for overcoming sanctions and achieving "victory" in the country's 12-year civil war, in which Tehran has been a major ally. Raisi's visit is the first by an Iranian president to Syria since the war broke out, and comes at a time when more regional capitals are re-engaging with the internationally isolated government in Damascus

See also [Page 09](#)



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MTCIT to hold drones programme from June

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) will conduct a competition for drones with the objective of spreading awareness of the importance of these remote controlled flying robots. An official at MTCIT said, "The ministry, in partnership with Sultan Qaboos University and support of Ooredoo, will launch 'Oman Competition for Drones'. The annual event will feature drones equipped with artificial intelligence systems. The programme will include workshops and training courses to develop and refine skills of participants." The official informed that the first edition of the programme will start in June 2023 and conclude in February 2024. Programme courses will be held at Sultan Qaboos University from



4pm to 7pm.

According to the official, the programme targets 120 students and graduates of colleges and universities who are looking to acquire new technical skills that enable them to actively participate in implementing technical solutions and contribute to building the national economy and creating jobs in the field of drones. It also aims to prepare and support the winning participants to compete in regional and international competitions.

The MTCIT official further explained that the training programme combines theory and practice with emphasis on the practical aspects. The students accepted for the programme will be divided into six batches, each consisting of 20 participants. Each batch will undergo a training programme consisting of four training modules. "The training programmes will include familiarisation with components of drones, laws governing drones, operation and safety

procedures, and workshops on how to assemble and test drones. It will also include training in management of Windows and Linux operating systems." MTCIT has set conditions to accept participants, including Omani nationality, be a university student pursuing a Bachelor's degree or a graduate with Bachelor's degree, and have knowledge of programming languages, including Python. "Candidates should also have prior experience with drones, be fluent in English to understand the programme content and commit to complete it within the specified period. Candidates must have technical skills in designing, installation, welding and fault repair." The deadline for registration is May 11, 2023. MTCIT has invited interested students to register via [https:// makeen.gov.om/ AIDrones](https://makeen.gov.om/AIDrones)

RO23.6mn water project launched in Musandam



Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama) launched a RO23.6mn water sustainability system in Musandam on Wednesday. The event was held under the patronage of Sayyid Ibrahim bin Saeed al Busaidi, Governor of Musandam, in the presence of several dignitaries and residents of the governorate, at Khasab Hotel. The project includes supplying water to 70 coastal villages via four floating desalination units at



a cost of RO 6.6mn, and a 10,000m³ per day desalination plant in Khasab and several desalination units in Musandam governorate at a cost over RO17mn. With the new infrastructure, production capacity of desalina-

tion units in the governorate has now reached over 18,000m³ per day. Nama informed that it has expanded its water desalination capacity in the wilayat of Bukha from 1,900m³ per day to 2,900m³ per day, and in Dibba from 2,850m³ per day to 3,850m³ per day. 'A well water desalination plant has been established in Madha of production capacity 2,000m³ per day.' The project also includes several storage tanks, according to the latest international specifications, to meet water demand for a period of no less than 48 hours.

Tender Notice

Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), announces following E-Tender for 2023:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Deadline for Specifications Request	Deadline for tenders bids	Tender Price
19/2023	Oracle Infrastructure Support Renewal with local support for one year	10 May 2023	24 May 2023	25 RO

Interested companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender document from the E-Tendering website: <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. The Vendors must provide **Electronic Bank Guarantee** issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of (2%) of the Tender value valid for (120) days on website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> and addressed to Public Authority for Social Insurance.

CORRESPONDANCE:

1. Tender inquiry : All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at E-Tendering system (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
2. E-Tendering system inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering system technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: Tel : +968 24402200 , E-mail : etenderhd@ita.gov.om
PASI is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other tender that may be received

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Suhail Bahwan and Nissan part ways

Our Correspondent Muscat

Nissan Middle East has announced that it will soon be entering into a new partnership in the Oman market. Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) is no longer the commercial agency for Nissan and Infiniti cars in Oman. 'In line with our ongoing efforts to deliver and upkeep an exceptional service to all our customers, we are in the process of entering into a new partnership in the Oman market,' Nissan Middle East stated on its website. Pending the appointment of a new distributor for Nissan prod-

'In line with our ongoing efforts to deliver and upkeep an exceptional service to all our customers, we are in the process of entering into a new partnership in the Oman market'

ucts in Oman, Nissan has appointed Precision Tune Auto Care (Opal Marketing and Industry) to provide repairs and maintenance of Nissan vehicles, covered by Nissan warranty booklets, at Precision Tune Auto Care centres located in Oman. In a public advertisement, Precision Tune stated that effective from April 1, 2023, SBA is no longer Nissan's authorised distributor of Infiniti vehicles and

parts and provision of related services, and effective from April 7, 2023, SBA is no longer Nissan's authorised distributor of Nissan vehicles and parts and provision of related services. For repair and maintenance requirements covered by Nissan and Infiniti warranty booklets, customers are requested to book appointments by calling toll free numbers 80001234 or 80004455

Indian Community Festival back after 5 years, to be held on May 5-6

Muscat - After a gap of five years, the 15th edition of the Indian Community Festival will be held in Amerat on May 5 and 6. It will feature a blend of Omani and Indian cultures and traditions. Indian Social Club's Kerala Wing launched the festival in 2001 which was then called 'Keralotsav'. The festival was re-branded to 'Indian Community Festival' in 2014 and its venue moved from Marah Land in Qurm to Amerat.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, George Wilson, chairman of the event, said, "The festival will include a series of programmes to attract audiences, and a variety of food and handicraft stalls." The chief guest this year is K K Shailaja, former Health Minister of Kerala. "We chose our chief guest keeping in mind the theme for this year, which is 'Women - the fortress and fortitude of the changing world'. She did an in-

credibly good job as a health minister, especially during COVID-19," Wilson explained. He informed that Muscat Science Festival is part of the Indian Community Festival in which students from various schools will present projects. Top performers of the festival will win awards. The science festival was held online during the pandemic. "There is no entry fee to the festival venue, so we expect 50,000 to 60,000 visitors this year," Wilson said.

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We express our heartfelt condolences to

Mukhtar Hasan

**Hisham, Talal and Aliya Hasan
and the entire family**

on the sad loss of

Anisa

beloved wife, mother and grandmother.

We stand with the bereaved family in this
time of grief and pray to Allah to grant
the departed soul eternal peace.



إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون.

Board of Directors and Management of
Renaissance Services



National Museum offers peek into history at Muscat airport

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The National Museum on Wednesday inaugurated its corner in the departure hall of the Muscat International Airport as part of its mission to offer the world an opportunity to know and experience the rich cultural heritage of Oman.

The new corner that comes following a cooperation with the Oman Airports was inaugurated in the presence of Sheikh Ayman bin Ahmed al Hosani, CEO of Oman Airports; Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, secretary general of the National Museum, and employees of the National Museum and Oman Airports.

The corner aims to enrich the cultural experience of travellers exiting the country through the Muscat International Airport - an important gateway to the world.

"The corner transfers the distinctive cultural experience from the National Museum to the corridors of Muscat International Airport," said Moosawi of the National Museum.

"Through it, travellers can learn about the civilisational, historical and cultural dimensions of Oman, encouraging them to visit



the historical and cultural landmarks, which contributes to supporting the museum and the tourism sector."

The Oman Airports CEO projected this corner as an addition to the revitalisation of cultural tourism in the sultanate. "Oman has a great history and multiple treasures, and it is important even for the transit passengers to know about these treasures," said Sheikh Hosani, while explaining the reason for having this corner at the departure.

"There is no doubt that the promotion of cultural tourism has a great impact on the sector, and help boost the influx of tourists to Oman to learn about

its cultural heritage."

He informed that the Muscat International Airport is working round the clock to rapidly return to the pre pandemic levels.

"We hope, during the coming months, will touch the numbers that we achieved in 2019 indicating the return of tourism activity to Oman. We hope witness an increase of tourist inflow compared to 2019 by the end of this year."

The National Museum corner is divided into several sections, most notably the Omani Khanjar (dagger) and the Culture of Scent, Oman and East Africa, the Diba Hoard, and Samad Period.

The corner includes 23 artefacts that will be displayed for a

period of five years, subject to extension and renewal, dating back to different historical periods.

Among the exhibits are memorial pieces presented to the Sultans of Zanzibar, which reflect the cultural impact of Oman in East Africa, in addition to a selection of precious objects from the Early Iron Age (1,300-600BC) in the Diba Hoard section. These items were recently discovered at a collective grave site in Diba, on the eastern edge of the Musandam Peninsula.

The corner also displays two jars dating back to Samad period in Oman (from 300BC to 100-200AD).

Rains fed over 18mn m³ of water to dams in 8 days

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Recent rainfall channeled 18.832mn cubic metres (mnm³) of water into various dams in Oman during the last week of April, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resource (MAFWR) said on Wednesday.

Rainfall during the eight days from April 22 to 29 resulted in the rise of water in dams up to 83.312mnm³ of the total capacity of 130.872mnm³.

According to a statement by the ministry, the Wadi Dayqah Dam in the wilayat of Qurayat in Muscat gathered the highest volume of water during the period. An addition of 8.9mnm³ of water in the dam raised its reserve to 69.13mnm³ - almost 70 per cent of its total storage capacity.

About 4.14mnm³ of water got into the Sur Protection Dam in South Sharqiyah, 1.7mnm³ in different dams in Amerat, 1.3mnm³ in dams in Al Qabel in North



Sharqiyah and 1.2mnm³ in dams in Dakhaliyah.

According to MAFWR, Oman faces a shortfall of 316mnm³ of water every year. The annual contribution of renewable water from various sources is esti-

mated at about 1,318mnm³ and the pressure on these sources has been increasing, especially for the demand in the agriculture sector that consumes almost 83 per cent of the annual water needs of the country.

GCC states expand financial footprint in MENA region

Continued from Page 01

In addition to official financing, GCC countries have significantly increased their foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) economies and Pakistan over the past decade, estimated at US\$55bn in 2021, an increase of 85 per cent since 2011, the IMF estimated.

The GCC investment is spread across most emerging markets and middle-income economies of the region, but Morocco has received the lion's share, totalling US\$13bn in 2021, according to the IMF.

'Quarterly data suggests that the upward momentum of FDI continued in early 2022. The increase in inward FDI from the GCC supports private investment, productivity and growth in recipient countries and, in some cases, helps meet external financing needs, contributing to shared regional macroeconomic stability,' the fund explained.

The strong expansion in economic activity across the GCC, mainly because of higher oil prices, has boosted labour demand in the six GCC countries, supporting higher-income and employment opportunities, including for migrant workers.

'As a result, inward remittances in countries (Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and, to some extent, Lebanon) with strong ties to the GCC rose in 2021 and remained high in the first half of 2022,' the IMF noted.

These trends, which in some cases also reflect robust flows from other major remittances-sending regions (Europe), have helped to alleviate pressure on the external accounts and the cost-of-living crisis affecting many households in MENA emerging market and middle-income and low-income countries, supporting consumption growth and economic activity.

Two researchers to represent Oman at Nobel laureates' meet

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has announced the names of two researchers who will be representing Oman in the 72nd Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting in Germany from June 25 to 30.

Dr Mohammed Salim al

Alawi, consultation-liaison psychiatrist at the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital; and Dr Faris Abdullah al Farsi from the same hospital, will attend this year's gathering and avail the chance to interact with about 40 Nobel laureates as well as 600 young scientists coming from over 80 countries.

'This unique annual gathering is exclusive for outstanding

undergraduate, master and PhD students, as well as post-doctorate researchers in the physiology and medicine fields,' the ministry stated.

The Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting has been happening since 1951. The participation of the duo at this year's meeting would help build the capabilities of Omani researchers, transfer knowledge and ex-

change experiences and refine the scientific and research skills of the Omani youth, the ministry further said.

The meeting would provide an opportunity to the Omani youth to get acquainted with Nobel laureates closely, know the latest scientific developments, and develop partnership with scientists from around the world, the ministry added.

INTERVIEW

ALI DAUD, CHAIRMAN OF OMAN AMERICAN BUSINESS CENTER (OABC)

Spotlight on US-Oman FTA: Promoting bilateral trade, economic growth

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman American Business Center (OABC) was formed in 2003 to foster robust economic and trade activities between the United States and Oman. In an interview with *Muscat Daily*, Ali Daud, chairman of OABC, discussed the crucial role played by the OABC in promoting economic relations between the US and Oman, emphasising the significance of the bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in facilitating growth in trade. He provided an insight into the benefits, challenges, and future prospects of the US-Oman FTA, as well as the exciting initiatives undertaken by the OABC to raise awareness and empower businesses to leverage the Free Trade Agreement.

Can you briefly describe the role of the OABC in promoting bilateral trade, business and investment between the US and Oman?

For the past 20 years, the OABC has played a vital role in promoting bilateral trade between the United States and Oman. We support Omani and American businesses by facilitating critical connections within the private and public sectors, providing advocacy, hosting educational workshops and networking events as well as supporting international delegations and trade missions.

The US and Oman have a Free Trade



US-Oman FTA represents an opportunity for Omani businesses to expand market for Omani goods and services in the US and makes sourcing from the US more cost effective

ALI DAUD

Agreement since 2009. What are the key benefits of this FTA for Omani companies keen to export/import to/from the US market?

There are only 20 countries in the world that have a Free Trade Agreement in place with the United States, and this gives Oman a huge competitive advantage. By removing or reducing tariffs and other trade barriers, the FTA represents an opportunity for Omani businesses to expand the market for Omani goods and services in the United States. It also makes sourcing from the US more cost effective.

In your view, how has the FTA impacted economic and trade relations between the two countries? How do you see the US-Oman business relations evolving in the future, and what opportunities and challenges do you anticipate?

Since the implementation of the FTA,

Oman's export to the US has more than doubled. In 2022, bilateral trade between the two countries was valued at over US\$4bn (a record year), and the United States is the leading buyer of Oman's non-oil products.

In the past several months, significant activities to boost the bilateral relationship have been taking place. A first-ever strategic dialogue between the countries' top senior government officials took place in Oman, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Oman and the EXIM Bank of the US was signed and more meetings to increase trade between the two nations continue to take place both in the US and here in Oman.

It is important for Omani businesses to remember the FTA is an agreement signed by governments, but it's up to the businesses to use it. That is why OABC plays such a significant role, particularly with our new FTA training programme.

What opportunities does the US-Oman FTA present for small and medium-sized businesses in Oman?

It is very simple, the sultanate's FTA with the US makes accessing the world's largest economy easier. Plus, small and medium enterprises will benefit from an immediate cost advantage whether they are looking to export their products to the US or source goods from the US.

You mentioned about launching an awareness programme focusing on the US-Oman FTA. What inspired the OABC to launch the FTA Awareness Program? Can you elaborate on key features and components of this programme?

While the trade between the US and Oman has reached a record high, there is still so much opportunity for Omani businesses. We work very closely with the US Embassy in Muscat, and together we realised that

there was a need to build greater awareness and understanding of the FTA and how it can bolster international trade, attract investment and create jobs for both Omanis and Americans.

This programme will offer a survey for companies to assess their export readiness, a series of five interactive webinars, a two-day executive training and export readiness audit for those companies, which are ready to export, new educational materials and a black-tie gala recognising those American and Omani companies, which demonstrate best practices when it comes to the FTA.

Can you briefly talk about the objectives of the FTA Awareness Program, and how do these align with the broader mission of the OABC?

The aim of this project is to help promote the special economic partnership between Oman and the United States, as reflected in the FTA with the goal of increasing awareness of this agreement amongst Omani and American importers/exporters and to ultimately increase trade and jobs in both the markets.

This aligns with the work that the Oman American Business Center does every day with our members and the Oman business community. This programme, funded by the US Embassy in Muscat, allows us to further our efforts and reach out to more people both in Oman and United States.

In your view, what are some of the most common misconceptions or misunderstandings about the US-Oman FTA, and how does the FTA Awareness Program address these? Many people believe the US-Oman FTA only benefits Americans, but this isn't the case. For the past two years the trade surplus has been greatly in Oman's favour reaching over US\$1bn. We hope this programme will not only improve the public perception but also greatly increase both awareness and understanding as how to best use the FTA.

What advice would you give to Omani companies that are looking to start export to the US market under the FTA?

They should get involved with the Oman American Business Center. Our upcoming FTA programme offers everyone the chance to learn more about the FTA. Whether trading with the US is a top company objective or something you're considering in the next several years, we will provide you with the tools and resources to make it happen. Furthermore, all of our members benefit from being part of Oman's largest and most active business networking organisation in the country.

[For more information on becoming a member of the Oman American Business Center or taking part in the FTA program, the companies and individuals can contact us at info@oabc.org or call at +968 9418 9500]

OBITUARY



We express our heartfelt
condolences to
HH Sayyid Shabib Bin Taimur Al Said
and
Samir J Fancy
on the sad passing of their
beloved sister

Anisa

We stand with the bereaved family in
this time of grief and pray to Allah to
grant the departed soul eternal peace.



إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون.

Board of Directors and Management of
Renaissance Services



النهضة
Renaissance

Middle East growth set for 'soft patch' in 2023: IMF

Dubai, UAE – Middle Eastern and North African economies are headed for a slowdown this year, the International Monetary Fund said Wednesday, warning impoverished countries including conflict-hit Sudan will continue to suffer high inflation.

Growth will hit a "soft patch", down from last year's 5.3 per cent to 3.1 per cent in 2023, the IMF said in its regular regional outlook.

"The decline in growth is an acceptable result in the context of addressing the most difficult economic problem that we suffer from in a large number of countries in the world – inflation," said Jihad Azour, the IMF's Middle East and Central Asia director.

The report covers 32 countries and territories from the wealthy, resource-rich Gulf to North Africa and war-torn Yemen as well as Central Asia and Pakistan.

It said low-income countries in those regions would recover from last year's contraction of 0.6 per cent to modest growth of 1.3 per cent, while inflation would ease from 83 per cent to a still-high 46 per cent.

However, Azour said the drop "is not sufficient compared to the needs of these countries", which include Sudan, Yemen, Mauritania, Somalia and Djibouti.

The economic impact of fighting in Sudan, which broke out last month between rival generals and has paralysed the country, is hard to assess, he told AFP.

"It is difficult to predict, especially since this conflict erupted a



short time ago, and it is not clear how it will develop."

Sudan's long-term problems and "additional burdens" imposed by the conflict make it "difficult to maintain a degree of

tional risks and uncertainties also on other countries," the IMF official later told journalists at a news conference.

Headline inflation in the regions covered by the report

The OPEC+ cartel slashed production by two million barrels per day in October. Major oil powers announced a further cut of one million barrels per day last month.

"The extension of the OPEC+ agreement to reduce oil production had an impact on the oil-exporting countries," Azour said.

He also said closer diplomatic ties across the region, including a March agreement by heavy-weight rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran to resume ties, lower "tension" and were "a good thing for the economy".

"All breakthroughs are positive, as they reduce risks on the one hand, and open new horizons for economic movement and investment on the other hand."

AFP

Real GDP growth for oil-exporting countries would slow from last year's 5.7% to 3.1% in 2023, the IMF said, attributing decrease to a cut in oil production under OPEC+ agreement

economic stability given the already weak economic structure", Azour said.

"What we can see so far is that there's an additional toll on neighbouring countries in terms of refugees, and there are addi-

would remain unchanged at 14.8 per cent, while real GDP growth for oil-exporting countries would slow from last year's 5.7 per cent to 3.1 per cent, the IMF said, attributing the decrease to a cut in crude production.



Maersk strengthens its presence in Oman with new office at Sohar Freezone

Muscat – AP Moller – Maersk (Maersk), a global integrator of logistics, inaugurated a new corporate office at Sohar Freezone in Oman on Wednesday.

Present at the inauguration were Christopher Cook, managing director, Maersk UAE, Oman, and Qatar; Omar al Mahrizi, chief executive officer, Sohar Freezone, and senior leaders from Maersk and Sohar Freezone.

Cook said, "Oman is a significant market for us where we are committed to serving our important customers by bringing world-class integrated logistics solutions closer to them. Our ambition is to simplify the supply chains, make them efficient and transparent, and thus contribute towards the Oman Vision 2040 that aims at making Oman a competitive economy."

He added, "Sohar Freezone was a natural choice for us to set up our new office because of its strategic location at the port and

the world-class infrastructure of road network and air connectivity on offer."

The new office in Oman, the third one in the country after Muscat and Salalah, will allow Maersk to get closer to its customers and create meaningful interfaces with them. Besides ocean transportation, Maersk will offer a host of services and solutions to its customers in Oman, such as landside transportation, including cross border movement of cargo, customs clearances, warehousing and distribution, cold chain logistics and air freight.

Mahrizi said, "As a full-integrated logistics and industrial hub enabling global business partnerships, we are pleased to welcome Maersk, a global integrated logistics company, as our latest tenant at Sohar Freezone.

This partnership will enable us to streamline our operations further as we continue to focus on logistics and supply chain op-

timisation and strengthen our position as a smart logistics hub. Together with our partners, Sohar continues to support Oman's ambitions to further expand the transport and logistics sector, as per the objectives laid out in the Oman Vision 2040."

The new office complements the several other initiatives Maersk has undertaken to strengthen its footprint in Oman. In November 2022, Maersk added Khazaen Dry Port to its extensive 'Port of Call' network, offering transportation, container terminal, and reefer container services to import and export goods easily.

Around the same time, Maersk also launched a service through the Port of Salalah in Oman as a gateway to Yemen, ensuring seamless cargo movement.

This has increased efficiency for the customers and has the potential to eliminate unexpected costs.

White House 'will not negotiate' on debt ceiling

Washington, US – US President Joe Biden, the Republicans and the US economy were on a disastrous collision course Wednesday after the White House made clear it will not negotiate over extending the nation's debt limit.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warns that the government will run out of money and default on its debts as soon as June 1, if there is no authorisation for more borrowing.

That would mean inability to pay for everything from social programs to the military and – in a cataclysmic blow to world financial markets – the national debt.

Congressional leaders have been invited to meet with Biden on May 9, next week.

Republicans, who control the House of Representatives, insist they will only extend the debt limit if Biden first agrees to steep cuts in the federal budget. That, says the White House, is a no-no.

"This is not an issue that we will negotiate on," Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

Jean-Pierre said Biden was willing to discuss "a separate process to address the budget" cuts but said the debt ceiling issue should be entirely set aside.

"It is Congress' constitutional duty to prevent default," she said. "Given the limited time Congress now has, it is clear that the only practical path to avoid default is for Congress to suspend the debt limit without conditions."

The test of political will – often likened to a game of chicken in the face of an oncoming train – comes right after Biden announced that he will seek a sec-



US President Joe Biden

ond term in 2024.

Failure, triggering a default and potential economic chaos, would throw the election into dangerous new territory for the 80-year-old, who is staking his bid on a record of rebuilding the economy after the Covid-19 pandemic.

'What has changed?'

Debt limit extensions are generally an uncontroversial annual accounting maneuver that allows the government to pay for extra expenses already incurred.

However, Republicans – whose party has come under the sway of a hard-right-wing faction in the House – have chosen to use the issue as leverage on their broader bid to slash government spending and reduce the deficit.

House Republicans passed a bill laying out exactly this -- a combination of extending the debt ceiling in return for steep spending cuts across an array of

government programs.

The bill has virtually no chance of passing the Democratic-led Senate and would in any case be vetoed by Biden. Jean-Pierre said Biden sees the proposed Republican cuts as "unreasonable" and "dangerous."

Asked repeatedly whether Biden will eventually have to cave into Republican demands in order to save the country from default, Jean-Pierre insisted that the onus rests entirely on Congress.

"It is Congress' duty to get this done," she said. "It's a question for them."

Jean-Pierre noted that Republicans in Congress had backed three annual debt limit extensions with little opposition when Donald Trump had been in power, prior to Biden.

"What has changed?" she asked.

AFP

Indian budget airline Go First files for bankruptcy, blames 'faulty' engines

New Delhi, India – Debt-laden Indian budget airline Go First has filed for bankruptcy protection, blaming "faulty" engines from US aerospace company Pratt & Whitney for the grounding of about half its fleet.

Go First was India's fifth-biggest domestic carrier as of March, with 6.9 per cent of the market share, according to government figures.

The carrier has been locked in a dispute with its exclusive supplier of engines for its Airbus A320neo fleet over issues it said had cost it US\$1.32bn in lost revenues and additional expenses.

Its bankruptcy was a necessary step due to the "ever-increasing number of failing engines supplied by Pratt & Whitney's International Aero Engines", which had led to the grounding of 25 aircraft, Go First



said in a statement on Tuesday.

It went on to accuse Pratt & Whitney of failing to comply with an arbitration order directing it to release spare leased engines that would have allowed a return to full operations.

The engine-maker said in a statement that it was complying with the arbitration ruling and was continuing "to prioritise delivery schedules for all customers".

Go First, owned by Indian conglomerate Wadia Group, said on its website that it had cancelled flights scheduled from May 3 to May 5 for "operational reasons".

Local media reports said Go First check-in counters were deserted at airports in New Delhi and other cities.

India's aviation sector is fiercely competitive, and several airlines have run aground due to

some combination of poor management, overleveraging and adverse market conditions.

Full-service carrier Jet Airways collapsed in 2019 with US\$1.2bn in debt after growing into one of the largest airlines in the country, leaving its 20,000 employees out of work.

Kingfisher Airlines closed in 2012 after it failed to repay loans worth millions of dollars to state-owned banks.

Its owner, beer tycoon Vijay Mallya, fled India four years later and battled his extradition from London to face financial fraud charges back home.

India's civil aviation minister Jyotiraditya Scindia said in a statement reported by local media that the government had been offering "every possible assistance" to Go First.

AFP

Iran seizes second oil tanker in Gulf waters

Dubai, US – Sanctions-hit Iran seized on Wednesday a second oil tanker in less than a week as tensions rise in the commercially vital Gulf waters.

A fleet of high-speed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) craft surrounded the Greek-owned Niovi as it travelled empty from Dubai to Fujairah, another port in the United Arab Emirates, the US military said.

The Panama-flagged vessel's seizure in the Strait of Hormuz comes six days after a similar incident also in the Gulf, which lies between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula and carries at least a third of the world's seaborne oil.



"A dozen IRGCN fast-attack craft swarmed the vessel in the middle of the strait," said a statement from the Bahrain-based US Fifth Fleet.

"The IRGCN subsequently forced the oil tanker to reverse course and head toward Iranian territorial waters off the coast of

Bandar Abbas, Iran," it said.

Iran has confirmed the seizure "following an order from the judiciary", the judiciary's Mizan Online news website said.

On Thursday, helicopter-borne Iranian navy commandos abseiled onto the deck of a Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker,

the Advantage Sweet, in the Gulf of Oman. It was then moved to Bandar Abbas, TankerTrackers.com said.

The two seizures come after the United States captured a Greek-managed tanker carrying Iranian oil, maritime security firm Ambrey said.

The Niovi's capture also followed a warning from Greek authorities of heightened risk after the US seizure, Ambrey added.

"Greek authorities had issued a warning that Greek shipping was at an increased risk from Iran after the detention of a Greek-managed Suezmax tanker carrying Iranian oil," it said.

AFP

Muscat Municipality dedicates public services for disabled

As part of its moral obligation to assist mobility and access of persons with special needs, Muscat Municipality participated in the first forum dedicated to persons with disabilities. The forum was opened on Monday under the patronage of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidi, governor of Muscat.

The municipality has set a number of laws and legislations that take into account the needs of persons with disabilities before licensing the construction of projects and public buildings in Mus-

cat governorate so that this segment of the population can move easily and conveniently in public and private places and buildings.

Slopes
There are technical requirements for the implementation of slopes and entrances so to fit the use of persons with disabilities. The slopes were made to provide easier movement and mobility, and include adequate protection standards and safety from falling, with the provision of guidance boards.



Vehicle parking
Muscat Municipality, in coordination with the concerned authorities, allocates parking spaces for vehicles of persons with disabilities in all public and private parking lots, so as to offer the nearest slots around the entrances and exits of places they visit, marked by special parking with guide plates.

Sidewalks
When designing the sidewalks and pathways, the municipality

takes into account that they are free from obstacles, and are non-slip, so that they are suitable for wheelchair owners with special needs. Width requirements are important for too.

Restrooms
Public toilets were also prepared to serve people with special needs, one for men and another for women, with the provision of spaces and detailed standards for the dimensions and measurements of the room.

GCET organises first career fair at college premises



The Global College of Engineering and Technology (GCET) organised its first career fair on Monday at the college premises.

The event was held under the auspices of Sayyid Munther bin Saif bin Hamed al Busaidi, chairman of Oman Equestrian Federation and in the presence of many eminent persons from different institutions from both public and private sectors, a press release stated.

The fair was held to support students, graduates and job seekers by providing with training and job opportunities, besides directing them and advising them on the requirements in today's job market.

Over 13 different companies - such as OQ, Oman Fiber Optic, Rihal, Huawei, Al Jenaibi International Automobiles, Tatweer Cyber Security, and Green Umbrella Recruitment to name a few - participated in the career fair,

the release informed.

Sulaiman al Balushi, in charge of career counseling, emphasised the importance of such events and their effect on the students and job seekers and their role in enriching the available opportunities in the job market. "These fairs and events come as an opportunity to gather different institutions from public and private sectors along with the students and job seekers under one umbrella to showcase and offer the available opportunities in the job market."

It is also considered a valuable opportunity to strengthen the relationships between academic institutions and other industries to exchange feedback and knowledge on how to properly design academic programmes and to know what the real requirements in today's job world are. "We are extremely happy about the success of this event."

MHD opens Jetour showroom, MG service centre, TyrePlus outlet



MHD ACERE, a leading automotive distributor in Oman has announced the relocation and enhancement of its MG Service Centre, as well as the opening of a brand new TyrePlus outlet and a second Jetour showroom in Mabela.

The MG Service Centre has been relocated to a new, more spacious location to better handle the ever-increasing demands of customers in Mabela.

The service centre will be of great benefit to MG owners in the area, offering them a more convenient facility to service their vehicles closer to home. The centre has also been upgraded to provide even better services to customers.

"With expertly trained professionals and a range of facilities to suit every need, including oil

change service, wheel balancing and alignment, AC check, car battery replacement, brake service, tyre puncture repair, and general car checks, the MG Service Centre is equipped to meet all of customers' automotive needs," the company stated.

The launch of the new TyrePlus outlet in Mabela is another exciting addition to MHD ACERE's lineup of offerings. TyrePlus is the only destination where customers can expect world-class brands like Michelin, BFGoodrich, Varta, Optima and a range of facilities to suit every need.

Jetour's second showroom in Mabela 'features a fully-equipped after-sales service centre tailored to provide customers with the highest level of service and support', company added.



A'Sharqiya Investments Holding Co. (SAOG)

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Chairman's Report for the Quarter ended March 31, 2023

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors, it gives me great pleasure to present the unaudited consolidated financial statements of A'Sharqiya Investment Holding Company (SAOG) and its subsidiary – Qalhat Real Estate Investments & Services LLC. (QREIS) - for the three month period ended March 31, 2023.

Overview of Operations and Financial Performance

A summary of the company's operating performance for the three-month period ended March 31, 2023 in comparison to the corresponding period in 2022 and the full year ended 2022 is presented below:

	(RO in '000)				
Quarter ended March 31, 2023	March 31 2023	March 31 2022	% / Increase (Decrease)	Full Year ended 2021	
Total Operating Income	379	487	(22.2)	1,150	
Profit after Tax (PAT)	195	312	(37.4)	531	
Total Assets	18,210	18,621	(2.2)	18,659	
Shareholder's Equity	14,478	14,873	(2.7)	14,804	

Un-Audited Separate Consolidated Condensed Statement Of Financial Position As At 31 March 2023

	31 March 2023	31 March 2022	31 December 2022	
	Parent RO	Group RO	Parent RO	Group RO
ASSETS				
Non-current assets				
Property and equipment	4,597	281,411	6,241	6,328
Lease receivables	-	4,007,185	-	4,718,372
Investment in subsidiary	250,000	-	250,000	-
Financial assets at FVOCI	8,412,938	8,412,938	9,540,710	9,540,710
Deferred tax assets	39,463	39,463	47,552	47,552
Financial assets at FVPTL	101,004	101,004	123,787	123,787
Investments in Bonds	237,329	237,329	-	-
Capital Work in Progress (Water net work)	-	-	-	282,870
Total	9,045,331	13,079,330	9,968,290	14,719,619
Current assets				
Lease receivables	-	711,118	-	584,242
Prepayments/Other receivables	315,773	662,292	400,879	708,808
Bank balances and cash	2,691,574	3,757,753	1,124,304	2,607,931
Total	3,007,347	5,131,163	1,525,183	3,900,981
Total assets	12,052,678	18,210,493	11,493,473	18,620,600
EQUITY				
Capital and reserves				
Share capital	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000
Legal reserve	1,638,945	1,722,279	1,445,116	1,528,450
Fair value reserve	781,712	781,712	1,079,842	1,079,842
Retained earnings	443,492	2,973,620	(834,385)	3,264,411
Equity attributable to equity holders of parent	11,864,149	14,477,611	10,690,573	14,872,703
Total equity	11,864,149	14,477,611	10,690,573	14,872,703
LIABILITIES				
Non-current liabilities				
Finance lease payable	-	3,378,678	-	3,395,013
End of service benefits	129,963	161,828	117,924	147,041
Total	129,963	3,540,506	117,924	3,542,054
Current liabilities				
Finance lease payable	-	16,266	-	15,204
Due to subsidiary	-	-	620,884	-
Accruals and other payables	22,877	78,056	43,077	94,051
Provision for taxation	35,689	98,054	21,015	96,588
Total	58,566	192,376	684,976	205,843
Total liabilities	188,529	3,732,882	802,900	3,747,897
Total equity and liabilities	12,052,678	18,210,493	11,493,473	18,620,600
Net assets per share	0.132	0.161	0.119	0.165

Un-Audited Separate And Consolidated Condensed Statement Of Comprehensive Income For Three Months Period Ended 31 March 2023

	31 March 2023	31 March 2022	
	Parent RO	Group RO	Parent RO
INCOME			
Finance income on lease receivables	0	104,058	0
Dividend income	200,919	200,919	329,156
Dividend from Subsidiary	400,000	-	-
Maintenance services income	-	16,656	-
Unrealised gain on assets at FVTPL	5,759	5,759	4,767
Realised gain on disposal of asset at FVTPL	3,344	3,344	-
Interest income	24,369	32,933	7,589
Other income	30,516	15,516	15,000
Operating income	664,907	379,185	356,512
EXPENSES			
Interest & finance expenses	(549)	(589)	(632)
Staff cost	(78,733)	(78,733)	(66,984)
Finance cost on lease payable	-	(44,682)	-
Depreciation	(926)	(8,258)	(837)
General administrative expenses	(34,577)	(35,469)	(33,124)
Operating expenses	(114,785)	(167,731)	(101,577)
Profit before taxation	550,122	211,454	254,935
Taxation	(6,859)	(16,059)	(15,045)
Profit for the period	543,263	195,395	239,890
Other comprehensive income:			
Net change in fair value of FVOCI financial assets	(126,060)	(126,060)	200,013
Deferred tax Adjustment for the period	0	0	0
Total comprehensive income for the period	417,203	69,335	439,903
Total comprehensive income attributable to :			
Equity holders of parent	417,203	69,335	439,903
Non-controlling interests	-	-	-
	417,203	69,335	439,903
Profit attributable to :			
Equity holders of parent	543,263	195,395	239,890
Non-controlling interests	-	-	-
	543,263	195,395	239,890
Earnings per share	0.006	0.002	0.003

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

Mohammed Ali Mohammed Al Fannah
Chairman

IN BRIEF

Suspect in Texas slayings arrested
Washington, US - A man accused of massacring five neighbours after they asked him to stop firing his rifle in his yard was captured on Tuesday after a days-long manhunt, Texas law enforcement said. Francisco Oropesa had eluded authorities since the shooting on Friday in the small town of Cleveland in southeastern Texas. "We now have this man in custody," San Jacinto County Sheriff Greg Capers told reporters at a press conference. "He was caught hiding in a closet underneath some laundry." The 38-year-old Mexican national is accused of attacking his neighbours after they allegedly asked him to stop shooting his semi-automatic AR-15 rifle because the noise was keeping a baby awake.

Laos political activist gunned down at cafe
Bangkok, Thailand - A prominent activist and critic of the Laos government has been gunned down at a cafe in the capital Vientiane, with graphic footage of the murder published online by state media. Communist Laos has long been criticised for its poor human rights record and failing to properly investigate the disappearances of government critics. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International condemned the murder and urged the Laos authorities to carry out a proper investigation. State news agency KPL on Monday shows a gunman in a brown shirt and black cap shooting Anousa 'Jack' Luangsuphom twice on Saturday. The KPL report said police were investigating the incident and searching for suspects.

8 dead in Brazil's Indigenous territory
Brasilia, Brazil - Eight people were found dead on Indigenous territory in northern Brazil, police said on Tuesday, where miners have been illegally occupying protected reserves. Federal police said in a statement that the bodies were found on Monday in the state of Roraima, and an investigation was underway. It did not provide the identities of the victims. Five others, including an Indigenous person, were killed over the weekend in the same area. AFP

World should prepare for El Nino, new record temperatures, says UN

Geneva, Switzerland - The United Nations warned on Wednesday of a growing likelihood the weather phenomenon El Nino will develop in coming months, fuelling higher global temperatures and possibly new heat records.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization said it now estimated there was a 60-per cent chance that El Nino would develop by the end of July, and an 80-per cent chance it would do so by the end of September.

"This will change the weather and climate patterns worldwide," Wilfran Moufouma Okia, head of WMO's regional climate prediction services division, told reporters in Geneva.

El Nino, which is a naturally occurring climate pattern typically associated with increased heat worldwide, as well as drought in some parts of the world and heavy rains elsewhere, last occurred in 2018-19.

Since 2020 though, the world has been hit with an exceptionally long La Nina - El Nino's cooling opposite - which ended earlier this year, ceding way to the current neutral conditions.

And yet, the UN has said the last eight years were the warmest ever recorded, despite La Nina's cooling effect stretching over nearly half that period.

Without that weather phenomenon, the warming situation could have been even worse.

strongest ever, with dire consequences. WMO pointed out that 2016 was 'the warmest year on record because of the 'double whammy' of a very powerful El Nino event and human-induced warming from greenhouse gases'.

Since the El Nino effect on global temperatures usually plays out the year after it emerges, the impact will likely be most apparent in 2024, it said.

"We are expecting in the coming two years to have a serious increase in the global temperatures," Okia said.

'More extreme weather'
Taalas highlighted that the expected arrival of El Nino could

have some positive effects, pointing out that it 'might bring respite from the drought in the Horn of Africa and other La Nina-related impacts'.

But it 'could also trigger more extreme weather and climate events' he said, stressing the need for effective early warning systems 'to keep people safe'.

No two El Nino events are the same and their effects depend, in part, on the time of year, WMO said, adding that it and national meteorological services would be closely monitoring developments.

The climate pattern occurs on average every two to seven years, and usually lasts nine to 12 months. AFP



A farmer walks along a dried-up rice field in Naic in the Philippine Province of Cavite on Wednesday (AFP)

Global heating spikes likely
La Nina 'acted as a temporary brake on global temperature increase', WMO chief Petteri Taalas said in a statement.

Now, he said, 'the world should prepare for the development of El Nino'.

The expected arrival of the warming climate pattern, he said, 'will most likely lead to a new spike in global heating and increase the chance of breaking temperature records'.

At this stage, there is no indication of the strength or duration of the looming El Nino.

The last one was considered very weak, but the one before that, between 2014 and 2016, was considered among the



A man celebrates with a relative after being released from Insein Prison in Yangon on Wednesday (AFP)

Myanmar junta pardons over 2,000 prisoners

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar's junta pardoned more than 2,000 political prisoners to mark a Buddhist holiday on Wednesday, with families rushing to prisons for tearful reunions with loved ones jailed in a sweeping crackdown on dissent.

The military has arrested thousands of protesters and activists since the February 2021 putsch that ended Myanmar's brief democratic experiment and plunged the country into turmoil.

Pardons were granted to 2,153 prisoners serving sentences under Penal Code 505 (a) to mark Kasone Full Moon Day, a festival marking the birth of the Buddha, the junta said in a statement. The law carries a maximum three-year jail term.

About 50 people gathered outside Yangon's sprawling, colonial-era Insein prison following the announcement, AFP reporters said.

As a yellow bus pulled out of the complex, some in the crowd held paper bearing their relatives' names up to the windows. One man reunited with his weeping family outside the prison took his baby into his arms.

Ma Ye Ye was waiting to see if her son, who was arrested under the law in 2021, would be freed. "He was arrested for nothing," she said, requesting a pseudonym for fear of retaliation.

"He just walked through a security gate and soldiers arrested him."

"I was thinking this morning that it would be really good if my son was to be released on this Buddha day," Ma Khin, another mother waiting in the crowd said, also requesting a pseudonym.

"Then I received phone calls from my relatives that there would be an amnesty... I don't know if he will be on the list, but it's my duty to come and wait for him."

The military ordered the pardons 'for the peaceful mind of the people and on humanitarian grounds', it said.

Those who re-offend will have

to serve the remainder of their sentence with an additional penalty, it added.

Myanmar typically grants amnesties to thousands of prisoners to mark national holidays or Buddhist festivals.

Wednesday's announcement comes as Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang is in the country for talks with the internationally isolated generals.

On Tuesday he met junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, becoming the highest-profile Chinese official to meet the top general since the putsch.

"China advocates that the international community should respect Myanmar's sovereignty and play a constructive role in helping it achieve peace and reconciliation," Qin said, according

Pardons were granted to 2,153 prisoners serving sentences under Penal Code 505 (a) to mark Kasone Full Moon Day

to the Chinese foreign ministry.

Several Beijing-backed infrastructure projects are slated to run through northern Myanmar and link China's landlocked Yunnan province with the Indian Ocean.

More than 21,000 people have been arrested since the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government, according to a local monitoring group.

At least 170 journalists have been arrested during that span, according to the United Nations.

Suu Kyi has been detained since the early hours of the coup.

In December, the junta wrapped up a series of closed-court trials, jailing her for a total of 33 years in a process rights groups have condemned as a sham. AFP

THE NEW 'SECRET POWER'



Pheu Thai Party candidate Paetongtarn Shinawatra, youngest daughter of former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, shows her newborn son Thasin with husband Pitaka Suksawat at the Praram 9 hospital in Bangkok on Wednesday. She hailed her newborn son as her 'secret power' (AFP)

Press freedoms shrink, journalists targeted: UN and media

United Nations, US - Press freedom is under attack in every corner of the globe, with journalists continually harassed, jailed and killed, UN officials and media outlets warned on Tuesday.

Speaking ahead of World Press Freedom Day on Wednesday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued a rallying cry for journalists and media worldwide. "All our freedom depends on press freedom," he said in a video message, calling it the 'foundation of democracy and justice' and the 'lifeblood of human rights'.

"But in every corner of the world, freedom of the press is under attack," Guterres added, addressing a conference held at UN headquarters in New York.

Highlighting the problem, UNESCO awarded its 2023 World Press Freedom Prize to three

Iranian women, two journalists and a human rights activist, who have been jailed.

While Guterres did not cast blame on specific countries, other speakers highlighted individual cases, such as that of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, detained in Russia on espionage charges he has rejected. "The fight for press freedom, the fight for Evan's release is a fight for everybody's freedom," *Wall Street Journal* publisher Almar Latour told the forum.

Dozens of news organisations have denounced the charges against Gershkovich as unfounded, while US President Joe Biden has called his imprisonment 'totally illegal'.

Other journalists hit upon the rising dangers of the profession.

"I'm coming from a country,



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres delivering remarks via video during the UNESCO world press freedom event at United Nations headquarters in New York City on Tuesday (AFP)

Iran, where being a journalist is a crime... (and) can land you in jail, can get you killed, can get you tortured," said Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-American journalist living in exile.

'Threatened by disinformation'
According to Reporters Without Borders, 55 journalists and four media workers were killed in the line of duty in 2022.

"Truth is threatened by disinformation and hate speech, seeking to blur the lines between fact and fiction, between science and conspiracy," Guterres said.

Journalists, he added, 'are

routinely harassed, intimidated, detained, and in prisons'.

Others voiced similar concerns, with the head of UNESCO, which is organising an event at the United Nations in New York on Wednesday to mark the occasion, also speaking out.

Audrey Azoulay said the digital age was changing the entire information landscape - making 'professional, free, independent journalism' more necessary than ever. She said harassment and intimidation of journalists was unacceptable. "We find ourselves at a new crossroads," she said. "Our current path is leading us away from informed public debates... a path towards ever more polarisation."

New York Times publisher A.G. Sulzberger said it was not only direct repression that threatens journalists and freedom of information. "The internet also unleashed the avalanche of misinformation, propaganda, punditry and clickbait that now overwhelms our information ecosystem... accelerating the decline in societal trust," he said.

"When the free press erodes, democratic erosion almost always follows."

The secretary general of Amnesty International, Agnes Callamard, said censorship has also become more common.

"Sadly, censorship has become the default position of many governments in terms of controlling the knowledge of their societies," she said.

The recipients of the UNESCO prize were Iranian reporters Elahieh Mohammadi and Niloufar Hamed, and human rights activist Narges Mohammadi. AFP

Islamic Jihad announces truce in Gaza

A Palestinian was killed in pre-dawn air strikes Israel carried out in retaliation for rocket fire

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - Palestinian fighter group Islamic Jihad announced a truce around Gaza on Wednesday, after fighters traded fire with Israel following the death in Israeli custody of a hunger striker from its ranks.

One Palestinian was killed and five wounded in pre-dawn air strikes Israel carried out in retaliation for rocket fire from Gaza, the territory's health ministry said.

But mediators from Qatar, Egypt and the United Nations succeeded in brokering a return to calm from 4am (0100 GMT),



A Palestinian boy checks the site of an air strike targeting a military site in Deir al Balah, in the central Gaza Strip, on Wednesday (AFP)

sources in Islamic Jihad and fellow fighter group Hamas told AFP.

Egypt - a peace broker between Israel and Palestinian fighters in previous conflicts - corroborated the truce, though Israel did not immediately confirm any agreement.

"We managed to reach a calm

with both sides responding to it from this morning," an Egyptian security source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The Israeli army said the last

warning sirens sounded near the Gaza border at around 5:30am (0230 GMT).

Witnesses in the blockaded territory told AFP that several

rockets were fired at Israel around this time.

By Wednesday morning, AFP journalists reported that calm had returned, with schools and shops open as normal. Life had also returned to the areas of Israel bordering Gaza.

"One round of confrontation has ended, but the march of resistance continues and will not stop," said Tariq Salmi, a

he added.

Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh demanded that Israel return the hunger striker's body to his family. "We stress - and as we have informed all the mediators who intervened - the necessity of handing over the body of the martyr Khader Adnan to his patient family," Haniyeh said in a statement.

Adnan, 45, from Jenin in the occupied West Bank, died early on Tuesday after an 87-day hunger strike following his arrest by Israel over ties to Islamic Jihad. Qaddura Fares, head of the Palestinian Prisoners' Club, said Palestinian authorities had asked Israel for Adnan's body on Tuesday but were yet to 'obtain a response'.

A string of high-profile hunger strikes during at least 13 stints in Israeli custody had turned Adnan into a national hero, and revitalised hunger striking as a form of protest among Palestinians incarcerated in Israeli jails.

AFP

One round of confrontation has ended, but the march of resistance continues and will not stop

TARIQ SALMI

spokesperson for Islamic Jihad, in a statement.

"Our brave fighters have proven their loyalty and commitment to defending their people,"

Syria: Iran's Raisi meets Assad

Damascus, Syria - Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi met his Syrian counterpart in Damascus on Wednesday, official media said, on the first visit by a head of state of the Islamic republic since Syria's civil war broke out 12 years ago.

Bashar al-Assad welcomed close ally Raisi at the presidential palace, SANA news agency said, at a time when more regional capitals are re-engaging with the internationally-isolated government in Damascus as it seeks to rebuild after years of civil war.

During the conflict, Tehran has provided economic, political and military support to Syria, helping Damascus claw back lost territory and positioning itself in a leading role as Assad seeks to focus on reconstruction.

The two-day visit comes just weeks after Iran's landmark, Chinese-brokered agreement to re-



Syria's President Bashar al-Assad receiving his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi at the presidential palace in Damascus on Wednesday (AFP)

store ties with regional rival Saudi Arabia, which has sparked a flurry of diplomacy in the Middle East.

"During this trip, we will hold consultations to strengthen and improve economic, political and security relations," Raisi said be-

fore departing Tehran, adding that ties between Syria and Iran were 'completely strategic'.

The Syrian presidency said a number of agreements would be signed between the two countries, which remain under heavy Western sanctions.

The large Iranian delegation includes the ministers of foreign affairs, defence, oil, roads and urban development as well as telecommunications.

Preparations for Raisi's visit have been underway for days.

Security forces were heavily deployed in key parts of the Syrian capital, while billboards with portraits of the two presidents reading 'welcome' in Arabic and Farsi lined the airport road.

Syrian and Iranian flags also flew along the road to the Sayyida Zeinab mausoleum south of Damascus.

AFP

9 dead in Belgrade school shooting

Belgrade, Serbia - Eight students and a security guard were killed during a school shooting in the Serbian capital Belgrade on Wednesday, the interior ministry said, as police arrested a teenage student suspected of carrying out the attack.

The incident rocked the Balkan nation, where there has not been a school shooting of this magnitude in decades.

The shooting occurred at 8:40am (0640 GMT) at an elementary school in Belgrade's downtown Vracar district.

Police moved quickly to seal off the neighbourhood as parents rushed to the scene, where students were visibly distraught as they waited outside the school. "Eight children and a security guard were killed, while six children and

one schoolteacher were wounded," the interior ministry said. "All police forces are still on the ground and are intensively working to shed light on all the facts and circumstances that led to this tragedy."

Milan Nedeljkovic, president of the Vracar district, said the school's security guard probably prevented more deaths by putting himself in front of the shooter. The guard 'wanted to prevent the tragedy and he was the first victim', Nedeljkovic told reporters live on television outside the school.

"Probably the tragedy would be even bigger if the man did not stand in front of the boy who was shooting," he added.

'Father's gun'

A teenage student suspected of carrying out the attack was

arrested. "The police sent all available patrols immediately to the spot and arrested a suspected minor - a seventh grade student who is suspected of firing several shots from his father's gun in the direction of students and school security," the interior ministry said.

Police did not release any additional information about the suspected shooter or comment on a possible motive.

The head of Belgrade's main hospital KCS, Milika Asanin, said doctors were operating on several of the wounded.

"One male student is in a serious condition with serious gunshot wounds to the chest and neck, and the other male student was injured in his lower leg," Asanin told Serbian news outlet RTS.

AFP

INDIA

SC declines to entertain pleas seeking to stop *The Kerala Story's* release

New Delhi - The Supreme Court on Wednesday refused to entertain pleas seeking a stay on the release of the movie *The Kerala Story* in theatres and OTT platforms and allowed the petitioners to approach the Kerala High Court.

A bench of Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud and Justice P S Narasimha said a similar plea is pending before the Kerala High Court and asked them to move the High Court with their pleas. The high court is scheduled to hear the case against the film on May 5.

Advocate Vrinda Grover mentioned the petition before the bench seeking urgent listing tomorrow saying the film is getting released on May 5. The petition mentioned by Grover sought a modification in the disclaimer of the film to state that it is wholly fictional.

Grover said: "The opening shot says the film is true. It has been advertised as a true story. That movie vilifies the entire community. There is no disclaimer. It's a pan India

release."

Advocate Nizam Pasha, appearing for Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind, also mentioned the plea for an urgent hearing, saying his petition is seeking different reliefs to stop the film's release and not just a modification of its disclaimer.

The bench, however, asked them to approach the High Court where a similar petition is pending.

On Tuesday, Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind approached the Supreme Court seeking a stay on the release of the movie in theatres and OTT platforms saying the movie was likely to cause hatred and enmity between different sections of society in India.

The plea said the film demeans the entire Muslim community and it will result in endangering the life and livelihood of the entire Muslim community.

Seeking direction to not allow the release of the movie, the plea also sought direction that its trailer be removed from the internet.

ANI

'Congress protects masterminds of terror': Modi

Karnataka will go to polls on May 10 and counting will be on May 13

Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka - In a scathing attack on the Congress party, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said that the grand old party protects the 'masterminds of terror'.

"If there is instability in Karnataka, your fortune will also remain unstable. Congress is the enemy of peace in Karnataka... it is the enemy of development. Congress protects the masterminds of terror...promotes appeasement," said Modi. He was addressing an election campaign rally at Mudbidri in Dakshina Kannada district in the run-up to the May 10 Karnataka Assembly elections.

He exhorted the people to vote for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and claimed that the grand old party promotes appeasement.

"Those who are going to vote for the first time in their life are going to decide the future of Karnataka. My sons and daughters who are going to vote for the first time, if you want to make your career, do the work of your mind, then it will not be possible with the Congress," Modi said. "BJP's resolve is to make Karnataka Number 1 in the country, to



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses a public meeting ahead of the Karnataka assembly elections in Mudbidri of Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka on Wednesday (ANI)

strengthen the Modern Infrastructure in Karnataka, to make Karnataka a manufacturing super power. Congress, on the other hand, is asking for votes in the name of retirement... for undoing the development initiatives of the BJP."

Modi stated that Janata Jarandan's (general public's) order was 'on my head and eyes'. "After all, 140 crore people of this country are our remote control," he added.

The prime minister will take out two mega road shows and

four public meetings this weekend, sources said on Wednesday. He will arrive in Bangalore on the night of May 5 and will hold two roadshows in the city on May 6. The first roadshow will cover about 8km while the other will cover a distance of

If there is instability in Karnataka, your fortune will also remain unstable. Congress is the enemy of peace in Karnataka... it is the enemy of development. Congress protects the masterminds of terror

NARENDRA MODI

30km, they said.

Similarly, on May 7, Modi will address four public meetings in different parts of the state.

He is also expected to visit Karnataka on the last day of the election campaigning for which preparations are already on.

The BJP is eyeing for a second term in the state, and has exuded confidence in retaining power with a full majority.

Karnataka will go to polls on May 10 and the votes will be counted on May 13.

ANI

TROUBLE IN PARIS

Messi's PSG future in doubt after suspension over Saudi trip



Argentina's Lionel Messi and his wife Antonela Rocuzzo during a visit to Diriyah near Riyadh (AFP)

Paris, France - Lionel Messi's future at PSG was plunged into doubt on Wednesday after he was suspended by Paris Saint-Germain after travelling to Saudi Arabia without the club's permission.

A source with knowledge of the disciplinary procedure told AFP that Argentina's 35-year-old World-Cup winning captain, who is out of contract at the end of the season, would be sidelined for "several days", while various media in France reported that he would be suspended for two weeks.

"He cannot train, cannot play, and will not be paid while disciplinary measures are in place," the source added.

Another source, also speaking on condition they were not identified, indicated that the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner would "probably" be sidelined for a fortnight, noting that "no-

body is more important than the club".

Messi played the whole game in PSG's 3-1 home defeat by Lorient in Ligue 1 on Sunday.

He then travelled to Saudi Arabia to fulfil commercial commitments in his role as a tourism ambassador for the Gulf state.

He cannot train, cannot play, and will not be paid while disciplinary measures are in place

The Saudi Tourism Authority said in a press release on Wednesday that Messi had "returned to Saudi for a second time, this time with his family" and had been treated to a demonstration of palm weaving and had fed Arabian gazelles.

As a result of the trip, Messi missed a training session scheduled for Monday following the weekend defeat.

The PSG squad were given a day off on Tuesday and Messi did not take part in training on Wednesday either.

PSG are due to return to league action away at struggling Troyes on Sunday, a game that Messi may now miss.

If he were to be sidelined for

told AFP last month that he was now "much more likely" to depart.

Messi arrived from Barcelona, the club where he had spent the majority of his career, in 2021 but has struggled to reproduce his best form at Qatar-backed Paris.

Despite that, he has scored 31 goals in 71 appearances in all competitions.

He was recently jeered by a section of the PSG support, who see him as a symbol of all the club have done wrong in focusing on superstar signings while failing to build a genuinely competitive team.

Messi has scored 20 goals in all competitions this season and is the leading assist provider in Ligue 1, with 15.

However, his form since leading Argentina to World Cup glory in Qatar has declined along with that of most of the PSG team.

AFP

Kudermetova enters semis

Madrid, Spain - Russian Veronika Kudermetova ousted world number three Jessica Pegula 6-4, 0-6, 6-4 in a topsy-turvy clash on Wednesday to reach the Madrid Open semi-finals.

The 26-year-old beat the American five-time Grand Slam quarter-finalist in three sets to reach a WTA 1000 event semi-final for the first time, recovering after a collapse in the second.

"To beat Jessica it feels very nice, I'm so proud of myself because every match I played almost three hours," said Kudermetova.

"And today in the second set I start to play so badly.

"But before the third set, I said 'Veronika, you need to try to play your best, because the fans are here. I want to show you some energy'." The Russian battled well to take the first set in the Madrid sun, but crumbled in the second.

Kudermetova won three three-set matches to reach the quarter-finals and appeared to tire, making several unforced errors as last year's Madrid Open finalist triumphed easily in just 22 minutes, winning 83 per cent of points.



Carlos Alcaraz celebrates his victory against Alexander Zverev

Alcaraz earns Zverev revenge, Medvedev out of Madrid Open

Madrid, Spain - World number two Carlos Alcaraz breezed past Alexander Zverev 6-1, 6-2 to reach the Madrid Open quarter-finals on Tuesday.

Third-ranked Daniil Medvedev crashed out against Russian compatriot Aslan Karatsev, 7-6 (7/1), 6-4, while Stefanos Tsitsipas eased through against Bernabe Zapata Miralles 6-3, 6-1.

In the women's competition world number two Aryna Sabalenka was forced to sweat by Mayar Sherif but eventually

came through 2-6, 6-2, 6-1 to reach the semi-finals.

Top-seeded Spaniard Alcaraz, who also beat Zverev in last season's Madrid final, gained revenge for the German's triumph when they met later in the 2022 French Open quarter-finals.

Two-time Madrid winner Zverev, 26, was blown away in the opening set. He improved a little in the second but not sufficiently to trouble Alcaraz, who moved his opponent around at will.

AFP

McIlroy 'refreshed' after mental health break

Miami, United States - Northern Ireland golf star Rory McIlroy revealed on Tuesday he had taken a break from the sport to focus on his "mental and emotional well-being" in the wake of his missed cut at the Masters last month.

McIlroy returns to the PGA Tour this week at the Wells Fargo Championship in North Carolina feeling refreshed following a three-week hiatus from the sport in the wake of his disap-



Rory McIlroy

pointing Augusta campaign.

The 33-year-old four-time major champion withdrew from the RBC Heritage tournament last month immediately after the Masters without giving an explanation.

On Tuesday McIlroy revealed he had skipped the tournament for his own wellbeing, adding that the turmoil that has rocked golf in the past year since the emergence of the breakaway LIV circuit had taken a toll.

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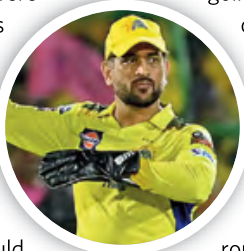
Chennai-Lucknow clash washed out, with Dhoni talking about 'swansong'

Lucknow, India - Former Indian skipper **M.S. Dhoni** on Wednesday teased fans about whether this IPL would be his last, before the T20 tournament witnessed its first washout of the season with the match between Chennai Super Kings and Lucknow Super Giants called off.

Hosts Lucknow were 125-7 in 19.2 overs when rain interrupted play in the north Indian city. After an hour and 40 minutes of waiting, the officials decided the points would be shared between the teams, abandoning the game.

Earlier, Dhoni, 41, got the crowd going when he gave the television presenter a tongue-in-cheek answer regarding whether he was retiring from the tournament.

The ongoing season is expected to be Dhoni's last as a



player, but when cricketer-turned-commentator Danny Morrison asked the India legend whether he was enjoying his "swansong tour", Dhoni replied: "Well, you have decided it's my last."

The reply made the fans roar and Morrison said: "I love it, he is going to come back. He is coming back to play next year."

The Indian wicketkeeper-batsman, who has led Chennai to four IPL titles, is getting a rousing reception at every venue this year, with fans turning up in Chennai's yellow to cheer him on.

Dhoni had last month thanked the packed crowd at Kolkata's Eden Gardens, saying: "They are trying to give me a farewell."

Dhoni led India to two World Cup titles, including T20's inaugural showpiece event in 2007.

KISHAN, YADAV IN SPARKLING FORM AS MUMBAI INDIANS BEAT PUNJAB KINGS

MATCH 46

Ishan Kishan of Mumbai Indians plays a shot during his knock of 75 in their match against Punjab Kings in Mohali on Wednesday. Kishan and Suryakumar Yadav, who scored a 31-ball 66, helped Mumbai reach the target of 215 with seven balls and six wickets to spare. Tim David and Tilak Varma were unbeaten on 19 and 26 respectively. Earlier, Liam Livingstone scored 82 in 42 balls for Punjab.

'WORLD OF PRESSURE'

Tendulkar son steps out of father's shadow

New Delhi, India - Being the offspring of a cricket legend is hard but Sachin Tendulkar's son Arjun is quietly starting to make his mark - albeit with the ball not the bat.

Last month the 23-year-old left-arm fast bowler played for the first time in an IPL match -- for his dad's old outfit Mumbai Indians - and returned solid if not spectacular figures of 0-17.

For context, by the time his dad was the same age he was captain of India, had 10 Test centuries -- his first aged only 17 -- and was on his way to achieving god-like status at home.

Sachin went on to become the top-scoring Test batsman of all time and when he retired in 2013 it was a national tragedy.



Mumbai Indians' Arjun Tendulkar during a practices session

Indian media and fans are salivating at the idea of another Tendulkar wearing the Indian colours.

However, Arjun still has a long way to go to prove that he has the ability to play regularly in the IPL, never mind for his country.

And with a father like his, the weight of expectation is huge.

"Just being a Tendulkar will turn the spotlight on you," veteran cricket journalist Ayaz Memon told AFP.

"Along with that comes a whole world of pressure, you

can't escape.

"So that's what young Arjun has lived through all his life. The expectations multiply and the scrutiny will get harsher and harsher."

Arjun was signed by Mumbai Indians in 2021 but the recent

home match against Kolkata in front of a packed, ecstatic crowd was the first time he had played.

When captain Rohit Sharma told him to bowl it was such a big moment that Sachin was in tears, according to former West Indies cricketer and commentator Ian Bishop.

It was in the next game that Arjun made his mark.

He took his debut wicket -- a feat even his father couldn't achieve during his IPL career -- and defended 20 runs in the final over. That spoke of his nerve as much as his ability.

A nervous Sachin watched his son's last-over heroics and later tweeted: "And finally a Tendulkar has an IPL wicket!"

The euphoria was soon forgotten, however, when in Mumbai's next match he was smashed for 31 runs in an over, with social media full of accusations of nepotism.

Arjun played one more match and took one more wicket before being benched.

AFP

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Back to winning ways

Odegaard stars as Arsenal beat Chelsea to return to top Premier League

London, United Kingdom - Martin Odegaard fired Arsenal back to the top of the Premier League as the Norway midfielder's double inspired a 3-1 win against woeful Chelsea on Tuesday.

Mikel Arteta's side lost control of the title race after last week's 4-1 defeat at Manchester City.

But the Gunners signalled their intention to push City all the way to the wire with a much-needed first win in five games.

Odegaard's brace was followed by a Gabriel Jesus strike as the hosts raced into a three-goal before half-time at the Emirates Stadium.

Noni Madueke's second half goal was no consolation for Chelsea's wretched performance.

Arsenal are now two points clear of second placed City and while Pep Guardiola's men remain favourites to win the title, the north Londoners have at least applied a little pressure on the champions.

City will go back into first place if they beat West Ham at home on Wednesday in the first of their two games in hand on Arsenal.

"The first 60 minutes, I thought we played really well. That was everything I want to see from our team," Arteta said.



Arsenal's Martin Odegaard celebrates after scoring against Chelsea in their English Premier League match in London on Tuesday (AFP)

"Speed, quality, movement, two beautiful goals, we connected with our crowd and created an incredible atmosphere.

"We wanted to earn the right to be top of the league. We are happy to be there."

After 10 weeks at the top, Ar-

senal were knocked down to second place by City's win at Fulham on Sunday.

Three successive draws, including two blown two-goal leads, and the calamitous loss at City have led Arsenal to be written off as title race chokers.

But Arteta insisted this week that the title was still winnable and his players responded to the Spaniard's rallying cry.

Troubled Chelsea were ideal opponents for Arsenal to get back on track before a tricky trip to Newcastle on Sunday.

The Blues have now lost all six games since Frank Lampard returned as caretaker boss to replace the sacked Graham Potter.

Languishing in 12th place, Chelsea are on an nine-game winless run in all competitions and face the prospect of failing to finish in the top half of the table for the first time since 1996.

"We were too nice to play against in all aspects in the first half. Not good enough," Lampard said.

"It's tough because you want to win games, but it's our job, we'll work on it."

Rampant Arsenal

Former Arsenal forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang made his first Chelsea start since the Blues lost 1-0 to the Gunners in November.

But Aubameyang, whose four-year spell with Arsenal ended acrimoniously in 2022, never had a chance of exacting revenge on his old team before being hauled off at half-time.

Arsenal were in complete control from the start and Odegaard gave them a deserved lead in the 18th minute.

Left in acres of space, Granit Xhaka's low cross eluded Chelsea's lackadaisical defenders and Odegaard guided a superb curling finish past Kepa Arrizabalaga from just inside the penalty area. Ben Chilwell threatened a Chelsea equaliser, but Aaron Ramsdale made a fine save to preserve the lead.

That near-miss was a false dawn for abysmal Chelsea as the Gunners turned the screw with a second goal in the 31st minute.

AFP



Erling Haaland

Haaland goalscoring heroics a 'surprise', says Guardiola

London, United Kingdom - Pep Guardiola says Erling Haaland's astonishing scoring feats for Manchester City have been a "surprise", with the Norwegian on the cusp of breaking the Premier League's single-season goal record.

The 22-year-old netted his 34th goal of the league campaign in Sunday's 2-1 win at Fulham, drawing him level with joint Premier League single-season record holders Andy Cole and Alan Shearer.

Haaland's strike at Craven Cottage was his 50th goal of the season - he holds the all-competitions record by a Premier League player since the top flight was rebranded in 1992.

With a potential 10 games remaining for treble-chasing City this term, Haaland could even pass Dixie Dean's all-time English record of 63 goals set in the 1927/28 season.

The Everton player's mark of 60 top-flight strikes during that campaign will surely remain intact.

It has been a breath-taking first year in English football for Haaland, and even Guardiola didn't expect such a spree from the former Borussia Dortmund star.

"It is a surprise for all of us - maybe not for him - to do what

Of course it's good for him and the team if he breaks the records. It's a good sign

PEP GUARDIOLA

he's doing in this difficult league but the way he behaves and has done it is for the success of the team," he said.

"Of course it's good for him and the team if he breaks the records. It's a good sign.

"The magnitude of a record is because for a long time it was not broken. All records will be broken one day."

Late Alba strike takes Barca to brink of title, Madrid slip up

Barcelona, Spain - Jordi Alba struck a late winner for Barcelona in a 1-0 win over 10-man Osasuna on Tuesday to move the Catalans a step closer to their first La Liga title since 2019.

Xavi Hernandez's side climbed 14 points clear of second place Real Madrid, who lost 2-0 at Real Sociedad.

The visitors had debutant Jorge Herrando sent off in the first half for a professional foul on Pedri, as they sat deep and tried to frustrate hosts Barcelona.

Visiting goalkeeper Aitor Fernandez kept the leaders at bay in the second half but eventually substitute Alba, who has had reduced minutes this season, sliced home a volley to snatch a late victory.

"We're going to wait and see, but it's a giant step forward," said Xavi.

Osasuna coach Jagoba Arrasate rotated heavily to rest players ahead of the Copa del Rey final against Madrid on Saturday, while Barca started with the same side which crushed Real Betis at the weekend.

The Catalans failed to carve



Barcelona's Jordi Alba (R) celebrates with Ansu Fati after scoring against Osasuna on Tuesday (AFP)

out many clear opportunities in the first half against their defensive opponents.

The best chance fell to Pedri after left-back Alejandro Balde found him a few yards out from goal but he did not connect with the ball well, scuffing a shot wide.

Osasuna were reduced to 10 men before the half hour mark

when Herrando pulled down Pedri as he ran in on goal.

If Barcelona earn two more points from their last five games, they will be champions.

Madrid beaten

Former Madrid winger Takefusa Kubo and Ander Barrenetxea netted the goals for Real So-

ciedad against Los Blancos, tightening their grip on fourth spot and Champions League qualification.

Madrid defender Dani Carvajal was sent off after an hour for a second yellow card to make matters worse for Los Blancos, who face Osasuna in the Copa del Rey final on Saturday.

Outstanding Olmo steers ten-man Leipzig to German Cup final

Freiburg Im Breisgau, Germany - RB Leipzig forward Dani Olmo scored one and set up three more first-half goals as the German Cup holders returned to the final, with a 5-1 win at Freiburg on Tuesday.

In a rematch of last year's final, which Leipzig won on penalties, Freiburg started brightly but two goals in 90 seconds put them squarely on the back foot.

Olmo headed Leipzig in front from a Dominik Szoboszlai cross after 13 minutes and assisted Benjamin Henrichs shortly after.

The Spain forward teed up Szoboszlai and France winger Christopher Nkunku to give the visitors a commanding 4-0 lead at half time.

Leipzig were reduced to ten men early in the second half when last-man Josko Gvardiol pulled down Roland Sallai outside the box but were unable to mount a comeback.

Freiburg scored a late goal through Michael Gregoritsch, but Szoboszlai scored again from the spot in injury time for a dominant win.

Promoted to the first-division for the first time in 2016, Leipzig



RB Leipzig's Dani Olmo battles with Freiburg's Lucas Hoeler (left) and Yannick Keitel for the ball during their German Cup match

have now appeared in four of the past five German Cup finals.

In search of their first German Cup title, Freiburg coach Christian Streich named a defensive line-up, surprisingly omitting top scorer Vincenzo Grifo for France defender Kilian Sildillia.

Freiburg looked dangerous early and went close through Japan winger Ritsu Doan, but Leipzig smashed in two goals in quick succession, prompting Streich to remove Sildillia for Grifo after just 18 minutes.

The change failed to stop the

rot, Leipzig making it three after 37 minutes when Olmo set up Szoboszlai to slot in his side's third. Having lost only twice at home in the league this season, against Bundesliga heavyweights Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, Freiburg continued to push forward. Grifo found striker Gregoritsch in the box, but the giant Austrian dragged his shot just wide of the post.

Nkunku, Leipzig's top scorer this season in the league with 13 goals, made it four in first-half injury time.



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SALT AND PEPPER
When just two condiments can churn out wonders in your wok...



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ENTERTAINMENT
A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood

Enhancing learning

EXPERTS IN OMAN BELIEVE THAT CHATGPT WILL TRANSFORM EDUCATION - NOT UNDERMINE IT, AS FEARED - IF IT IS USED WITH DISCRETION AND PARENTAL SUPERVISION



ABC: Hello, what information do you need?
Student: Can you tell me something about the Taj?

ABC: Taj Hotels is a chain of luxury hotels and a subsidiary of the Indian Hotels Company Limited, headquartered in Mumbai, India.
Student: No, I mean the Taj Mahal.

ABC: Taj Mahal Teas are tasted, graded and perfectly blended at the Brooke bond Tea Excellence Centre.
Student: No, I need to know something about the Taj Mahal in Agra, for my school essay.

ABC: The Taj Mahal is an ivory-white marble mausoleum on the right bank of the river Yamuna in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India. It was commissioned in 1631 by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan.

Technology is becoming a more significant part of how children will learn and develop as education progresses. But basic intelligence and discernment is a prerequisite for students to make the most of it and enhance their own knowledge.

Currently, in the field of education, chatbots are one technology that is quickly gaining popularity. And ChatGPT is one of the newest and most inventive chatbots available for students to gain instant assistance to gain knowledge as well as complete their assignments.

ChatGPT is a powerful tool that can be utilised in schools and colleges to enhance the learning experience for students. It has the ability to analyse and understand human language, and generate responses that are virtually indistinguishable from

those of a human.

This makes chatbots an ideal tool for facilitating communication and learning in an educational setting. However, some people also worry that reliance on technology could lead to a drop in social interaction or a decrease in critical thinking abilities.

Tariq al Barwani, IT expert, is of the view that ChatGPT is not the end of learning but an aid to how kids will learn. "In the past, students could find assistance via Google, but today ChatGPT is an improved and even smarter option to turn to."

In order to assess student aptitude and minimise plagiarism, Barwani believes that professors should conduct more in-class tests and frequent quizzes. "Although it is true that the AI generated content is currently difficult to spot and the tools that are currently available to detect plagiarism can be expensive, I'm confident that in future there will be affordable ways to do so."

He further added, "ChatGPT can also be used as an online tutor, providing students with instant feedback and guidance on their coursework. This can be particularly helpful for students who are struggling with a particular subject, and those who need additional support outside of the classroom."

Dr Reshmy Krishnan, Head of Research and Associate Professor in Muscat College, said that with the help of ChatGPT, students can learn new languages, programming, and writing within no time.

"Students who are learning a new language can converse with a chatbot in that language to hone their speaking, writing, reading, and listening abilities. It can also provide its services to youngsters with special needs who need individualised and flexible learning opportunities. However, it

does not replace human interaction and direct guidance in education. Students need emotional support, motivation, and critical thinking, which can be provided only through direct learning from teachers."

Critical thinking is an essential component of education that must be developed during lesson delivery. "Teachers should ask open-ended questions which require students to think critically and creatively. Group projects are an advisable method to promote critical thinking and teamwork. While providing feedback, students can be asked to explain the reasoning behind their thought process. Technology such as educational software and interactive simulations can enhance students' critical thinking skills," Dr Krishnan added.

Boon or bane

Drawing attention to some drawbacks of using ChatGPT, Barwani said, "AI occasionally produces inaccurate information and one should not wholly rely on it for information."

Haitham al Hajri, a cyber-security

expert, on the other hand, pointed out, "If chatbots are used very frequently, people may become overly dependent on them, which will hinder their ability to think creatively and innovate. This will make the next generation entirely hooked onto devices."

Dr Reshmy, however, believes that ChatGPT has high potential in Oman. Since this tool understands and responds to queries in any language, communication and information exchange are more accessible and efficient for ordinary people, especially those from rural areas.

"Chatbots can be extensively used in sectors like education, healthcare, and customer service. Also, it will become extremely difficult for people to find work in Oman because of numerous job losses as a result of companies using chatbots to handle tasks."

Parental supervision

Parents can play a vital role in helping children use technology to enhance their development without becoming overly reliant on ChatGPT.

According to Dr Reshmy, "Parents

should set clear boundaries around technology use, such as limiting screen time, avoiding using mobile phones during meals, prioritising family time, and setting up a specified space for study. By giving little tasks and responsibilities at home, parents can encourage their children's ability to think critically, solve problems, and make decisions."

ChatGPT has the ability to completely change the way we approach education, if students are also given individualised, efficient, and interesting learning opportunities so that they do not depend totally on technology for gaining knowledge.

About using such digital aides to enhance the student's knowledge and learning profile, Dr Reshmy said, "ChatGPT is an AI tool that generates responses as per the input regardless of the IQ level of the user. The accuracy of the response depends on the data it has been trained on. Hence, if the input provided to ChatGPT is accurate, the responses generated can certainly benefit kids with lower IQ by providing them with useful insights. The responsibility of ensuring the accuracy of the input rests with the person providing it, rather than with ChatGPT itself."

"ChatGPT can certainly help save time for kids and parents in completing homework or assignments for younger children. As an AI language model, ChatGPT can provide quick and accurate responses to questions related to a wide range of topics, in all subjects including examples. However While ChatGPT can be a useful tool for gaining quick information and understanding, students should still be encouraged to think critically and develop their own ideas and solutions to problems."

(Contributed by Deeba Parween)



cook-up



Salt and Pepper Prawns

- Ingredients**
- 250g medium size prawns – peeled, deveined
 - ¼ cup cornflour
 - 1 cup vegetable oil
 - 1 large red chilli - sliced diagonally
 - 1 large green chilli - sliced diagonally
 - 2 cloves garlic - minced
 - 2 spring onions - sliced
 - ¼tsp salt
 - ½tsp Chinese 5 spice
 - ½tsp ground pepper
 - Juice of one lime, plus extra wedges for serving

Method

Place the prawns in a large bowl, add cornflour, and mix well until the prawns are fully coated in the flour. Next, heat the oil in a large saucepan. Carefully add the prawns to the oil using some kitchen tongs. Shake off excess flour before adding. Work in batches so you don't overcrowd the pan.

Remove the cooked prawns from the pan with a strainer and place on a plate lined with paper towel to soak up any excess oil.

Heat a teaspoon of the oil in a frying pan or wok over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and chilli and cook for a minute before adding the spring onion and cooking for a further minute. Add the prawns, salt, pepper and 5 spice to the pan and squeeze in the lime juice. Toss and cook for a minute. Serve with fresh lime wedges.

When just two condiments can bring magic into your wok, why play with more? Check out the robust relationship of salt and pepper in different culinary creations

SALT & PEPPER delectables

Salt and Pepper Mushrooms

- Ingredients**
- 300g mushrooms - sliced
 - 1tbsp vegetable oil
 - 1 onion - sliced
 - ½ red pepper - sliced
 - ½ yellow pepper - sliced
 - 4 garlic cloves - minced
 - 3 red chillies - sliced
 - Sea salt, to taste
 - Ground black pepper, to taste
 - Splash of rice wine vinegar

Method

In a large wok heat the oil and add the mushrooms and fry for around 5 minutes until nice and tender and slightly browned. Remove from pan and set aside. Add the onions and peppers in the wok and stir fry for a few minutes. Add the garlic and chillies when the onion and pepper have gone soft.

Stir until the onions have turned slightly golden, then add 2 pinches of salt and a few grinds of pepper. The ingredients in the pan should be a soft golden colour. Add the mushrooms back into the pan along with a good big splash of vinegar



and a few pinches more of salt, and stir it all together. Get the mushrooms well coated in all the other ingredients. Serve hot and enjoy.

- Ingredients**
- ½ cup cornflour
 - 1tbsp table salt
 - 1¼tbsp ground black pepper
 - 1tbsp Chinese five-spice
 - 6 skinless chicken thigh fillets - quartered
 - Vegetable oil for frying
 - 1 onion - chopped into large chunks
 - 1 red chilli - chopped
 - 1 green chilli - chopped
 - 2 garlic cloves - minced
 - 3 spring onions (scallions) - roughly chopped

Method

Mix together the cornflour, ¾tbsp of the salt, 1tbsp of the black pepper, and 1tbsp of Chinese five-spice. Sprinkle over the chicken thigh fillets and toss together to coat. Take 1 cup of oil, and reserve 1tbsp for later use. Add the rest of the oil to a large frying pan and heat over high heat.

Add the chicken to the oil, a piece at a time, to ensure the oil doesn't boil over. Work in batches. Fry for about 5-7 minutes, turning once until cooked through and golden brown all over.

Using a set of tongs, transfer the

chicken to a plate lined with kitchen paper. Repeat with the second batch of chicken, then turn off the heat when done.

As soon as the second batch of chicken is cooking, heat the reserved 1tbsp oil in a separate frying pan over medium-high heat. Add the chopped onion, red and green chillies, the remaining ¼tbsp of salt and the remaining ¼tbsp of black pepper to the pan. Fry for about 2-3 minutes, stirring often, until the onion starts to soften slightly.

Then turn down the heat to medium and add in the 2 cloves of minced garlic and 3 chopped spring onions. Fry for a further minute, stirring often.

By now, both batches of chicken should be cooked. Add the chicken to the frying pan with onion and chillies in and toss everything together for 1 minute. Remove from the heat and serve.



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take a break

IN TOWN

SPRING SALON 2023



International artists present stunning canvases in 'Black and White' at Matti Sirvio Art Galleria. Photos: V K Shafeer



INDEPENDENCE CRICKET TROPHY



75th Sri Lankan Independence Cricket Trophy at Oman Cricket Academy. Photos: V K Shafeer

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these won the Grammy Award for Record of the Year in 2008?
- A. Beat It by Michael Jackson
B. Rehab by Amy Winehouse
C. Hotel California by The Eagles
D. Killing Me Softly with His Song by Roberta Flack
02. Football athlete, broadcaster and actor, O.J. Simpson, ran in the Torch Relay for which Olympic Games?
- A. 1976 Winter Olympics
B. 1986 Winter Olympics
C. 1996 Summer Olympics
D. 1984 Summer Olympics

03. Who were the Persians defeated by in the sea battle at Salamis in 480BC?
- A. Phoenicians
B. Rome
C. Greece
D. Venice

Answers: 1.B 2.D 3.C

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY:

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

L	O	O	G
A	N	T	L
V	A	D	T
S	D	S	A

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Emotional news could come to your family. Try to keep in touch throughout the day so you can stay abreast of what's going on. The news could be confusing at first, so it would be a good idea to get everyone in the same room to process it together. Your role in your circle of relatives will be an important one. You can help keep everyone from overreacting or flying off the handle.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

It's just like you to bend over backward to help a friend in need, but haven't you noticed that this friend needs you an awful lot? If you want to be satisfied with this relationship, you need to speak up when you're starting to feel they're taking advantage of you. You don't have to pick a fight, but you do have to stand up for yourself. They expect nothing less.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

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



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Clarity is especially important right now, because you need to make sure the people you're dealing with completely understand who you are and what you're willing to do. Put in extra effort when it comes to making sure you're saying what you mean and confirming that people understand what you're trying to say. If you don't, conflict could arise.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If you're only acting modest because you don't want to come off as being too cocky, then you aren't being honest! Don't feel guilty about enjoying the praise you get when you do something remarkable. Embrace it! After all, you're not exactly the type of person who would rent a billboard to promote every achievement, so you don't have to worry about people thinking you have a big head.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Put all of your compassionate energy to good use today by offering aid to those in need. You don't have to hop on a plane to another country. There are plenty of people right in your own little corner of the world who could use your help. You know, right now, there's someone in your life who could use a hand with a work project.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The weird behavior that's been happening in your social circle might be driving you nuts, but it doesn't directly involve you, so don't insert yourself into the drama today. Keep your head down and avoid picking sides. It's possible for you to remain neutral despite what one of the main players says.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today, you need to pick up your feet and get moving more aggressively toward one of your goals. It isn't going to come to you! Sure, it might seem hard to attain, and it probably will take more than one day to attain it. But it's important for you to believe that you can get what you want. You just have to start reaching for it!



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your growing ambition makes you mismatched with a mellow friend. If you two have social plans soon, you need to work harder to adjust to their way of thinking if you want to have a good time. You can't talk about your career or other aspirations and expect them to be interested. Their influence in your life is good.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Is your mind on tomorrow? Get it back to thinking about today! You have to deal with the people who are in your life right now and the issues at hand. It's good to be mindful of the future and have goals you want to reach, but if you're ignoring the present, you're missing out on a lot. So instead of thinking about what you're going to do this weekend focus on the next few hours.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You'll get the greatest amount of satisfaction from encountering unfamiliar topics today. You need novelty in the ideas you process to feel like you're making progress. Do whatever it takes to feed your brain some new input, and try to do it early in the day. Thinking the same way about the same things is bound to get boring.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Make sure you do whatever it takes to get some peace and quiet today. It's healthy to have time to yourself every once in a while, and today is as good a time as any. Your creativity hasn't been as sharp as usual, and you could use a recharge. Do something fun that's best done alone.

entertainment



'SUPER MARIO' CROSSES US\$1BN GLOBALLY

The *Super Mario Bros Movie* easily held its first-place position on North American movie screens this weekend while its accumulated global total pushed past the US\$1bn mark, analysts said Sunday. The video game-based film earned an estimated US\$40mn for the Friday-through-Sunday period in the United States and Canada for a domestic total so far of US\$490mn, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported. With overseas earnings now at US\$532mn, its accumulated global total has hit US\$1.02bn.



SOME LIKE IT HOT, TOPS TONY AWARDS nominations

The musical, which features a score by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, was nominated for best musical, best original score, best book of a musical (written by Matthew Lopez & Amber Ruffin) and best direction of a musical, as well as in the acting categories, with nominations for both Christian Borle and J Harrison Ghee in the category of best performance by an actor in a leading role in a musical and for Kevin Del Aguila and NaTasha Yvette Williams in the featured roles categories.

Lea Michele, currently starring in *Funny Girl on Broadway*, and Myles Frost, who won a Tony Award in 2022 for his lead performance in *MJ*, announced the nominations at SoFi New York on Tuesday morning. The 76th Annual Tony Awards will be held on June 11 at United Palace in New York City's Washington Heights.



ALIA'S DEBUT AT MET GALA

Dressed in an ivory ball gown embellished with 100,000 pearls hand beaded in India, Bollywood star Alia Bhatt made an impressive debut at the 2023 Met Gala New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art which paid tribute to the legendary German designer Karl Lagerfeld. Alia wore an atelier Prabal Gurung ivory silk tulle and satin face organza exaggerated basque waist ball gown with hand beaded pearls. For her maiden appearance at the 'fashion's biggest night', the Indian star said she wanted to wear something that felt authentic and was 'proudly made in India'.



Hollywood writers strike as studio talks collapse

Thousands of Hollywood television and movie writers went on strike Tuesday after talks with studios and streamers over pay and working conditions failed to clinch a deal. The strike means late-night shows are expected to grind to a halt immediately, while television series and movies scheduled for release later this year and beyond could face major delays. "We have not reached an agreement with the studios and streamers," the Writers Guild of America (WGA) said in an email to members.

COMING SOON



GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3
In Marvel Studios' 'Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3' our beloved band of misfits are settling into life on Knowhere. But it isn't long before their lives change.
Genre: Action
Starring: Dave Bautista, Zoe Saldana, Chris Pratt
Language: English

AMAZON REVEALS STREAMING DATE FOR BEN AFFLECK'S 'AIR'

Ben Affleck's critically acclaimed *Air* will become available to stream on Amazon Prime Video on May 12 after an exclusive run in theatres across the world. The star-packed period sports drama, which has sparked early Oscar buzz, marks a new era for Amazon Studios in terms of how it releases certain original titles. Instead of sending *Air* straight to streaming, the studio has agreed to abide by a traditional theatrical window for a robust run.



BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW:
KISIKA BHAI KISIKI JAAN
Genre: Family drama
Starring: Salman Khan, Pooja Hegde, Venkatesh

Mindless mayhem

Loaded with characters made out of small time reality TV stars, packed with colourful, yet mindless song and dance sequences, and fights and feuds that are only intended to prop up the central character, *Kisika Bhai Kisiki Jaan* is meant for those who have nothing better to do.

Directed by Farhad Samji and produced by Salman Khan Films, this Bollywood masala stars Salman Khan, Pooja Hegde, Venkatesh and Jagapathi Babu in lead roles to ensure that festive audiences get a good dose of nonsense. The film is a remake of the Tamil film *Veeram* (2014) but is packed with irritating allu histrionics.

Don't hunt for a storyline, there is none. It is only a compilation of alternating peppy songs and fight sequences that seem to go on and on. Bhaijaan, a braveheart, who lives with his three brothers - Ishq, Moh and Love - in a colony of Delhi, are often involved in fights. Bhaijaan (he has no other name) hates the idea of marriage as he feels that his wife might create disharmony in the family. However, the younger brothers who pretend they don't want to get married, all have secret lovers - Sukun, Muskaan and Chahat (all non entities from television). The brothers learn through Nadeem Chacha (late Satish Kaushik) that Bhaijaan was in love

with a girl named Bhagyalakshmi and the hunt for a suitor begins, mixed with endless skimishes with a goon called Mahavir. There's a southern presence in the shape of Venkatesh and Jagapathi Babu, besides Vijender Singh, the real-life boxer and Rohini Hattangadi, a matriarch who presides over the mindless mayhem post interval. And, no - the songs, including 'Yentamma' and the nursery rhyme jig, were not funny, rather offensive. We're not going to torture you further...that's the job of the film. We only hope, Salman wakes up and smells the coffee this time round.

Rating ★★☆☆☆





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