

Hon'ble Lady greets on Mother's Day

Muscat - Honourable Lady Sayyida Ahad bint Abdullah bin Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, has sent a congratulatory message on the occasion of Mother's Day, observed on March 21. The message reads as follows:

"A mother is a symbol of sacrifice and a source of mercy. Her resourcefulness is inexhaustible, awards countless, blessings great, bounties plentiful and status lofty. Allah the Almighty honoured the mother and our Prophet advised us to do the same. It has thus become incumbent on us to take care of the mother, honour her and respect her.

"We are delighted to send our heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to every mother who worked hard to provide a comfortable life to the family. Our greetings to every mother who exerted sincere efforts and remained vigilant in bringing up her children and endured hardships for their well-being so that they could become loyal in serving their countries and all of humanity.

"Happy Mother's Day!"



Poets are cultural ambassadors: Aisha al Saifi

Civil aviation recovery satisfactory: CAA

Plans currently in works include introduction of amphibious aircraft, Phase 1 of Musandam Airport

Our Correspondent Muscat

The civil aviation sector has seen 'satisfactory' recovery in the sultanate after the COVID-19 pandemic hit it hard in 2020 and 2021, Nayef bin Ali al Abri, Chairman of Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), said at a media briefing on Monday.

Passenger and freight traffic have witnessed significant increase, and there are plans to introduce amphibious aircraft, start work on Phase 1 of Musandam Airport, rehabilitation of the southern runway at Muscat International Airport, and develop the National Civil Aviation Strategy 2040, Abri informed.

Revealing details of the performance of the civil aviation sector in 2022, Abri said, "All airports in Oman saw satisfactory recovery following the travel restrictions of the pandemic. Movement of aircraft through Muscat International Airport increased 87 per cent in 2022, with



In Muscat International Airport, aircraft traffic increased 87% in 2022, passenger traffic increased 129% and freight traffic grew 34%

NAYEF BIN ALI AL ABRI

the number of passengers reaching 8,602,000, an increase of 129 per cent. Freight traffic also grew - 34 per cent - during this period."

He further informed that the authority's revenue in 2022 totalled RO72.43mn, an increase of RO26.43mn or 58 per cent, while expenditure increased RO221,000 or one per cent over 2021.

The number of open sky agreements also increased - 66 more - with 122 countries, while the total number of airline permits reached 10,962.

"Sohar Airport witnessed 28 per cent increase in air traffic and 122 per cent passenger numbers. In Duqm Airport, passenger numbers increased 37 per cent, while aircraft traffic decreased 21

per cent," Abri said. Elaborating on development plans, he said the authority approved a national plan for aviation safety, a project to install a hydrogen generator, establishment of a new automatic meteorological station in Barka, and provision of a wireless emergency alert system for tsunami warning in 2022.

Early warning system Abdullah bin Rashid al Khadouri, Director General of Oman Meteorology at CAA, said, "The early warning system project has been supported by directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and an investment of RO8mn."

He added that the authority has launched a programme called 'Muzn' that aims to develop the quality of alerts, meteorological services and early warning, and improve systems and devices in the National Multi Hazard Early Warning System.

According to Khadouri, the programme also aims to modernise a satellite and numerical forecast system and a wadi flood prediction project. Installation of a weather radar in Muscat is expected to be completed in May 2023.

"The authority will launch a new initiative, called Friends of Meteorology, which will include amateur weather analysts and host meetings and training programmes about weather forecasting," Khadouri added.

Oman's Onsor develops 3D tech, offers it to US firm

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman's Onsor Technologies signed an agreement on Monday with California-based zSpace to export 3D laptops to the United States.

Onsor Technologies has offered zSpace, a provider of augmented and virtual reality solutions, a revolutionary 3D technology that requires no glasses. The companies have partnered to bring this innovation to the world, starting with the US market and then expanding to Oman and beyond.

The signing ceremony featured presentations by both companies and a live demonstration of a device equipped with the new technology.

The technology allows 3D viewing without the need of cumbersome glasses, providing an immersive and realistic visual experience that enhances creativity and imagination, a press release stated.

Onsor developed the technology, featuring a specially designed screen and cameras that monitor eye movement, to create 3D images that align with the user's field of vision.

Onsor Technologies' partnership has enabled zSpace to provide an innovative solution to the market. The technology will improve training processes simulating real-life scenarios without the need for 3D glasses across



various industries, including oil and gas, manufacturing and defence. Additionally, the technology will be used to enhance educational and entertainment experiences.

'Onsor Technologies is committed to providing advanced solutions that enhance people's lives and make the world a better place. The launch of this new technology demonstrates its dedication to revolutionising the industry and consolidating its position as an innovator in the tech world.'

With the US market as the starting point, this technology will soon be available in Oman and other countries, providing new possibilities and opportunities across various industries.

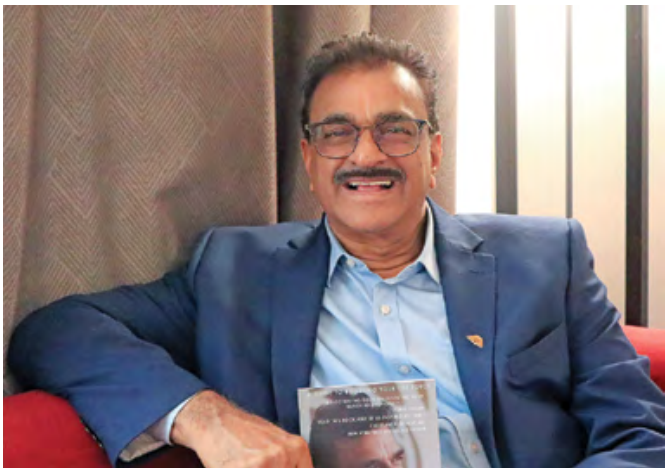
'Onsor Technologies and zSpace are at the forefront of this groundbreaking technology, and their partnership promises to bring further advancements in the future.'

Mazda advertisement featuring four models: Mazda 6, Mazda CX-30, Mazda CX-9, and Mazda CX-5. The ad highlights a cash gift starting from RO 1,050 up to RO 3,900, free AAA roadside assistance for 3 years, and a service package (5 years or 100,000 km) starting from RO 200 only. The ad also includes the Mazda logo and the slogan "So generous, IT'S INSPIRING".

Drug addicts need mental support, wellness for total change: Expert

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to train more Omani experts, volunteers and medical practitioners in dealing with drug addicts through wellness and balance, Dr Siddick Maudarbocus, founder and owner of Les Mariannes Wellness Sanctuary – Mauritius, was in Oman recently. Dr Maudarbocus is credited with developing a unique programme that blends modern medical practice and traditional Eastern medicine. His biography *Patients, Patents & Pills: How Wellness Can Save Your Life* deals with techniques and case studies of how to control emotions and attain balance in life and relationships. The book offers a unique insight into his work at Les Mariannes Wellness Sanctuary, a destination that stimulates mind, body and soul. Trained as a gen-



eral physician, Dr Maudarbocus has 35 years of work experience in the UK, Ireland, Africa and the Middle East. His recent visit to Muscat was the second in seven years. He is collaborating with Dr Zahra al Harmali who founded Shuroq al Amal al Alamia in 2015 to rehabilitate drug addicts. Among numerous awards and recognitions,

Dr Zahra was winner of Apex Media's Woman of the Year Award 2020 in the Unsung Heroes category. Shuroq al Amal al Alamia is a non-profit centre licensed and supervised by the Ministry of Health, registered with the Ministry of Commerce and certified by Royal Oman Police. Elaborating on his approach to

Our body is like nature that changes with seasons. Hence the main aim is to keep balance both internally and externally... Life is all about balance

DR SIDDICK MAUDARBOCUS

healing patients, Dr Maudarbocus said, "Life is all about balance, and wellness is very important for the balance. Our mind and body function at optimum levels when there is balance in our chemicals, hormones, electrolytes and blood pressure, among other parameters. Our body is like nature that changes with seasons.

Hence the main aim is to keep balance both internally and externally." Dr Maudarbocus will train volunteers in wellness for patients addicted to drugs. Collaborating with him, Dr Zahra is preparing to offer "something new and exclusive in the country with wellness as the top priority". According Dr Maudarbocus, it is important to understand that medicines work for only a limited period of time in individuals of substance abuse. "They need mental support and wellness for a total change in body and mind. Our approach to rehabilitation is identifying the addict's talent and qualities, following which we work with them. We also try to remove insecurities. Patients of drug abuse need validation, time and purpose and the professionals treating them require patience and training," Dr Maudarbocus said.

'Guided e-therapy during COVID-19 proved effective'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A new research showed the effectiveness of online therapy over self-administered therapy in reducing anxiety and depression linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study - conducted by Dr Mohammed Salim al Alawi, consultation-liaison psychiatrist at the Department of Behavioural Medicine at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital - won the 9th National Research Award, organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for its interesting revelation. Titled *Efficacy of a Six-Week-Long Therapist-Guided Online Therapy Versus Self-help Internet-Based Therapy for COVID-19-Induced Anxiety and Depression*, the study went into comparatively assessing the efficacy of therapist-guided online therapy with that of self-help, web-based therapy focused on COVID-19-induced symptoms of anxiety and depression among individuals living in Oman.

Through the study, Dr Alawi and his team provided preliminary evidence to support the effectiveness of online therapy to reduce the anxiety and depression that originated from the pandemic. It also showed that therapy provided by trained counsellors has a better impact than self-administered therapy. In the first phase, the research team surveyed a sample of 1,580 participants, among which 30 per cent (474 participants) were found suffering from anxiety and depression, while during the second phase, the research team randomly selected 44 participants out of the 474 suffering from the above symptoms and tested two types of therapy on them. Dr Alawi said 22 of them received one online session per week over a span of six weeks from psychotherapists in either Arabic or English, while the other



The study, conducted by Dr Mohammed Salim al Alawi, won the 9th National Research Award organised by the Ministry of Higher Education

22 received an automatic weekly newsletter through e-mail containing self-help information and tips to cope with distress associated with COVID-19. The psychotherapists utilised the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) on the basis of their training background, and applied the approaches they found best suited for the participants in these sessions. On the other hand, information offered to the other group that received the automatic weekly newsletter through e-mail mainly consisted of behavioural tips from principles of CBT and ACT. After the sixth weeks of trial, the study found that symptoms of anxiety and depression did reduce in both groups, yet a greater reduction was observed in those who had received therapist-guided e-therapy. In regard to the significance of the study, Dr Alawi stated that the findings of this study can assist mental health practitioners in Oman to effectively provide their services in a remote-based format to vulnerable populations and also provide policymakers with insights into the usefulness and feasibility of online-delivered mental health therapy.

RO8mn commercial, leisure project announced for Salalah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Two leading real estate companies of Oman have joined hands to develop one-of-its kind commercial and leisure project in Al Saada area of Salalah, in the governorate of Dhofar. Tibiaan Properties and Al Tamman Real Estate Company signed a contract to develop and market the project, which will include commercial units suitable for offices, retail stores, restaurants and cafés among others. The cooperation comes to deliver premium projects in Dhofar governorate, where demand is rising for quality real estate projects, a press release stated. 'The project is named 'Ajwaa', which in Arabic refers to the beautiful weather Salalah enjoys throughout the year, thus reflect-



Ajwaa will represent a distinctive investment destination allowing individuals and institutions the opportunity to own a commercial space for their business or to rent

ing the opportunities this project offers to investors in both corporate and individual capacity.' The location for the project was carefully selected within one

of the most vibrant areas in Salalah on the Sultan Taimur Street in Al Saada, with an easy access to all parts of Salalah, the release added.

'The RO8mn project - Ajwaa - will represent a distinctive investment destination, as it will allow individuals and institutions the opportunity to own a commercial space for their own business or to rent it out. Spread on an area over 20,000sqm, the project includes more than 220 commercial spaces making it an integrated commercial destination for work and leisure alike.' "Al Tamman Real Estate is a major real estate developer in Oman, and today we announce our new project in Salalah - Ajwaa - which comes to enrich the market with quality and innovation and meeting the demand expectations," said Himansu Mohapatra, General Manager of Al Tamman Real Estate. Speaking about the location and design, Mohapatra underlined that what distinguishes the

project, in addition to its strategic location, "is its distinctive design that comes in accordance with the highest technical and aesthetic specifications". Younis al Harrasi, CEO of Tibiaan Properties, said, "We are pleased to announce our first project in the wilayat of Salalah with Al Tamman Real Estate Company, where we have studied the project's importance and value addition to the governorate of Dhofar starting from identifying the land location all the way to creating the best mix of commercial units which will serve the community." The project is in line with the company's direction to expand presence all over the sultanate to deliver real estate solutions and wider range of investment opportunities after a journey that extends over 20 years.



SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF HEALTH



NOTICE

The Ministry of Health (MOH) would like to announce to the citizens and residents who have been accepted to perform the Hajj pilgrimage this year (1444H/2023G) about providing vaccines in health institutions starting from the second week of April 2023.

According to the requirements of the competent authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the necessary vaccinations are:-

1.The Quadric-vaccination against Meningococcal Meningitis (ACYW135)

2.Seasonal flu vaccine

3.Covid-19 vaccine (Bivalent vaccine).

Therefore, MOH urges all citizens and residents who want to perform the Hajj pilgrimage this year (1444AH / 2023) to adhere to taking the vaccinations. The above requirements are considered a prerequisite to entering the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to prevent the spread of infection and safeguard public health.



Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Labour

ANNOUNCEMENT

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

Tender No.	Tender Description	Last date for electronic purchasing	Last date of tender submission
11 / 2023	Provision of maintenance services for the Labour Department building in Musandam Governorate	Sunday 09/04/2023 at 02:00 pm	Sunday 30/04/2023 at 10:00 am

Specialized establishments can obtain electronic documents from this link below, starting from Tuesday 21/03/2023, 8:00 AM.

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

Each bid is to be attached with a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate of (1%) of the value of the tender for the Ministry of Manpower, valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission of the tender.

Each electronic bid is to be attached with bank guarantee, provided that the original bank guarantee is delivered upon request from the Ministry.

Tender envelopes will be opened at 11:00am on the same day on Sunday 30/04/2023.

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

labour_OMAN



AMERA calls on public to sight Ramadan moon

Muscat - The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs has asked citizens and residents to be on the lookout for the Ramadan moon on Wednesday evening, on the 29th of Shaban 1444 AH, which corresponds to March 22, 2023.

The ministry has called on citizens and residents to sight the moon to determine the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan this year. The ministry said the main moon sighting committee will meet on Wednesday.

In the event of sighting the moon the ministry has asked people to contact the offices of walis and the judges.

Ramadan working hours for slaughterhouses

Muscat - Muscat Municipality has announced new working hours for Seeb and Amerat slaughterhouses for the month of Ramadan.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality, said, 'Working hours of the slaughterhouses through out Ramadan will be from 8am to 1pm for individuals and from 6am to 8am for companies.' The 7am to 1pm working hours for individuals and from 6pm to midnight for companies, which began on Monday, will continue until the end of the month of Shaban.

Oman, Unicef join hands for children's wellbeing campaign

Muscat - The Government of Oman, supported by Unicef, is gearing up for the launch of a new nationwide campaign to promote wellbeing among children.

The campaign, which aims to raise awareness through broadcast, print and social media, is led by a Task Force comprising officials from the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Development and the National Centre for Statistics and Information, besides Unicef, and is part of a broader initiative to encourage positive parenting practices in the country.

Young people are key to the future of the nation and it's vital that they are supported from very early on in life, specifically by safeguarding their rights, ensuring quality social well-being services, and providing those with disabilities adequate social protection, stated a press release.

To this end, the campaign has been developed in response to an Oman-based study on key behaviours regarding early childhood education, inclusion and



(Supplied photo)

The campaign aims to raise awareness through broadcast, print and social media, and is part of a broader initiative to encourage positive parenting practices in the country

adult supervision. It will focus on reinforcing the learning and social benefits of early childhood education and raise awareness of the services available to allow more children to enjoy fulfilling lives and their rights in society.

A ratified member of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1996, Oman is amongst the top-ranking Arab countries in child

protection and one of the leading countries that commits to providing children with education, healthcare and adequate protection.

The Ministry of Social Development hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to help address violence against children. People can dial 1555 to report an incident, or the Child Protection Hotline on 1100.

Students' English language skills to get boost with myON

Muscat - The Ministry of Education (MoE) and Renaissance, the creator of the myON digital reading platform, have launched a pilot project aimed at improving attitudes towards literacy in 12 primary schools across the sultanate.

The pilot programme - part of the MoE's commitment to enhance digital English language learning across the sultanate - will run for five weeks, giving participating schools access to thousands of digital texts of myON to boost students' reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

Improved attitudes towards reading in English and on digital platforms and greater use of technology-based learning to support English language acquisition are also key objectives of the initiative.

"We are delighted to be working on the myON pilot with the Renaissance team. We feel myON will help our students enhance their English competence and love of reading. We are so impressed with the engagement that has already been shown by our students, teachers and supervisors and feel this will lead to a successful first phase of our partnership," commented Salim Mohammed al Kharousi, Director of Department of Human Sci-



(Supplied photo)

ences Curriculum Development, MoE.

With a wealth of innovative and engaging features, myON is unlike any other online reading platform in the way it supports foundational literacy and English-language development through audio and recorded voice features, stated a press release. Used by millions of students around the world, it allows enhanced digital books to be read on and offline while also providing teachers with real-time data and unique insights on what students have been reading, when and for how long.

Joan Mill, Group Managing Director of Renaissance International, said, "Renaissance is proud to be working with the

Omani Ministry of Education and to mark the start of this exciting programme featuring myON. Oral reading fluency is an essential part of literacy development and growth. During this programme, we look forward to helping teachers across schools better understand the significant benefits of our platform, enabling them to not just monitor the reading progress of their students, but also successfully instil a love for reading overall."

Throughout the pilot programme, Renaissance will send weekly newsletters to teachers and school leaders to inform them of student usage and progress, and to share top tips and ideas for using myON with their students.

Two fuel stations with charging facility for electric cars planned in N Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) is offering two sites for establishment of integrated fuel stations in North Sharqiyah.

According to an official, two plots of land, each measuring 15,000sqm, are being offered for integrated fuel service stations in Ibra and Bidiyah, North Sharqiyah.

Bidders must be Omani, male or female, aged not less than 23

years at the time of bidding. The bidding company must have at least 30 per cent stake of an Omani or an oil operating company in Oman, the MHUP official informed.

Additionally, bidders must be registered through the electronic system - Real Estate Development Services Centre - using ID number or commercial register.

"The two stations must each include a building for restaurants, main services, restroom, an electric car charging station, shops, parking lots, a fuel filling station,

and a car repair workshop," the ministry official added.

The last date for submitting bids is June 8.

Establishment of the two integrated fuel stations is in line with MHUP's efforts to achieve the objectives of population and economic growth, including commercial and industrial real estate units. It also aims to enable the private sector to attract investments in various governorates to contribute to the development of integrated and sustainable urban communities.



MINISTRY OF HEALTH
SULTANATE OF OMAN



ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health (Directorate General of Health Services in South Batinah Governorate) invites specialized companies to participate in the tender shown below:

Tender Ref :	Description	Last Date For Collection Of Tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
1045	Renting photocopiers (black and white /color) to the General Office of the Directorate and its affiliated institutions	Specialized companies registered with the Tender Board	27/4/2023	02/04/2023	=/25 R.O
1046	Renting Printers (black and white /color) to the General Office of the Directorate and its affiliated institutions	Specialized companies registered with the Tender Board	27/4/2023	02/04/2023	=/25 R.O

Taking into account the following:

- Bidders must submit their bids electronically through the website, <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>
- Each bid shall be accompanied by an electronic guarantee of not less than (1%) of the bid value, valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submitting bids through the system.
- The Ministry is not obliged to accept the lowest bids or any other bid.
- For inquiries related to the tender, please contact the website of the E-Tenders Support Service System on the phone number **24402200** or e-mail etenderhd@ita.gov.om





إعلان مناقصة

TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

SOHAR Port and Freezone invites Tenderers to the following tenders
ندعو شركة ميناء صحر والمنطقة الحرة للموردين للمشاركة في المناقصات أدناه

No رقم	Tender Ref الرقم المرجعي	Tender Title عنوان المناقصة	Tender Fee OMR الرسوم
1	SIPC 2023-110	Provide Communication & Media Services for SOHAR Port and Freezone	105.000
2	SIPC 2023-111	Provide Social Media & Media Buying Services for SOHAR Port and Freezone	52.500

- The above-mentioned tender fees including the VAT 5%.
- Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 9:00 am on Tuesday, 21/03/2023 until 4:00 pm on Monday 03/04/2023.
- Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:

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

Account Name اسم الحساب	Sohar Industrial Port Co شركة ميناء صحر الصناعي
Account Number رقم الحساب	3101-007970-500
Bank Name اسم البنك	Oman Arab bank SAOC - Main Br بنك عمان العربي ش.م.ع.م - الفرع الرئيسي
SWIFT رمز السوفيت كود	OMABOMRUXXX

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

- تسليم رسوم المناقصة المذكورة أعلاه ضريبة القيمة المضافة وفهرها 5%
- بإمكان مقدمي العطاءات طلب استلام وثائق المناقصة إلكترونياً ابتداءً من يوم الثلاثاء الموافق ٢١/٠٣/٢٠٢٣ (الساعة ٩ صباحاً) وحتى يوم الاثنين الموافق ٠٣/٠٤/٢٠٢٣ (الساعة ٤ مساءً).
- على مقدمي العطاءات اتباع الإجراءات والخطوات التالية للحصول على مستندات المناقصة إلكترونياً:

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

Step 2:
Tenderers to send the following documents:

- A request for the electronic tender documents
- Scanned bank transfer
- The firm's commercial registration documents

All shall be communicated to the following e-mail address:
sipc_procurement@soharportandfreezone.om

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

- SOHAR reserves the right to accept or reject any tender without assigning any reasons
- All SMES are requested to provide their Riyada Card along with the required documents

For any clarification regarding the tenders please send an e-mail to:
sipc_procurement@soharportandfreezone.om

الخطوة الثانية:
يُعين على مقدمي العطاءات تقديم المستندات التالية:

- طلب الحصول على النسخة الإلكترونية من مستندات المناقصة
- نسخة من إصال التحويل البنكي
- أوراق السجل التجاري للشركة

على أن يتم إرسالها إلى:
sipc_procurement@soharportandfreezone.om

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

- يحق لشركة ميناء صحر والمنطقة الحرة قبول أو رفض أي مورد بدون الإفصاح عن الأسباب.
- يتوجب على جميع المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة تقديم بطاقة زيادة إلى جانب مستندات الشركة
- في حال وجود أي استفسار أو استفسارات تتعلق بالمناقصة الرجاء التواصل معنا عبر البريد الإلكتروني:
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Pakistan	732.13
Bangladesh	273.45
Philippines	141.15
Sri Lanka	896.08
*Rates as on March 20 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

First Citizens in talks to acquire Silicon Valley Bank

First Citizens BancShares is evaluating an offer for Silicon Valley Bank, Bloomberg News reported, citing people familiar with the matter.

At least one other suitor is making a serious consideration for the collapsed lender, Reuters reported

SVB and First Citizens did not immediately respond to Reuters' request for comment outside of business hours.

Reuters reported earlier this week that the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp had asked banks interested in acquiring Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank to submit bids by March 17.

The auctions followed the FDIC taking over Silicon Valley Bank last Friday and Signature Bank on Sunday, as the collapses of the two US mid-sized lenders whipsawed global financial markets over fears of a contagion.

This will be the FDIC's second attempt at selling SVB after a failed effort a week ago. The FDIC had retained investment bank Piper Sandler Cos to run a new auction, the sources told Reuters.

Omantel signs deal with Wingu Group to expand into African market

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omantel, the leading provider of telecom services in Oman, has sealed a partnership deal with Wingu Group's Djibouti Data Centre to expand into the African market and further boost its standing as a leading regional wholesale hub.

Wingu Group's Djibouti Data Center was the first and only carrier neutral data center facility in East Africa with access to all major international fiber optic systems connecting Europe, Middle East, and Asia Pacific regions with Africa.

Apart from providing access to the African market, Omantel said its Point of Presence (POP) in Djibouti will help forge new wholesale partnerships with operators and hyper-scalers, improve the utilisation of connectivity between Oman and Africa, facilitate better commercial models that will lead to business growth and enable better support for customers with connectivity requests to and from Africa.

In a press statement, Sohail Qadir, vice president of the wholesale business unit at Omantel, said, "As a global wholesale player, Omantel is always on the lookout for new



Sohail Qadir (right) and Demos Kyriacou (left) sign the agreement (Supplied photo)

market opportunities. Our new partnership with Wingu Group's Djibouti Data Center presents us with a great opportunity to solidify our presence in Africa. It will help us attract more customers to connect to and from Africa, resulting in an enhanced customer experience and new business opportunities for Omantel and Djibouti Data Center. This is indeed another important milestone of fulfilling our wholesale vision: from Oman to the World."

Demos Kyriacou, deputy CEO and chief operating officer at Wingu Group, the owner and operator of Djibouti Data Center (DDC) said, "We pride ourselves on creating a strategic gateway to East and Southern Africa. We are pleased to cement this partnership with a prestigious global

player like Omantel. A collaboration of this nature will trigger greater connectivity in the region and inspire more global players to collocate in our Djibouti data center. We are very happy that the Djibouti Data Center has cemented itself as a reliable and cost-effective gateway hub to many of the fastest growing markets and service providers in Africa."

Kyriacou added, "The interest from such world-class players as Omantel has prompted us to begin construction on a second facility, which will provide, uniquely in Djibouti, our clients with an integrated Cable Landing Stations and carrier-neutral data center."

The partnership is set to open doors to new opportunities in

Africa and will further extend Omantel's reach by utilising the cable systems landing in Oman (Salalah) and Djibouti, such as the AAE-1, EIG, MENA as well as a number of new cable systems which will be announced soon.

As a global wholesale service provider, Omantel has Points of Presence in different countries across the globe including key wholesale hubs such as Marseille, London, Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Singapore, to name a few.

Wingu Group is a specialist carrier-neutral data center operator focused on East Africa. The group now has Tier III certified, carrier-neutral data centers in Ethiopia, Somaliland and Tanzania, and is adding a second facility in Djibouti.

Oman crude price falls 6% on global banking concerns

Our Correspondent
Muscat



Oman crude prices, along with other international oil benchmarks, fell on Monday to their lowest in 15 months on concerns risks in the global banking industry may trigger a recession that would lead oil demand to decline. Oil prices were also affected ahead of a possible interest rate hike by the US Federal Reserve this week.

Oman crude contract (for May delivery) plunged US\$4.58, or 6.1 per cent, on Monday to close at US\$70.35 per barrel at the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME), its lowest level since December 2021.

Last week, global oil prices recorded more than 10 per cent weekly drop, over fears that a global banking crisis would weigh on the oil demand outlook.

However, the average price of Oman crude (for March delivery) has stabilised at US\$80.92 per barrel, which is US\$3.49 per barrel higher than the price for February delivery, according to the DME data.

Stock markets and crude prices are under pressure due to the crisis in the Western banking industry, which has seen the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank in the US and the takeover of embattled Swiss banking giant Credit Suisse by the rival UBS in the span of two weeks.

In volatile trading, Brent crude futures on Monday fell 1.2 per cent to US\$72.1 a barrel by 12:11GMT. The US benchmark West Texas Intermediate crude contract was down 1.3 per cent at US\$65.89, according to a Reuters report.

Goldman Sachs, one of the most bullish banks on its outlook for oil, has trimmed its oil price forecasts down as worries over the banking sector and the potential for recession outweigh a surge in demand from China. The bank's analysts now see Brent crude reaching US\$94 a barrel for the 12 months ahead, and US\$97 a barrel in the second half of 2024, versus US\$100 a barrel previously, according to a Bloomberg report.

'Oil prices have plunged despite the China demand boom given banking stress, recession fears, and an exodus of investor flows,' Goldman Sachs said in a note as report by Bloomberg. 'Historically, after such scarring events, positioning and prices recover only gradually, especially long-dated prices,' it added.

Kuwait desert oil spill sparks state of emergency: Kuwait Oil Company

Kuwait City, Kuwait - Kuwait Oil Company declared a "state of emergency" on Monday following an oil spill on land, in an incident decried by environmental activists as a 'recurring problem' in the energy-rich Gulf state.

The emergency followed an "oil leak in the west of the country", the state-owned company said in a statement, as video posted by Kuwaiti media showed a gushing pipe surrounded by a large slick of oil.

"No injuries have occurred as a result of the leak and production has not been affected," company spokesman Qusai al-Amer was quoted as saying, adding that no toxic fumes had been reported.

The leak "occurred on land but not in a residential area", he later told AFP.

Teams have been dispatched to determine the source of the leak and contain the incident,



Amer said, declining to give the exact location or the extent of the spill.

Kuwait's Al Rai newspaper released a video on Twitter showing a pipe spewing large amounts of oil onto barren land. AFP could not independently verify the footage.

Kuwait is a major oil-producing country where nearly 90 per cent of government revenues come from oil. The key member within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries

(OPEC) is currently producing about 2.7mn barrels per day.

The Kuwait Oil Company has previously reported oil leaks in its fields in 2020 and 2016.

Kuwait had two oil slicks off its shores in August 2017, including one that was 1.6km long. Experts said the other spill, close to a joint Saudi-Kuwaiti oil field, may have measured up to 35,000 barrels of crude.

Kuwaiti environmental activist Khalid al-Hajire said the extent of damage from Monday's

oil leak remains largely unclear but decried non-compliance with environmental protocol.

"The oil pollution we constantly see in the air, land and sea proves that the oil industry is not sufficiently serious when it comes to protecting the environment," said Hajire who is the chairman of the Green Line Environmental Group, a non-governmental organisation.

Kuwaiti oil expert Abdul-Samee Bahbahani said the leak appears to stem from an abandoned oil well, citing images circulating on social media networks.

"I think the well was closed improperly, which led to erosion of the pipes and the cement cover, as well as an increase in pressure," he said, explaining the reason for the oil gush and warning that a spark could ignite a fire.

AFP

Maha Energy starts production test in Oman's onshore Block 70

Our Correspondent
Muscat



Swedish energy firm Maha Energy announced that the production test on Block 70 in Oman has commenced. The production test will include all eight new production wells drilled in the 2022-2023 drilling program, the company said in a statement.

The production test will start with the Mafrag-9 well. Bi-weekly, a new well will be added to the test until all new wells are connected to the testing system, the company said.

'Each well will be completed with PCP pumps before being placed on the test. Produced oil will be transported by heated trucks to a third party's facilities for further processing and, afterwards, transportation through the Omani national pipeline system,' Maha Energy said.

The company expects to be

able to announce preliminary information about the quality of the oil and initial production potential by May 2023.

Maha Energy entered into a joint operating agreement with Mafrag Energy earlier in 2023, whereby Mafrag Energy acquired 35 per cent interest in the exploration and production sharing agreement covering Block 70. Maha Energy is the Operator of Block 70 with 65% interest.

Maha Energy is an international upstream oil and gas company whose business activities include exploration, development and production of crude oil and natural gas. Its strategy is to target and develop underperforming hydrocarbon assets on global basis. The company operates three oil assets: Block-70 (Oman), Powder River (LAK Ranch) and Illinois Basin in the United States.

US regulator sells failed Signature Bank assets to another lender

San Francisco, US - The US banking regulator has struck a deal to sell most of the assets of the failed Signature Bank to another institution, the agency said on Sunday.

Signature Bank was seized by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) a week ago after it imploded in the wake of the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) earlier in March, a failure that has sent convulsions through the global banking sector.

The FDIC is also seeking a similar deal to sell off parts of SVB, according to Bloomberg.

Flagstar Bank, a subsidiary of New York Community Bancorp, will take over all the deposits and some loan portfolios of Signature

Bank, the regulator said in a statement.

Signature Bank held deposits of US\$88.6bn as of December 31, 2022, the statement said, adding that the bank's 40 branches would open under Flagstar on Monday.

About US\$60bn in loans and US\$4bn in deposits related to Signature Bank's digital banking business will remain under the regulator's control, according to a statement.

Last week, the US Federal Reserve, the Treasury Department and the FDIC intervened to prevent a massive wave of withdrawals at SVB from spreading to other small and medium-sized banks.

To reassure the market, they



guaranteed that customers would be able to withdraw all deposits from SVB and Signature Bank.

But regulators have so far been unable to find a buyer for SVB and are now considering breaking up the bank, a key

lender to startups, according to Bloomberg.

The FDIC is now "seeking to sell the failed bank in at least two

parts," sources told the news agency. Contacted by AFP, the regulator declined to comment.

The collapse of SVB, Signature Bank and fellow regional lender Silvergate has sparked fears of contagion across the industry as worried customers withdraw their cash.

San Francisco-based First Republic Bank - the 14th largest US bank by assets - has seen its stock market valuation melt by 80 per cent.

On Sunday, ratings agency Standard & Poor's (S&P) downgraded the bank's long-term issuer credit rating from BB+ to B+, despite a US\$30bn rescue package from 11 large US banks.

The measure "should ease near-term liquidity pressures,"

S&P said in a statement, "but it may not solve the substantial business, liquidity, funding, and profitability challenges that we believe the bank is now likely facing."

The agency warned it could further lower the bank's rating if there is no progress in stabilizing deposits.

First Republic Bank made assurances that with the US\$30bn injection the lender is "well positioned to manage short-term deposit activity."

"This support reflects confidence in First Republic and its ability to continue to provide unwavering exceptional service to its clients and communities," a spokesman said.

AFP

Global bank shares slide despite Credit Suisse takeover by UBS

New York, US – Global bank shares took another beating on Monday despite a UBS takeover of embattled Swiss rival Credit Suisse and actions by financial authorities aimed at calming investors fearing a broader crisis.

UBS agreed to take over Credit Suisse for 3bn Swiss francs (US\$3.25bn) in a government-brokered deal on Sunday following days of market upheaval over the health of the banking sector.

Hours later, the US Federal Reserve and other major central banks announced a coordinated effort to improve banks' access to liquidity.

While shares in UBS and other banks sank on Monday, the broader stock markets fluctuated, with Asia closing in the red while European indices rose after opening lower as investors pore over details of the deal.

The Credit Suisse deal "may have some effect in reducing anxiety levels in financial markets, but it may only be short-lived, with traders left wondering which bank could be next to hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons," said Tim Waterer, analyst at Kohle Capital Markets.

Shares in Credit Suisse and lenders worldwide had already sunk last week over concerns of contagion to the rest of the sector from the failure of US regional banks.

The Swiss bank had already been shaken by other scandals, including its exposure to the 2021 collapses of investment firms Archegos and Greensill.

One concern from Sunday's deal was the effect it could have



Credit Suisse deal wipes out high-risk debt holders

Zurich, Switzerland – Holders of US\$17.3bn worth of high-risk debt at troubled lender Credit Suisse will lose their investment as part of its rescue merger with Swiss rival UBS, regulators said.

Swiss authorities required that 16bn Swiss francs in so-called additional tier 1 (AT1) bonds be written down in the mega-merger that was announced late Sunday.

The move will lead to an increase in the bank's core capital, the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority (FINMA) said in a statement.

"The takeover will result in a larger bank, for which the current regulations require higher capital buffers," FINMA said. AT1 bonds were created following the 2008 global fi-

nanacial crisis to put the burden of losses on investors instead of taxpayers.

Also known as CoCo, or contingent convertible bonds, they are a high-return investment but banks can suspend interest payments or convert them into bank shares in times of trouble. But Swiss authorities ordered that the Credit Suisse AT1s be written down altogether as part of the UBS deal, dealing a blow to the bondholders.

Credit Suisse said the bonds "will be written off to zero".

For their part, shareholders will get some three billion Swiss francs, or 0.76 francs per share – much lower than their closing price on Friday of 1.86 francs.

AFP

quired that they be written off.

AT1 bonds, which offer high returns but also carry high risks, were created following the 2008 global financial crisis to put the burden of losses on investors instead of taxpayers.

"Sentiment vis-a-vis the AT1 bond asset class will likely remain weak following last night's deal," said Stephen Innes, managing partner at SPI Asset Management.

Shares in UBS were down more than four per cent after falling as much as 12 per cent earlier in the day. Credit Suisse shares were down almost 60 per cent and stood around the deal's 0.76 franc share price.

Authorities sought to reassure the markets.

The European Central Bank on Monday described the continent's financial system as "resilient" with sufficient liquidity.

EU Economy Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni said the reaction of "monetary authorities has been strong and rapid".

"If banks face tighter regulation and pressure to further improve their capital ratios, it could

suggest that many consumers and businesses will find it harder to borrow money and that could feed into weaker economic activity," Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell, noted on Monday.

Gold, seen as a safe store of value in times of economic turmoil, topped US\$2,000 per ounce for the first time in more than a year Monday before paring down gains. It was the highest level since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine just over one year ago.

Fed focus

The market volatility came ahead of the US Fed's policy meeting this week, with speculation mounting that it will pause its interest rate hikes to provide some stability to markets. The more dovish Fed outlook weighed on the dollar.

The collapse this month of US regional lenders Silicon Valley Bank, Signature Bank and Silvergate sparked fears of contagion as worried customers withdrew cash. It led US authorities last week to promise support for other lenders and depositors, while Wall Street titans including JP Morgan, Bank of America and Citigroup pledged to inject US\$30bn into under-pressure lender First Republic Bank.

"Investors are likely keeping a look over their shoulder for the next disaster in a high-interest rate (and inflationary) environment, so at best we might see markets recover some of last week's losses," said analyst Matt Simpson at City Index.

AFP



European banking sector resilient: ECB

Frankfurt, Germany – The European financial system is "resilient" and has sufficient liquidity, the European Central Bank said Monday, as banking shares plunged following the announcement that UBS would take over troubled rival Credit Suisse.

"The European banking sector is resilient, with robust levels of capital and liquidity," the ECB said in a joint statement with the European Banking Authority and the EU's Single Resolution Board. The institutions said they welcomed the actions taken by the Swiss authorities "to ensure financial stability".

Switzerland announced on Sunday that UBS would buy stricken lender Credit Suisse for US\$3.25bn, in a bid to prevent economic

turmoil from spreading throughout the country and beyond. But the deal failed to calm market nerves, with European banking shares plunging in early trading on Monday.

The ECB stressed in its joint statement that in the eurozone, shareholders would have been first in line to absorb losses before AT1 holders are hit, as part of reforms spurred by the global financial crisis.

"Additional Tier 1 is and will remain an important component of the capital structure of European banks," it said.

The ECB and five other major central banks on Sunday pledged coordinated action to ensure sufficient liquidity in the global financial system.

AFP

Systemically Important Banks: Giants with feet of clay?

Paris, France – The buyout of Credit Suisse, a bank considered too big to fail, by its Swiss rival UBS, has brought back into focus the difficulty of saving so-called systemically important lenders.

The buyout, announced by Swiss authorities over the weekend, hasn't completely calmed the markets, testifying to the nervousness that pervades the financial system in the face of the pressure of rising interest rates.

What is a systemically important bank?

Credit Suisse was one of the around 30 largest lenders considered to be Global Systemically Important Banks, often considered "too big to fail". These are designated by the Financial Stability Board, an institution created in the wake of the collapse of US investment bank Lehman Brothers to supervise reforms to strengthen the international financial system.

They are required to hold larger capital buffers that are supposed to help ensure that they can absorb shocks.

The list includes JP Morgan Chase, Bank of America, CitiGroup, HSBC, Barclays, BNP Paribas, Deutsche Bank, Santander, UniCredit, UBS, as well as others including Credit Suisse.

The lenders are considered so big that their collapse would have devastating consequences for the overall financial system and real economy, whether that is businesses or households.

The problem, for Thierry Philipponnat, chief economist at the NGO Finance Watch, is that "today, all of the banks have become systemic" and that the authorities feel compelled to intervene.



He pointed to the failure of two banks in the United States earlier this month. Despite their moderate size, both were key to serving certain sectors of the US economy, which prompted authorities to rescue them to avoid a widespread bank crisis, with only limited success.

Why did Credit Suisse need to be rescued?

For the past two years Switzerland's number two bank had suffered a series of scandals that provoked huge losses. Confidence in the bank eroded and suddenly it had difficulty accessing funding at reasonable rates.

The run on Silicon Valley Bank in the United States, which even if it had particular circumstances, still unnerved investors and depositors in the banking sectors.

A similar state of panic in Credit Suisse was triggered last week when Saudi National Bank, its largest shareholder, said it wouldn't invest any more capital.

Even if Credit Suisse's reserves weren't in a critical state, Swiss President Alain Berset said the takeover was the "best solution for restoring the confidence that has been lacking in the financial markets recently" and to prevent a run on the bank.

According to the Financial Times and Blick, the bank's clients withdrew 10 billion Swiss francs in one day at the end of last week.

What lessons can be learned?

Even if the buyout by UBS, which was strongly encouraged by the authorities, was the best short-term solution, questions remain about its long-term impact.

"Creating even bigger banks only multiplies the moral hazard risk", said Finance Watch's Philipponnat.

He said investors and executives don't have to same incentive to adopt rigorous management because they know they will be bailed out in any event.

Economist Veronique Riches-Flores said she "isn't sure this is the most efficient model in the medium to long term".

One can also question the efficacy of the numerous measures to bolster big banks taken after the 2008 crisis. Credit Suisse met all the solvency criteria, and yet when faced with a crisis in confidence the authorities had to step in to arrange its buyout.

Riches-Flores criticised comments from the European Central Bank that sought to calm markets.

One "spark can quickly create a chain reaction that no one can anticipate", she said.

She said the Credit Suisse crisis was caused by the general uncertainty in the sector provoked by the failure of US banks that had no link at all with the Swiss lender.

AFP

"Published as required under CBO circular BM 980 dated 18 December 2004" Profit and loss account for the year ended 31-December-2022

	RO in 000's	
	This Year End	Last Year End
Gross interest income	77,924	67,192
Interest expense	(20,879)	(15,134)
Net interest income	57,045	52,058
Other operating income:		
1.Dividend income	-	3
2.Net fee and commission income		
a) Fee and Commission Income	14,275	12,934
Less: b) Fee and Commission Expense	(3,561)	(3,516)
3. Net foreign exchange income		
a) Income	6,426	6,144
Less: b) Expense	-	-
4.Net income from dealing in securities	-	-
5.Net income from investment in securities	-	-
a) Income	-	51
Less: b) Expense	-	-
6. Other income	439	37
Gross income	74,624	67,711
General administrative expenses	(46,331)	(50,894)
Depreciation	(3,762)	(2,146)
Total operating costs	(50,093)	(53,040)
Net operating profit (Profit on ordinary activities before provisions)	24,531	14,671
Income from		
a) subsidiaries	-	-
b) Associate companies	-	-
c) Investment licensing activity	-	-
d) Profit from sale of non-banking assets	-	-
Bad debts Written off (net of recoveries from written off customers)	2,872	3,415
ECL Allowance (net) charged for Loans & Advances	3,215	2,046
ECL Allowance (net) charged for Investments (FVOCI)	508	134
ECL Allowance (net) charged for Placements	(5)	141
ECL Allowance charged (net) for Off-balance sheet items	(126)	2,011
ECL Allowance charged (net) for Others (if any)	524	(247)
Provision for diminution / gain in value of investments	-	-
Profit for the year after loan loss provisions	31,519	22,171
Taxation	(4,810)	(3,839)
Net Profit after Tax	26,709	18,332
Other comprehensive income for the year		
- Movement in fair value of available for sale / FVOCI investment for the year	(1,270)	(309)
-Effect of currency translation for the year	-	-
-Remeasurement of defined benefit liability	(32)	(22)
Total comprehensive income for the year	25,407	18,001

Assets and Liabilities as at 31 December, 2022

		RO in 000's	
Assets (net of total ECL)		This Year	Last Year
1. Cash		32,119	43,019
2. Balances with CBO		90,384	239,202
3. Capital Deposit with CBO		500	500
4. Government and other securities		-	-
5. Treasury bills & other bills		134,985	274,737
6. Due from H0,branches,'principal shareholders and affiliates abroad		58,266	41,793
7. Due from banks:			
i) Placements		225,490	171,907
ii) Loans and advances		-	-
8. Other money market placements		-	-
9. Investments		403,228	174,225
10. Loans and advances		1,247,387	1,347,188
11. Tangible fixed assets		17,669	20,342
12. Losses carried forward		-	-
13. Other assets		31,600	36,334
Total Assets		2,241,628	2,349,247
Liabilities		This Year	Last Year
1. Deposits (incl. Govt.)			
a) Demand		821,892	1,024,431
b) Savings		371,157	399,685
c) Time		572,226	476,978
2. Certificate of deposits		-	-
3. Due to H0,branches, principal shareholders and affiliates abroad		22,243	23,564
4. Due to banks:			
i) Placements		-	-
ii) Borrowings		24,519	24,880
5. Other money market deposits		-	-
6. Borrowings from CBO		-	-
7. Capital		200,031	200,031
8. Reserves		50,558	49,157
9. Retained Earnings		108,728	96,299
10. Capital bonds		-	-
11. Other liabilities		70,274	54,222
Total Liabilities		2,241,628	2,349,247

The above return has been prepared in line with the accounting policies set out in the audited financial statements of the Bank.



Malika Betley
Chief Executive Officer

PricewaterhouseCoopers LLC
Auditing Firm

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Changan announces exclusive Ramadan offers

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment LLC (AGAE), part of Bahwan International Group, as unveiled an enticing deal as part of its exclusive Ramadan promotion on Changan models to celebrate the Holy Month.

The ‘Ramadan is about peace of mind’ offer is available on models including CS95 (2.0L Turbo Engine, 224 hp, 6-speed AT), CS85 COUPE(2.0L Turbo Engine, 224 hp, 8 speed AT); CS75 PLUS (2.0L Turbo Engine 224 hp, 8 speed AT), EADO Plus (1.6 L Turbo,126 hp, also available at 1.4 Turbo,155hp), HUNTER 1.9L Turbo Diesel Engine, 150 hp, 4WD, 6-speed MT and 4WD, 6-speed AT, CS35 Plus (1.4 Turbo ,156 hp, 7-speed DCT and ALSVIN 1.5L Engine, 105 hp, 5-speed DCT.

The Changan Ramadan offers include free service (for two years/35,000km to four years/75,000km), free insurance, free registration, manufacturer’s warranty (from five years/150,000km to six years/2,50,000km). The manufacturer’s warranty of five years/150,000km is applicable on Hunter Pickup. Six years/250,000kms is applicable on Alsvin, EADO Plus, CS35 Plus, CS75 Plus, CS85 Coupe and CS95 only. This special Ramadan promotion is exclusively designed for individual showroom customers not applicable for fleet/corporate buyers.

“We want to emphasise that Ramadan is the ideal time to purchase Changan vehicles, and retail customers can gain significant advantages from the Ramadan promotion. We extend our gratitude to our valued customers for their faith in our brand, and we are pleased to provide the best possible service to them through this exclusive promotion,” a senior AGAE official said.



CS95 is a seven-seater SUV 4WD



CS 75 Plus interior

Free Registration

All customers purchasing Changan models during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle registration for private registration only.

All customers purchasing Changan models during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle Insurance. Oman and UAE for private registration only.

All Changan vehicle purchase customers will get free service package as mentioned below, in which no wear and tear parts covered. Service proposed are Periodic Maintenance Service as per manufacturers recom-

mendation 10,000km service intervals. Customers can avail during the period includes free service (two years/35,000km to four years/75,000km).

Changan CS75 Plus

With its premium design, comfortable automotive interior, and highly intelligent configuration, the compact crossover Changan CS75 Plus which comes in luxury and sport variants offers a host of special features. The Changan CS75 Plus 2WD features a more sloped roofline and more power.

Under the hood, it has a 2L turbocharged 4-cylinder engine, mated to an seven-speed auto-

matic transmission with a power of 224 hp and torque of 360 Nm. With a wheelbase of 2710 mm, and it measures 4700 mm in length, 1865 mm in width and 1710 mm in height.

Changan CS95

High-performance full-size SUV CS95 is a seven-seater SUV 4WD which amplifies driving experience with sophisticated luxury and superior comfort has been designed to stir the driving emotions. With a commanding presence and muscular stance, Changan CS95 is designed to demand attention wherever it goes. With meticulously crafted details complemented by convenient technology, the CS95 ensures refined luxury in every drive for up to seven passengers. With a range of innovative driving technologies, the CS95 delivers an assured sense of confidence and control to the driver.

Changan CS85

Changan CS85, the luxurious crossover coupe combines the dynamic handling of an SUV with the sporty aesthetics of a coupe to give owners the best of both



HUNTER 1.9L

worlds. Packed with a 2.0L turbocharged engine which produces 224 horsepower and 360Nm of torque, an 8 speed AT Changan CS85 Coupe redefines the definition of smoothness. Changan CS85 Coupe is a sporty coupe designed SUV which reflects one’s personality.

Hunter Pickup

Equipped with safety features and modern driving systems, The ‘power to perform’ Changan Hunter with a 1.9L turbo diesel engine producing 150 hp with a 6-speed manual transmission and is available in 4 WD. One of the greatest facet of the Changan Hunter is its pick-up capabilities and usage. Being a heavy-duty pickup for loading, it is sturdy, spacious and of high quality, and is suitable for various load and road conditions. Boasting of class leading power and excellent ground clearance, it delivers an unmatched level of supremacy and capability especially for the farm and construction sector.

Changan EADO Plus

Changan EADO Plus is a compact yet aggressive family sedan

with premium styling, luxurious interior, and plenty of safety features. With intelligent safety features to assist, EADO Plus lets drivers be at peace when on the road. Taking from the inherent design language, EADO Plus ups the ante with a crisply styled exterior that emphasizes a strong sense of sportiness. With an engine of 1.6L Turbo, the Changan EADO Plus sport edition offers power of 126hp, Nm torque and transmission of 7 speed DCT. EADO PLUS is also available in 1.4L Turbo engine coupled with 155hp.

Changan CS35 Plus

Changan’s CS35 Plus, a sporty new-gen crossover equipped with state-of-the-art technologies is popular for its unparalleled driving experience. Energetic like the youth, it is packed with a 1.4L Turbo charged engine which produces 156hp and 260nm of torque and fitted with a seven-speed Dual Clutch Transmission (DCT) to always keep you ahead of the segment competition. CS35 Plus possesses fashionable appearance, strong power and good en-

tertaining features. Vibrant in style and sporty in design, the all-new CS35 Plus a youthful SUV for younger generation who are spirited, passionate, social and want to become the influencers of their time.

Changan Alsvin

Bearing a streamlined body design, exquisite interior design, and impeccable energy-efficient engine, the Changan Alsvin allows owners to exceed their everyday expectations. The 1.5L 5-speed dual clutch automatic transmission car truly brings unparalleled value to customers and offers an excellent fuel economy of 18.3km per litre. Changan Alsvin’s inline-4 motor engine puts out 105hp and 145Nm of torque. Changan Alsvin brings features and technology to the customers in the segment that they could previously only have dreamt of. The additional features offered in the 1.5L DCT are comparable to the highest price of comparable alternate cars in this segment such as moon roof, cruise control, TPMS, start-stop technology and heated side mirrors.

Oman’s Hi FM nominated for 3 international advertising awards

Hi FM, Oman’s Number 1 Hit Music Station, has announced that three of its adverts produced in the Sultanate of Oman by Robin Banks have been nominated for three different awards in the upcoming One Voice Conference awards in the UK.

Robin Banks, the producer of the nominated radio advertisements, said, “It’s an honour to be a part of these award-nominated campaigns. Our team works tirelessly to produce ads to a very high standard and we are beyond thrilled that these radio adverts that were only heard on Hi FM are now showcasing Oman to the world.”

The three radio adverts nominated are, ‘Gumball 3000’ advert for the Omani Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth which promoted tourism in the country



by showcasing the exciting Gumball 3000 rally through Oman. The ‘World Cup at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC)’ advert for the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. This advert promoted the Football Fan Festival and watching all the World Cup games at the OCEC venue, part of the OMRAN group. And lastly for ‘Anantara Al Baleed Resort in

Salalah’, which illustrated the beauty and luxury of the Anantara Al Baleed resort.

“We are thrilled to have three of our advertisements nominated for these prestigious awards,” said Eihab al Salah, the CEO of the Entertainment Network SAOC, the company that owns Hi FM. “These nominations are a testament to the creativity, hard work, and dedication of Robin and our team. We always care about our advertisers and their messages and work with them to create innovative and impactful campaigns that connect with our audience and leave a lasting impression.”

The One Voice Conference awards ceremony will take place on May 13 and will be attended by some of the most influential figures in the marketing, adver-

tising and voiceover industry. Hi FM and especially Robin Banks are proud to be putting Oman in front of a global audience and are delighted that their radio advertisements are recognised for their creativity, impact, and effectiveness.

Hi FM is a leading Western radio station in Oman which as well as being Oman’s Number 1 Hit Music Station with the craziness of Robin & Jonny in the morning and the world’s biggest Top 40 hits all day. Hi also specialises in creating innovative and effective marketing campaigns for businesses of all sizes. With a team of experienced and skilled copywriters and creatives, Hi FM is committed to delivering results-driven campaigns that help its clients succeed with their business objectives.

OPAZ with MoL organises workshop on localisation plans

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour (MoL), organised a workshop aimed at reviewing OPAZ performance indicators applied in the affiliated zones related to job localization plans and the creation of quality jobs in various economic sectors.

The workshop discussed OPAZ 2023 initiatives to increase the contribution of the companies operating in its zones in opening direct employment opportunities to the local people and localisations pathways of supervisory and specialised jobs.

During the workshop, participants from the Special Economic Zone of Duqm (SEZAD),

the Free Zones of Salalah, Sohar, Al Mazuna and various industrial cities were trained in optimal practices to analyse occupations and applications for recruitment of foreign workers in line with the authority’s objectives.

Dr Said bin Khalifa al Qurini, Director General of Investment Development Sector said, “The organisation of this workshop is a translation of OPAZ 2023 plan and its strategic objectives and a review of the performance indicators used to measure the achievement of these goals, which include implementing the cooperation programme previously signed with the Ministry of Labour on the matter of facilitating services related to work permits and the creation of

quality jobs for companies operating in those zones, and the establishment of training and qualification programmes for the national workforce.”

It is noteworthy that during the year 2022, a number of initiatives were implemented in special economic zones, free zones and various industrial cities, with the aim of improving the services provided to investors, including reducing the approval period for work permit applications to 24 hours for applications that meet the requirements, and improving the work environment in companies operating in the affiliated zones.

OPAZ is known for implementing the standards and requirements that ensure the safety of employees.

Ooredoo announces weekend double data

With Ooredoo’s Weekend Double Data Offer, Home Internet customers can now stream and download twice as many songs and movies over their 4G every Friday and Saturday for three months.

With a 12-month contract available, both new and existing customers can now enjoy superfast download and upload speeds and double their weekly data during the weekends at no extra cost.

They can subscribe to the limited-time offer from March 19 until June 19.

Ooredoo’s innovative 4G

Home Internet plans are based on an affordable, reliable, and uninterrupted service. The first-of-its-kind plan includes many benefits, such as a free plug-and-play, unlimited data options, and full coverage across Oman.

With free installation and up to 600GB during the working week and double during the weekend included, this solution provides the value and connectivity customers want.

Existing customers can opt in to the offer through the Ooredoo App and new customers will be enrolled by default.

Bima launches ‘replacement car festival’ in Avenues Mall

The Bima platform, the first electronic platform specialised in insurance in the sultanate, celebrated the launch of the Bima Avenues Mall Replacement Car festival, which will last until Wednesday.

Bima said a special discount would be given to everyone who comes to insure one’s vehicle during the festival at the Avenues Mall, in addition to having an opportunity to win a gift for visiting the Bima booth in the mall, and obtaining a free replacement vehicle service.

Musab al Badi, Director of Operations at the Bima platform, expressed his happiness today



with the launch of a new service of the replacement vehicle, which is obtained by everyone who buys insurance for his vehicle through the Bima platform.

In the event of an accident, he

will get a replacement car for a period of three days that can be increased for a small amount. As a third party insurance you will get a car in case you are the aggrieved party, while comprehen-

sive insurance gets the vehicle in both cases.

The platform works to compare offers of electronic car insurances between different insurance companies, and the company is authorised to provide insurance services to thirteen different insurance companies through its various electronic channels.

“The Bima platform is witnessing a great demand from customers to insure their cars through the platform,” Musab said.

She explained that the idea of the platform is based on providing its services in the easiest pos-

sible way to its customers while providing safe and fast transactions at any time, noting that the platform operates around the clock and insurance policies are issued daily until 12 after midnight on all days of the week and weekends and even on public holidays.

Since the start of its operations in March 2020, the platform has been able to provide its services to tens of thousands of customers, saving effort and time for all customers. The platform provides commercial insurance services to local companies and employment insurance as well.



Bank Muscat organises annual leadership forum

In line with its commitment to strengthen communication channels with frontline employees, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the sultanate, recently organised Leadership Forum 2023 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, in the presence of Sheikh Waleed K al Hashar, Chief Executive Officer, Bank Muscat.

The event was attended by members of the executive management as well as officials and branch managers from both Bank Muscat as well as Meethaq Islamic Banking.

The annual event is held as part of the bank's strategy to ensure that its employees are closely attuned to and aligned with its overall strategy.

The forum also helped discuss in detail, various aspects of the bank's plans to further develop banking services in Oman, new financial trends, how to face challenges in the sector and the best way to achieve future goals and targets.

The annual gathering brought together employees under one roof so as to enable face-to-face exchange of ideas about various banking and finance-related matters. The event provided an opportunity to highlight important developments affecting the bank and ensure its continued market leadership and stress on the importance of continued alignment to the bank's customer-centric vision of 'Serving you better everyday', which encourages innovation and continuous improvement of services in response to customer feedback and needs.

During the event, important details of the bank's strategy and future plans were discussed as the bank builds further on four decades of success and major achievements to move to the next stage of its evolution. It also underlined the importance of providing an integrated banking experience to enable customers to enjoy ease of banking and save time.

A large part of the bank's future plans are based on rapid digital transformation, which will enable it to provide innovative products and services.

Employees were encouraged to make the best use of the new capabilities and continue to maintain an outstanding performance for the benefit of all customers and partners.

At the end of the leadership forum, employees expressed their appreciation to customers for their continued confidence and trust in the services and products that the bank constantly launches as part of its efforts to meet their diverse needs.

Customers are central to all the work performed by bank employees and they are indeed the bank's partners in success. The 2023 Leadership Forum also included a number of presentations and a folk performing arts show that was staged by Bank Muscat employees.

Bank Muscat's annual Leadership Forum ensures that frontline employees are closely aligned to its customer-centric vision and the overall strategy of continuous improvement. As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman for over four decades, Bank Muscat has assets over RO13bn and the largest branch network in Oman serving over 2mn customers through 174 branches and more than 800 e-channel devices including Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) and Cash Deposit Machines (CDMs).

The bank has been focusing intensely on digital transformation over the past few years as it seeks to continue launching innovative products, services and solutions in line with global financial trends and customer aspirations. Digital transformation, which is a cornerstone of the bank's strategy, was a major topic of discussion at the leadership forum because of its importance in the achievement of the bank's future goals.

Cambridge IFA WOMANi acknowledges Bank Nizwa's exceptional female leaders

Bank Nizwa, Oman's leading Islamic bank, is dedicated to offering women equal opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities as a pioneering and female-friendly institution.

This commitment has resulted in five of the bank's employees being listed in the Cambridge IFA WOMANi 2022 report's top 300 influential women in Islamic business and finance.

The report acknowledges women who have made significant contributions to the industry and demonstrated exceptional leadership and innovation. To honour the female members shortlisted from the Middle East, Bank Nizwa partnered with Cambridge IF to host a special event in Oman.

The celebration was held under the auspices of H H Sayyida Dr Mona Fahad Mahmoud al Said, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

From Bank Nizwa, the list includes H H Sayyida Wisam Jaifer al Said, Head of Marketing and Corporate Communications;

Haifa Abdul Ali al Lawati, head of Human Resources; Ikhlās Dhum al Lawati Head of Service Quality, Customer Care and Phone Banking; Amal Said al Juma, Chief Manager - Wealth Management and Amna al Balushi Chief Manager- IT Governance & Security; all holding senior positions at the bank.

In addition to the recognition ceremony, there were two panel discussions featuring Haifa Abdulali al Lawati and H H Syidah Wisam al Said as speakers.

Haifa participated in the discussion on 'Women in Leadership: Breaking Barriers and Creating Change', while H H Syidah Wisam al Said contributed to a panel discussion, titled 'The Future of Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in Islamic Finance: Challenges and Opportunities'.

"In the world of Islamic banking and finance, women have had many opportunities to excel. The number of women professionals who have contributed to Islamic finance has grown and continues to do so," said Khaled al Kayed, the Chief Executive Officer.

Now more than ever, he reminded that women play a significant role in Islamic finance. "Omani women have played a key role in the overall development of Islamic finance, besides setting the pace for women to occupy high positions in Islamic banking," he further said.

In Bank Nizwa, the bank CEO said, women hold a significant number of senior positions, demonstrating the importance of empowering women. "The bank focuses on supporting Omani women in their efforts to acquire additional qualifications and enhance their skills. The success of these five remarkable women shows the bank's commitment to developing a talent pool for Islamic financial services," he added.



NBO gets Buna system for cross-border payments

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently signed an agreement to join the Buna Payment System. Buna is a cross-border and multi-currency payment system that allows customers to send and receive payments across the Arab region and facilitates remittances, trade and commerce between countries in the Arab World. This move reflects the bank's efforts to meet the needs of its customers and make every experience simpler and more seamless.

Abdullah al Hinai, CEO of NBO, said, "The introduction of Buna is a huge step forward for NBO and our customers and as we look to provide more intuitive platforms and offer our customers more efficient and secure payment solutions. We are proud of our team for achieving this milestone and we look forward to working with our partners at Buna to unlock opportunities, as one. I would like to express my gratitude to the Central Bank of Oman for supporting this initiative which is in keeping with the efforts to advance the national payment systems in Oman."

Mehdi Manaa, Chief Executive Officer of Buna, said, "We are pleased to welcome National Bank of Oman in Buna's network. The adhesion of the bank to Buna's platform strengthens efforts to increase trade relations between the Arab world and beyond and helps in the development of cross-border payments."



2 new Forever 21 stores open in Muscat

Retail conglomerate, Sharaf Retail significantly expands its presence in the lifestyle market across the Middle East with two new openings of its flagship brand - Forever 21, the popular fashion brand, in Muscat Oman.

The new stores are located in Mall of Oman and Oman Avenues Mall, both of which are popular shopping destinations in the city.

The new stores are spread across a combined area of 20842.12sqft of shopping space that mirrors the group's expansion strategy across the region.

The new stores will offer a wide range of trendy and affordable fashion for men and women, including clothing, shoes and accessories. Customers can expect to find the latest styles and fashion trends, as well as classic pieces that are perfect for any occasion.

"We are thrilled to be opening two new stores in Muscat," said Yasser Sharaf, Vice President Retail, Hospitality, Industry and financial services, Sharaf Group, "Muscat is a vibrant and dynamic city, and we believe our unique blend of fashion and affordability will be a hit with local shoppers."

The opening of the two new stores of Forever 21 in Muscat is part of Sharaf Retail's continued expansion in the Middle East. The company already has a strong presence in the region, with stores in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Shangri-La unveils immersive Ramadan specials

Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah - Muscat's favourite Ramadan destination - is back this year with a host of exquisite and savoury specials for Ramadan.

"Whether guests dine indoor or alfresco at Al Tanoor or in the comfort of our air-conditioned Layali Tent & Lounge for Suhoor, they will be spoilt for choice with generous buffet spread options including live stations for iftar or a fusion of culinary favourites served A la Carte for Suhoor," said a press statement.

Each experience will give guests generous space and unparalleled views like no other in Muscat and residents of the city are invited to dine on a range of Ramadan classics and global favourites, paired with live performances throughout the month, it asserted.

"This year, Ramadan at Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah will be exceptional as we bring in incredible and authentic flavours from the region with the expertise of our multi-talented Chefs. Our guests will witness an enhanced iftar experience complemented with traditional Oud performances and a dazzling decor to make it even more celebratory. In line with the Ramadan spirit of giving and sharing, our resort will also be spreading some joys with lots of contests to unlock stays and dining experiences at Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah" commented René D Egle, the Area General Manager of Shangri-La Barr al Jissah and Shangri-La Al Husn, Muscat.

Located in Al Bandar hotel, Al Tanoor restaurant is serving a delicious Iftar buffet, featuring a host of delectable traditional Ramadan delicacies inspired by local, regional, and international cuisines, from Maghrib prayer onwards. Available after sundown until 10.30pm daily, Iftar is priced at RO22 net per person.

Outdoor Layali Ramadan tent will present a savoury selection of Omani delights and global culinary favourites served A la Carte paired to the sounds of traditional Arabic artists. Open daily from 8pm to 2am, Layali Tent & Lounge is available for a minimum spend of RO10 per person.

The resort's garden and different locations are transformed into beautiful Arabian spaces that feature an open-air majlis. People were invited to dine in the comfort of the private traditional Omani outdoor tent and relish on a decadent menu presenting a fusion of flavours, traditional beverages coupled with entertainment.

A special 30 per cent discount when booking for groups of more than 100 persons. This year the ballroom of Barr Al Jissah is available to families, groups and business partners wishing to experience the Holy month with their closed ones.

Launched in April 2022, Shangri-La Circle members residing in Oman can avail 20 per cent off on their consumptions at the resort during Ramadan.



Xi arrives in Moscow to discuss Ukraine conflict

Xi Jinping’s three-day trip serves as a show of support for internationally isolated Russian president

Moscow, Russia - Xi Jinping hailed his landmark visit to Moscow on Monday as giving ‘new momentum’ to Chinese-Russian ties ahead of talks with Vladimir Putin on Beijing’s proposals to stop the fighting in Ukraine.

The summit between the Russian president and the Chinese leader comes as China seeks to portray itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict.

Washington has accused Beijing of mulling arms exports to Moscow - claims China has vociferously denied.

Xi’s three-day trip also serves as a show of support for internationally isolated Putin, just days after a war crimes tribunal issued a warrant for his arrest over accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

Landing at Moscow’s Vnukovo Airport, Xi was greeted by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko on a red carpet as a military brass band played the countries’ anthems, Russian state media showed.

“I am confident the visit will be fruitful and give new momentum to the healthy and stable development of Chinese-Russian relations,” Xi was quoted by Russian news agencies as saying shortly



China’s President Xi Jinping and Russia’s President Vladimir Putin (AFP)

after landing.

“In a world of volatility and transformation, China will continue to work with Russia to safeguard the international system with the UN at its core,” he said.

Xi described China and Russia as ‘good neighbours’ and ‘reliable partners’ and said the two would work together to defend ‘true

multilateralism’.

‘Constructive role’

The two leaders are due to discuss China’s 12-point position paper on the Ukraine conflict, which includes a call for dialogue and respect for all countries’ territorial sovereignty.

‘One way or another, issues

raised in (Beijing’s) plan for Ukraine will be touched upon during the negotiations. Comprehensive explanations will be given by President Putin’ of the Russian position, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Putin and Xi are set to have an ‘informal’ one-on-one meeting

and dinner later on Monday before talks on Tuesday, Putin’s top foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov told Russian news agencies.

Putin has welcomed Beijing’s statements on Ukraine as being indicative of a willingness to play a ‘constructive role’ in ending the conflict. But Kyiv on Monday reiterated calls for Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine ahead of Xi’s arrival.

“The formula for the successful implementation of China’s ‘Peace Plan’. The first and foremost point is the surrender or

held Ukrainian city of Mariupol - his first visit to territory captured from Kyiv since Moscow’s forces pushed across the border in February 2022. Xi’s visit also comes just days after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Putin on the accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

‘Objective and impartial position’

Beijing said on Monday the ICC should avoid what it called ‘politicisation and double standards’ and respect the principle

alogue and negotiation’.

Beijing and Moscow have drawn closer in recent years under a partnership that has served as a diplomatic bulwark against the West.

China has lambasted what it sees as a US-led campaign of pressure against Russia as Moscow’s campaign in Ukraine drags on, instead calling for what it calls ‘impartial’ mediation of the conflict.

“No single country should dictate the international order,” Xi wrote in a Russian newspaper article published on Monday.

“China has all along upheld an objective and impartial position based on the merits of the issue, and actively promoted peace talks,” he added.

Beijing’s stance has drawn criticism from Western nations, which say China is providing diplomatic cover for Moscow’s armed intervention.

They argue that China’s proposals are heavy on grand principles but light on practical solutions.

The United States last week said China’s proposals would simply consolidate ‘Russian conquest’ and allow the Kremlin to prepare a fresh offensive.

AFP

I am confident the visit will be fruitful and give new momentum to the healthy and stable development of Chinese-Russian relations. China will continue to work with Russia

XI JINPING

Palestine’s Shtayyeh blasts ‘racism’ of Israeli minister

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - Palestinian prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh on Monday blasted as ‘inflammatory’ remarks made by far-right Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich that Palestinians do not exist.

“There are no Palestinians, because there are no Palestinian people,” Smotrich said on Sunday, quoting French-Israeli Zionist activist Jacques Kupfer, speaking at an event in Paris according to a video circulating on social media.

“After 2,000 years of exile, the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah are beginning to come true and God is gathering his people, the people of Israel are returning home,” Smotrich said.

“There are Arabs around who don’t like it, so what do they do? They invent a fictitious people and claim fictitious rights to the land of Israel, only to fight the Zionist movement,” he added.



Israeli soldiers patrol Huwara in the occupied West Bank, on Monday (AFP)

Smotrich last year became a minister in the cabinet of Israel’s veteran leader Benjamin Netanyahu, which analysts have called the most right-wing government in the country’s history.

Shtayyeh, speaking before a cabinet meeting of the Palestinian Authority on Monday, said the ‘inflammatory statements are consistent with the first Zionist

sayings of ‘a land without a people for a people without a land’.

He said the comments were ‘conclusive evidence of the extremist, racist Zionist ideology... of the current Israeli government’. Smotrich and his Religious Zionism group have a history of making incendiary remarks about Palestinians.

AFP

Iraq PM to hold Turkey talks on Kurdish rebels

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraqi Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani will visit Turkey on Tuesday for talks including on scarce water resources and the rebel Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a government source said.

Sudani is set to meet Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on his first visit to Iraq’s northern neighbour since he came to power in October, an adviser to the head of the Iraqi government told AFP, speaking anonymously.

“The two main issues are water and the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq,” he added, referring to the rebel group that has been fighting the Turkish army for decades.

War-scarred Iraq is now digging ever deeper for water as a frenzy of dam-building, mainly in Turkey, sucks water out of the region’s two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates.

The Tigris and the Euphrates both have their sources in Turkey, and Baghdad has long accused Ankara of withholding water in



Iraq’s Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani (AFP)

Sudani is set to meet Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on his first visit to Iraq’s northern neighbour since he came to power

exploitation of water from the rivers.

Amid criticism, Turkey’s ambassador to Iraq, Ali Riza Guney, ruffled feathers last July when he said, ‘water is largely wasted in Iraq’ and called on people to ‘use the available water more efficiently’. Sudani will also discuss with Erdogan the presence of rear bases of Kurdish fighters from the Turkish PKK rebels in northern Iraq, which Ankara has repeatedly sought to root out in air and ground operations.

The rebels have kept up a deadly insurgency for Kurdish self-rule in southeastern Turkey since 1984.

Turkey has dozens of military facilities in northern Iraq for use in its war against the PKK, which Ankara and its Western allies blacklist as a ‘terrorist’ group.

In July 2022, Iraq blamed Turkey for artillery strikes on a park in Iraqi Kurdistan that killed nine civilians, including women and children.

AFP

Iraq faces uncertain future 20 years after invasion

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq on Monday marked 20 years since the start of the US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, but no official celebrations were held.

The oil-rich country remains traumatised from the years of war, occupation and bloody sectarian turmoil that followed the operation launched on March 20, 2003.

A semblance of normalcy has returned but Iraq still battles a range of entrenched challenges, from political instability to poverty and rampant corruption.

Neighbouring Iran, the major Shiite power and arch-foe of the United States, now wields much influence in Iraq, whose Shiite majority was freed from the oppression of Sunni strongman Saddam.

Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani, who is backed by a pro-Iranian coalition, at an event on Sunday did not speak of the US invasion but only of the ‘fall of the dictatorial regime’ of Saddam, who was caught, tried and executed.



Vehicles drive along a street in Baghdad on Sunday. Iraq marked 20 years on Monday since the start of the US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, but no official celebrations were planned (AFP)

At a Baghdad conference on the eve of the anniversary, Sudani said: “We remember the pain and suffering of our people in those years that were dominated by senseless wars and systematic sabotage.”

The government planned no events to mark the anniversary,

and Baghdad’s streets on Monday looked busy as ever, with most people more focused on the holy fasting month of Ramadan due to start later this week.

‘It’s a painful memory’ for the country, said Fadhel Hassan, 23, a journalism student. “There was

a lot of destruction and too many victims - innocent people, Iraqis and American soldiers.”

The US march to war started under then-president George W. Bush and gained pace in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States by Osama bin Laden’s

militant group Al-Qaeda.

Bush, backed by British prime minister Tony Blair, argued that Saddam presented a major threat and was developing weapons of mass destruction, although none were ever found.

‘Shock and awe’

Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched with a ground invasion led by 150,000 US and 40,000 British forces, and the ‘shock and awe’ bombing of strategic sites.

Within three weeks, Saddam’s regime had fallen, and the invasion forces took control of the capital Baghdad on April 9.

TV footage beamed around the world soon showed US Marines toppling a giant statue of Saddam, and later Bush declaring the ‘Mission Accomplished’ aboard an American warship.

But the invasion had sparked widespread disorder and looting, the chaos deepened by the US decision to disband the Iraqi state, ruling party and military apparatus.

AFP

Yemen warring parties agree prisoner swap

Dubai, UAE - Yemen’s Houthi rebels and the internationally recognised government have agreed to swap more than 880 prisoners during negotiations in Switzerland, both sides said on Monday, in another hopeful sign as efforts accelerate to end the war.

The agreed exchange comes after Saudi Arabia and Iran, who back opposing sides in the conflict, this month moved towards restoring diplomatic ties after a seven-year rupture.

‘An agreement has been reached to implement a (prisoner) swap’ that will see more than 880 people released in total, said Abdul Qader al-Murtada, the leading Houthi delegate to the Geneva talks, according to the rebel’s Al-Masirah TV channel.

The exchange is set to take place within weeks, he said.

The Houthi rebels seized control of the capital Sanaa in

2014, prompting a Saudi-led intervention the following year and fighting that has left hundreds of thousands dead and caused one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.

A UN-brokered ceasefire that took effect last April brought a sharp reduction in hostilities. The truce expired in October, though fighting largely remains on hold.

Under the agreement, the Iran-backed Houthis will release 181 detainees, including Saudi and Sudanese nationals, in exchange for 706 prisoners, said Murtada, who heads the Houthi’s National Committee for Prisoners’ Affairs.

Sudanese soldiers have taken part in the Saudi-led coalition. “The swap will be implemented after three weeks,” Murtada said, noting there are plans for another round of prisoner-exchange talks in coming months.

AFP

Thailand's PM dissolves parliament, calls election

Bangkok, Thailand - Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha dissolved the country's parliament on Monday, setting up a general election in May as the former coup leader seeks to secure the top job.

The vote pits unpopular former army chief Prayut, who came to power in a 2014 putsch, against the daughter of billionaire former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, whose shadow still looms over the kingdom's political scene despite more than a decade in exile.

The main opposition Pheu Thai group, fronted by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is polling strongly but Thailand's junta-scripted 2017 constitution will make it hard for the party to secure the top job.

A statement in the official Royal Gazette published on Monday announced the dissolution, and the Election Commission will confirm the date of the poll later, with May 7 or 14 tipped as the most likely.

The election is the second since the 2014 coup and the first since the country was rocked by massive youth-led pro-democracy protests in Bangkok in 2020. Unofficial campaigning has been under way for weeks, with rising living costs and the kingdom's sluggish recovery from the pandemic high on the agenda.

The 68-year-old Prayut, who cemented his rule in a controversial election in 2019, has demonstrated a longevity that is rare in Thai politics.

But in a poll published on Sunday of who voters would like to see as PM, Prayut lagged in third place at just over 15 per cent - way behind front-runner Paetongtarn at 38 per cent.



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha (centre) visits Khao Kong temple in Narathiwat district, southern Thailand, on March 15 (AFP)

In the same poll of 2,000 people, conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration, nearly 50 per cent said they would vote Pheu Thai, with Prayut's United Thai

parliament is expected to appoint a prime minister sometime in July. Under the army-drafted 2017 constitution, the prime minister is chosen by the 500 elected lower-house MPs and

premier after her father and his sister Yingluck - ousted by Prayut's coup in 2014.

The opinion polls would indicate Pheu Thai are in with a chance, with many voters sick of Prayut and the lack of progress they have seen in their own lives.

Prayut is polling behind the pro-reform Move Forward Party, which hopes to capitalise on the anti-establishment spirit of the 2020 street protests.

"I would argue that on the ground for the past four years that the sentiment of the era has changed so much for every institution in this country," Move Forward leader Pita Limjaroenrat told AFP, saying he believed voters were ready for change.

"I am sure they will vote for the future, and not the good old days."

Coup-prone

Thailand has seen more than a dozen coups since the birth of democracy in 1932 and the mili-

tary-royalist establishment remains a major force.

It remains to be seen whether this elite is prepared to accept another prime minister linked to Thaksin, who remains a bogeyman figure for them.

Chulalongkorn University political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak told AFP the election would be 'most consequential in my lifetime'.

It will decide whether the kingdom 'breaks out of an entrenched prolonged rut that goes back two decades', he said.

If Pheu Thai misses its landslide, it is possible that two or more military-linked parties - such as Prayut's United Thai Nation and the ruling Palang Pracharath Party - will form a coalition.

Thailand's Constitutional Court has also previously dissolved two of Pheu Thai's predecessor parties, in 2006 and 2008.

AFP



Frank Kendall III, US Secretary of the Air Force and Philippine acting Defence Secretary Carlito Galvez at Basa Air Base on Monday (AFP)

Philippines to announce new bases US soldiers can use: Officials

Floridablanca, Philippines - The Philippines and the United States will soon announce the location of four additional military bases in the Southeast Asian country that American soldiers will be allowed to use, officials said on Monday.

The longtime treaty allies agreed last month to expand cooperation in 'strategic areas' of the country as they seek to counter China's growing assertiveness over Taiwan and its building of bases in the South China Sea.

The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, known as EDCA, gave US forces access to five bases in the Philippines. It has been expanded to nine, but the locations of the four additional bases have not been revealed as the government consults with local officials.

It has been widely reported that two of the sites will be in the northern province of Cagayan, less than 400km (250 miles) from self-ruled Taiwan, which China sees as part of its territory.

Cagayan Governor Manuel Mamba has publicly opposed having EDCA sites in his province for fear of jeopardising Chinese investment and becoming a tar-

get in a conflict over Taiwan.

But Philippine acting defence chief Carlito Galvez told reporters here on Monday the government had 'already decided' on the sites and that Mamba had agreed to 'abide with the decision'.

"The two countries will announce as soon as they can (the locations)," said US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall at a joint press conference with Galvez and other officials.

Galvez and Kendall were at Basa Air Base, north of the capital Manila, where the United States is investing US\$24m in upgrading the 2.8km runway.

Basa is one of the five bases originally included in the EDCA.

The agreement allows US troops to rotate through the bases and also store defence equipment and supplies at them.

The pact stalled under former president Rodrigo Duterte, who favoured China over the country's former colonial master.

But President Ferdinand Marcos, who succeeded Duterte last June, has adopted a more US-friendly foreign policy and has sought to accelerate the implementation of the EDCA.

AFP

China says ICC should avoid double standards

Beijing, China - China on Monday called on the International Criminal Court to avoid what it called 'double standards' and respect immunity for heads of state, after the tribunal issued an arrest warrant for Russian leader Vladimir Putin on war crimes charges.

The court should 'uphold an objective and impartial stance' and 'respect the immunity of heads of state from jurisdiction under international law', foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told a regular briefing.

Wang also urged the court to 'avoid politicisation and double standards', stressing the solution to the Ukraine conflict remained 'dialogue and negotiation'.

China is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, the UN treaty which governs the court.

The International Criminal Court on Friday announced an arrest warrant for Putin on the accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

Moscow has dismissed the orders as 'void', and with Russia not a party to the ICC it is unclear if or how Putin could ever be extradited to face charge.

AFP

North Korea's Kim leads 'nuclear counterattack' simulation drill

Seoul, South Korea - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un led two days of military drills 'simulating a nuclear counterattack', including the launch of a ballistic missile, state media reported on Monday.

Kim expressed satisfaction over the weekend drills, which were held to 'let relevant units get familiar with the procedures and processes for implementing their tactical nuclear attack missions', said the report by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

The drills were the fourth show of force from Pyongyang in a week and came during Freedom Shield, the biggest US-South Korea military exercise in



Kim Jong Un and his daughter observing a warhead missile launch exercise simulating a tactical nuclear attack in Cheolsan county (AFP)

five years.

North Korea views all such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it

would take 'overwhelming' action in response.

The weekend drills in North Korea were divided into exer-

cises simulating the shift to a nuclear counterattack posture and a drill for 'launching a tactical ballistic missile tipped with a mock nuclear warhead', KCNA said.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said on Sunday that the short-range ballistic missile flew 800km (500 miles) before landing in the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan.

They branded it a 'serious provocation' that violated United Nations sanctions.

Kim said the weekend drills had filled the North Korean military units 'with great confidence', according to KCNA.

He also noted that North Korea 'cannot actually deter a war with the mere fact that it is a

nuclear weapons state', and that it could only reach its goals

It seems North Korea is trying to show it possesses enough practical nuclear attack capabilities

YANG UK

'when the nuclear force is... actually capable of mounting an attack on the enemy'.

Yang Uk, a researcher at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said the weekend drills demon-

strated that North Korea's nuclear posture was becoming 'a little more realistic'.

"It seems North Korea is trying to show it possesses enough practical nuclear attack capabilities to conduct comprehensive tactical trainings for its frontline units," he said.

Seoul and Washington have ramped up defence cooperation in the face of growing military and nuclear threats from Pyongyang, which has conducted a series of banned weapons tests in recent months.

It has also pushed South Korea and Japan to mend fences over historical disputes and try to boost security cooperation.

AFP

Tear gas, arrests as Kenya opposition stages protests

Nairobi, Kenya - Kenyan riot police fired tear gas and water cannon on Monday against demonstrators joining a day of action called by the opposition to protest a punishing cost-of-living crisis.

Running battles erupted between stone-throwing demonstrators and police in parts of Nairobi and at least one other city, in the first major unrest since President William Ruto became president last year, AFP correspondents said.

Ruto's government has vowed to take a tough stance over the protests, which opposition leader Raila Odinga insisted would go ahead despite not receiving police authorisation.



Kenya's opposition supporters throw stones towards police officers as teargas smoke raises during riots in Nairobi, Kenya, on Monday (AFP)

"I want Kenyans to come out in large numbers and show the displeasure of what is happening in our country," Odinga, who narrowly lost last year's election to

Ruto, told supporters on Sunday.

Police used tear gas against protesters gathered at a site near government offices in the capital Nairobi, where the major rally

was scheduled to take place, and several other areas of the city.

"We came here peacefully but they tear gassed us," said Charles Oduor, 21, who joined the large

crowds in downtown Nairobi.

"They lie to us everyday. Where is the cheap maize flour they promised? Where are the jobs for the youth they promised? All they do is hire their friends." Kenyans are suffering from surging prices for basic necessities, as well as a sharp drop in the shilling against the US dollar and a record drought that has left millions hungry.

'Life becoming more difficult'

Odinga said he had called the rallies to protest the 'skyrocketing' cost of living but also the 'stolen' election last August.

In Nairobi's biggest slum Kibera, a bastion of Odinga support,

people also set tyres ablaze while police used water cannon to disperse protesters.

Demonstrators and police also clashed in the lakeside city of Kisumu in western Kenya, another Odinga stronghold.

"Our victory was stolen and we are determined to get it back, we can't sit back and watch as life becomes more difficult by the day. We want Raila in State House," said Kevin Ojwang in Kisumu. Nairobi police chief Adamson Bungei said on Sunday that police received requests to hold two demonstrations only late Saturday and early Sunday, when normally three days' notice is required.

AFP

INDIA

Japan PM says India 'indispensable' in ensuring free, open Indo-Pacific

New Delhi, India - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Monday called India vital to ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific after talks with his counterpart touching on shared concerns about China.

Speaking in New Delhi after meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Kishida laid out plans for billions of dollars in investments in infrastructure and other sectors across the region.

"I have described Japan's plan to develop a free and open Indo-Pacific. To achieve this, India is an indispensable partner," Kishida said. "Japan will strengthen coordination with the US, Australia, UK, Canada, Europe and elsewhere. Of course, India is indispensable."

India, Japan, the United States and Australia make up the Quad alliance, which positions itself as a bulwark against China's growing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region under President Xi Jinping.

India's relations with China nosedived after 20 Indian troops died in clashes with Chinese soldiers in 2020 on their disputed Himalayan frontier.

In December Japan, officially pacifist since 1945, revamped its defence policy after warning



Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi after attending a joint media briefing at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Monday (AFP)

that China, with which it has a fraught history, posed the 'greatest security challenge ever'.

Japan is also boosting mili-

tary spending and is carrying out more joint exercises with other countries, including India, which has also deepened defence cooperation with West-

ern nations.

Quad summit

In June, Kishida had said Japan would help train 800 maritime

security personnel and provide at least US\$2bn to other countries to buy patrol boats and build up infrastructure as part of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Japan will strengthen coordination with the US, Australia, UK, Canada, Europe and elsewhere. Of course, India is indispensable

FUMIO KISHIDA

(FOIP) strategy.

Kishida said on Monday that FOIP's scope would expand to include new areas like climate change, cybersecurity and food security.

It would also direct public and private capital worth US\$75bn towards Indo-Pacific infrastructure by 2030.

Kishida's visit came less than a fortnight after Modi hosted his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese for talks that also covered worries about China.

Albanese, who is also forging closer ties with the United States and Britain under the separate so-called AUKUS alliance, is due to host all Quad leaders in May.

The Quad members deny hostile intentions and stress that they are not a military alliance, but China has described the grouping as an attempt to encircle it.

Kishida had been expected to press Modi to take a tougher line on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which India - a major buyer of Russian arms and oil - has refused to condemn.

There are fears that China may begin providing military assistance to Russia - despite denials from Beijing - and Xi was in Russia for talks with his 'old friend' President Vladimir Putin on Monday.

Kishida said that there was a 'lack of guiding perspective that is acceptable to all about what the international order should be'.

"This was clearly demonstrated by the considerable discrepancies in the attitudes across various countries to Russia's aggression against Ukraine," he said in his speech.

He added that he had invited Modi and the leaders of other countries in the region - including South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam - as well as Brazil to a G7 summit in May.

AFF

Punjab extends internet ban in hunt for Sikh separatist

Amritsar, India - Authorities in the northern state of Punjab extended a mobile internet blackout across the state of about 30mn people on Monday as police hunted a radical Sikh preacher.

The blackout extension came as supporters of Amritpal Singh were filmed vandalising India's consulate in San Francisco, not long after similar disturbances in London. Authorities in Punjab launched a major search on Saturday for Singh, who has risen to promi-

nence in recent months demanding the creation of Khalistan, a separate Sikh homeland.

Police said on Monday they had arrested 114 people so far but Singh's whereabouts were unknown.

The internet outage, originally in place until noon (0630 GMT) on Monday, was extended for another 24 hours.

Videos posted online, and independently verified by AFP, showed men smashing doors and windows of the Indian Consulate in San Francisco after



Policemen check the vehicle of a commuter along a street during a hunt for Sikh separatist, in Amritsar on Monday (AFP)

they broke down barricades set up outside the building.

The phrase #FreeAmritpal had been sprayed on the property as several dozen protesters gathered outside.

An official said the Indian foreign ministry was looking seriously at the clips.

India said it had summoned Britain's top diplomat after Singh's supporters vandalised the outside of the Indian High Commission in London.

India's foreign ministry said there was a 'complete absence'

of British police and 'finds unacceptable the indifference of the UK Government to the security of Indian diplomatic premises and personnel in the UK'.

Videos on social media verified by AFP Fact Check showed a man taking down the Indian flag on a balcony of the consulate, watched by a small group below waving yellow Khalistan flags. Britain's high commissioner to India, Alex Ellis, said on Twitter: "I condemn the disgraceful acts today against the people and

premises of the @HCL_London - totally unacceptable."

Punjab - with about 58 per cent Sikhs and 39 per cent Hindus - was rocked by a violent separatist movement for Khalistan in the 1980s and early 1990s in which thousands of people died. India has often complained to foreign governments over the activities of Sikh hardliners among the Indian diaspora who, it says, are trying to revive the insurgency with a massive financial push.

AFF

Nigerian ruling party keeps powerful Lagos post after tense local elections

Abuja, Nigeria - Nigeria's ruling party has held onto the powerful post of Lagos governor, the country's electoral commission said on Monday, following weekend local elections marred by reports of violence and vote buying.

So far, the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) has been declared winner in the majority of governorships where ballot counting has been completed.

Governors are powerful figures in Nigeria and some control state budgets that are larger than those of several African nations.

Saturday's elections for 28 governors and more than 900 state assembly lawmakers came three weeks after the governing party won a presidential ballot that opposition candidates claim was massively rigged.

Outsider Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) caused a stir in the February 25 election by gaining the most votes in Lagos, considered an APC fiefdom.

But he came only third nationwide and APC candidate Bola Tinubu was declared president-elect.

Both Obi and second-placed



Officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) count votes at a polling station after local elections, in Lagos on Saturday (AFP)

candidate Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) are contesting the presidential result in court.

The key question on Saturday was whether Obi's growing popularity, especially among Nigeria's youth, would translate into success at the local polls.

But the APC's Babajide Sanwo-Olu scored a landslide reelection as Lagos governor, the Independent National Electoral

Commission (INEC) said.

The incumbent won more than twice the number of votes of LP candidate Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour and more than 10 times those of PDP hopeful Olajide Adediran.

He also passed the required threshold of 25 per cent of votes across two-thirds of the state, the INEC said.

So far, the APC has won the governorship races in the states

of Gombe, Jigawa, Katsina, Kwara, Nasawara, Ogun, Sokoto and Yobe.

The PDP has won in Oyo, Bauchi and Akwa Ibom.

In the highly contested state of Kano, the economic heart of the mainly Muslim north, thousands of supporters of the smaller New Nigeria People's Party took to the streets to celebrate their trouncing the APC.

"The victory of NNPP is a victory for Kano because the will of the people has prevailed despite attempts to subvert it," said Hajarara Sani, 23, who was watching the crowds.

Results were still pending on Monday in the key southern state of Rivers. Adamawa, in the north-east, could see the election of Nigeria's first woman governor.

Head of state Muhammadu Buhari of the APC is stepping down in May after two terms and critics were hoping the presidential ballot would bring change.

But many were disappointed by the way the February election was conducted and turnout for Saturday's local polls was low.

AFF



Members of the South African National Defence Forces are seen deployed in Pretoria on Monday (AFP)

Protests amid heavy security in SA

Pretoria, South Africa - South Africa's leftwing opposition launched strikes and rallies under heavy security on Monday in a bid to force out President Cyril Ramaphosa over his handling of the country's sickly economy and crippling energy crisis.

Several thousand protesters gathered at a square in the capital Pretoria preparing to march to the Union Buildings, the seat of government, where police and troops were on patrol.

Thousands of others gathered in other parts of the country, according to footage on local media.

Eight-seven protesters were arrested for violence-related offences overnight, according to the police.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the country's third-largest party, has called for a 'national shutdown' of walkouts and protests, sparking fears of a repeat of unrest that turned deadly two years ago.

In Pretoria's Church Square, a huge poster made from white fabric, with 'Ramaphosa must go' written in red paint, was tied to a fence.

"Clearly this government is failing," said Carl Niehaus, a former official of the ruling ANC

who joined the mainly EFF supporters for the rally.

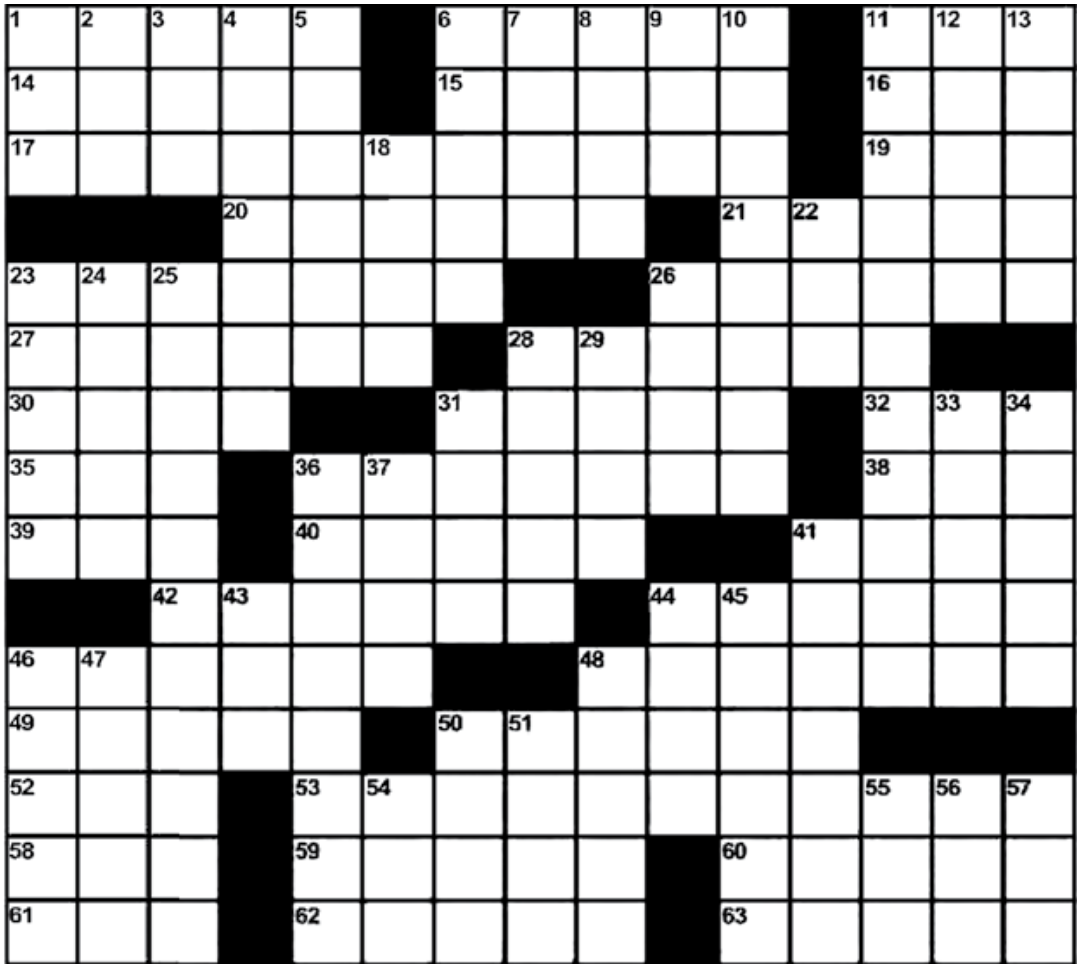
"The damage that the Ramaphosa government is causing is so terrible that we cannot tolerate it any longer. They must go now," he told AFP.

Trade unionist Trevor Shaku was among the protesters calling on the ANC government to go. "They have proven beyond doubt that they cannot rule this country, that they cannot manage this country," he said.

The authorities said they were on high alert to maintain security, with nearly 3,500 troops available to assist police.

AFF

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Oahu welcome
6) Toned down, as a trumpet
11) Amigo
14) Band of schemers
15) Give a formal speech
16) Bit of financial planning (Abbr.)
17) Symbol of deep concentration
19) Quick, small drink
20) Something to blow if angry
31) There are five great ones
23) Strikes with revulsion
26) Zombie, once
27) Address of affection
28) Greg's sitcom mate
30) Elevator inventor
31) Fishing net
32) CBS alternative
35) Compete in a race
36) Having spots of color, as horse
38) One-many link
39) Broad-antlered creature
40) T.S. or George of literature

41) Arab sailing vessel
42) "Actually ..."
44) Pluck eyebrow hairs
46) Muscle Beach spectators
48) Shaved, as sheep
49) Very, musically
50) Virgil epic
52) Devoured
53) Good thing to desert
58) Word teamed with "neither"
59) Carried piggyback
60) "Ho!" precursor
61) Ending for "sit" or "write"
62) Material for a dry cleaner
63) Penned up, as sows

DOWN

1) Be in a film
2) Well, _di-dah ..."
3) Geisha's belt
4) Large airport buildings
5) Acid-neutralizing base
6) Cloister inhabitants
7) Encourage strongly
8) Diplomatic trait
9) Airport info, initially
10) Disapproved of strongly
11) Film with Inspector

Clouseau (with "The")
12) Astrological ram
13) Pass by, as time
18) Galapagos unit
22) Get battle-ready
23) Have affection for
24) Flower part
25) Some prescriptions
26) Sugar source
28) Bus or railroad terminal
29) Sword handle
31) _ and Span (cleaner brand)
33) Staggering order?
34) Frightened into submission
36) Does a freezer chore
37) Expression of sorrow
41) Absolutely resolute
43) Gross less expenses
44) Now's partner
45) Considers carefully
46) Citizen of Muscat
47) Mounted
48) Nasty, as a remark
50) Kick into the pot
51) _ out a living (stretched a budget)
54) Debt acknowledgement

55) Cut-and-dried grass
56) It may be added to im-press?
57) _ XING (street sign)

NOTE PAD

LOGIA AHEAD DAM
OVENS BONGO ODE
WALKSTHEDOG GUT
JURORS TABLE
ORDERER BEFITS
BOOTEEREBERETS
EGGS GOTATCID
YUP EYEWASH USE
SEAVANESBILE
DEARERDARTED
ADDENDLEGISTS
BELLESTAMEN
AMISLEEPINGDOG
SUNCOMASDIANA
ERGEXILEANDES

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Your compassionate nature has helped you create some very strong relationships. But your compassion can sometimes cause you to get upset about problems that aren't yours to be upset about. Other peoples' issues are, by definition, theirs, and they need to solve them. You can't get so involved that you suffer sleepless nights. Try letting go. After all, they came to you for guidance and support, not a quick fix. Have faith that things will work out for them in the end. If you don't, you're underestimating the people you care about.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Today, don't be too surprised if you find out that something is much different than you thought it was. The signs were there, but you just didn't take the time to see them. This should be a lesson to you. From now on, look more deeply at issues that affect your life. Don't just blindly follow along with what those in power say. Question authority today. Not only will you be empowered, but you'll show them that you're paying attention to what they're doing.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You can get a better grip on the problems you're tackling right now if you have the courage to ask a few sensitive questions of a few powerful people. You have to break out of your shell and not worry so much about how someone will react to your questions. If you need to get an answer, you need to ask the person who has it. There's no getting around it! People will respond positively to you being bold and aggressive, so try it sooner rather than later.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your deepest emotions have been coming to the surface quite a lot lately, and they'll likely cause you to act in an unpredictable way today. But the good thing is whatever drama you stir up is drama that needs to be stirred up. Don't hold back if you feel the tears or the laughter coming on. Have the courage to start those conversations that don't happen every day. You know, the ones where you and someone you love can make real progress.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Try to push things to the next level, especially in terms of academics or general knowledge. You need to feed your intellectually curious side with healthy ideas and debate, not junk thinking. Ignore the conspiracy theorists and read something challenging about history or a person who interests you. Look up the words you you don't know. Get more proactive when it comes to learning. Think of your mind as a muscle. It takes effort to stay smart.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Be the first person to speak up when something unfair or unjust happens. Make it known that you don't agree or people might assume that you do. It takes action to stand firm sometimes. People who use tricks or lies to get what they want have a way of contaminating everything and everyone around them, so don't think twice about putting as much distance between you and them as possible. Waste no time on those people today.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Your popularity is definitely on the rise right now, but it might be climbing at a slower pace than you'd like. There is something to be said for taking baby steps on the road to fame and adulation. It will help you savor each moment more and appreciate the people who are cheering you on. The transformation you're going through isn't going to give you immediate gratification. It takes time to grow into and get comfortable with.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The sun feels like it's shining a little bit brighter today, doesn't it? Your mood is lightening. While your thoughts may not always be clear, your goals are. Put a plan together so you can make the most of it. Avoid wasting any time on the couch. You don't have to be social if you don't want to, but you do have to keep active. Your mind will be buzzing all day long. You'll be seeing things in new ways and attracting people who could be very good for you.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If you need to feel socially useful, follow that desire today. Ask around and find out who could use a hand planning a party or meeting or spreading the word about an upcoming event. One of the things you're best at is keeping the energy in the room high. You have a great ability to get people talking. Your conversational range covers more than just typical topics like the weather and sports. Use this skill to spice up the next gathering you go to.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Take your temperature today, both literally and figuratively. Your health is something you should take more seriously than you have been. Just because you feel great and look great doesn't mean that you wouldn't benefit from a checkup. Any emotional intensity and upheaval that you've been going through is going to be even more intense soon, and you'll need to be in top shape to deal with it as gracefully as you can. Check in with yourself.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

A very kind person could come into your life, and you'll feel a magnetic pull toward them. Follow it. Let yourself go where they go, do what they do, and give what they give. They have an inner peace that you should learn how to adopt for yourself. You've been waiting for someone to show you a better way of being with people. The wait is over. This mentor, even if they don't know it, will help you identify a whole new set of goals in your life.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Are you feeling unsure about how to approach someone about a difficult issue? The answer is to just step up and start that conversation. Now is not the time to be wishy-washy about how you feel either. Let them know what you think is wrong and what you think needs to happen in order to make it right. Once you start speaking, things will immediately become comfortable and it will feel right. They care about you and want to try to make you happy, so you just have to tell them how.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The Canadian TV series "Tall-boyz", released in 2019, is what genre?
A. Documentary
B. Comedy sketches
C. Music
D. Sci-fi

02. One couple won the World Figure Skating Championships for Ice Dancing for four successive years 1981-1984. Who were they?
A. Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean
B. Dolly Parton and Kris Kristofferson
C. Nancy Kerrigan and Oksana Baiul
D. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant

03. Although the Somali sengi was known locally it had not been observed by scientists after 1970 and was considered extinct, until 2020 when scientists found it again. What is its English name?
A. Elephant shrew
B. Greater short-tailed bat
C. Long-billed honeycreeper
D. Least vermilion flycatcher

Answers: 1. B 2. A 3. A

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

E	E	D	I
G	A	D	I
B	N	M	N
O	Y	O	D

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BACK TO THE TOP

Alcaraz routs Medvedev for Indian Wells title, returns to No 1 rankings

Indian Wells, United States - Spain's Carlos Alcaraz swept past Daniil Medvedev 6-3, 6-2 on Sunday to win the Indian Wells ATP Masters 1000 and secure his return to number one in the world.

US Open champion Alcaraz ended Medvedev's 19-match winning streak, denying him a fourth title in as many tournaments to ensure he will supplant Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic atop the rankings.

"It feels amazing to lift the trophy here, to recover the No. 1," Alcaraz said. "I would say this has been the perfect tournament."

Serbia's Djokovic, barred from entering the United States because he hasn't been vaccinated against Covid-19, sat out Indian Wells and will miss the Miami Open starting this week, where Alcaraz is the defending champion. Alcaraz, 19, who became the youngest world number one ever after his triumph at Flushing Meadows last year, claimed his third Masters 1000 title and joined compatriot Rafael Nadal as the only players to win at least three as a teenager. Nadal won six before turning 20.

He was unstoppable on Stadium Court, breaking through what he'd called the "wall" of Medvedev's formidable defenses.

Medvedev, coming off titles in Rotterdam, Doha and Dubai, could find no answer as Alcaraz

fired winners from all over the court, defying the windy conditions. "Daniil obviously didn't play at his best level, but I'm very happy for my performance and how I played this tournament."

He said the big change in him since a semi-final defeat to Nadal last year at Indian Wells was his comfort level on the game's biggest stages.

"I think my tennis didn't improve so much since last year. What I improve a lot is to not take the pressure, just to play relaxed. That, for me, is the most important thing."

"That's why I show a great

ing volley winner giving him match point that he converted with another service winner.

Not easy

"I expected a tougher match," he said. "Against him is always a tactic match, and I did perfect today. That's why it looks easy -- but it wasn't."

Alcaraz has returned to number one despite a late start to the year. Injury forced him to miss the Australian Open, where Djokovic claimed a record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam title.

Since launching his season in February Alcaraz has won a title

I expected a tougher match. Against him is always a tactic match, and I did perfect today. That's why it looks easy - but it wasn't.

CARLOS ALCAZAR

level, because I feel like I have no pressure. I enjoy."

Medvedev certainly wasn't able to ratchet up the pressure on him. A stinging backhand winner gave Alcaraz an early break in the opening set as he raced to a 3-0 lead. He gave himself a set point with a sharply angled forehand volley and sealed it with an unreturnable serve, then won the first 10 points of the second set on the way to a 4-0 lead. He didn't face a break point as he polished it off in one hour and 11 minutes, a div-

in Buenos Aires and reached the final in Rio de Janeiro.

But to stay at the top he'll have to successfully defend his Miami title over the course of the next two weeks.

Medvedev, a former world number one and US Open winner himself, was disappointed that he didn't play his best, but pleased to get past the fourth round at Indian Wells for the first time, despite twisting his ankle in a win over Alexander Zverev.

AFP



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain with the trophy after defeating Daniil Medvedev of Russia in the final of the ATP Indian Wells Open on Sunday (AFP)



Rafael Nadal

Nadal out of top 10

Paris, France - Carlos Alcaraz returned to the top of the ATP rankings on Monday after his Indian Wells triumph, while Rafael Nadal dropped out of the top 10 for the first time in 18 years.

Spanish teenager Alcaraz cruised past Russian Daniil Medvedev in Sunday's final to retake top spot from Novak Djokovic who was missing Indian Wells due to being unvaccinated against Covid.

American Taylor Fritz dropped five spots to world number 10 after his title defence ended in the quarter-finals.

Nadal, who has been out injured since a second-round exit at the Australian Open, fell to 13th place.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion had previously been inside the top 10 since April 2005.

AFP

Rybakina beats Sabalenka to win Indian Wells WTA title

Indian Wells, United States - Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina edged Aryna Sabalenka 7-6 (13/11), 6-4 on Sunday to win the Indian Wells WTA title and avenge her loss to the Belarusian in the Australian Open final.

Kazakhstan's Rybakina, the world number 10 who ousted top-ranked defending champion Iga Swiatek in the semi-finals, followed up with her first victory over second-ranked Sabalenka in five career meetings.

Rybakina, projected to rise to seventh in the world, handed Sabalenka just her second defeat of the year, denying her a third title to go with a win in Adelaide that presaged her first Grand Slam triumph at Melbourne.

"It's actually the first time it goes my way," Rybakina said as she accepted the trophy, a smiling Sabalenka leaning to the microphone to interject, "I will make sure it was the last one."

"We'll see next time," Rybakina laughed.

The banter belied another tense battle between the two, who had gone to three sets in all four prior encounters.

Sabalenka had the edge from the baseline, but, in the face of fierce pressure from Rybakina, the serve demons that beset the



Indian Wells Open champion Elena Rybakina (L) and runner-up Aryna Sabalenka pose with their trophies (AFP)

Belarusian last year resurfaced and her 10 double faults in the opening frame ultimately proved too much to overcome.

After fending off three break points in a marathon fourth game, she broke Rybakina to gain the first advantage.

But Sabalenka handed back the break with a double fault as

Rybakina leveled the set at 4-4.

She gifted Rybakina a set point with another double fault in the 12th game and while the Kazakhstan player couldn't capitalize, she would do so finally in the tiebreaker.

Sabalenka herself let two set points go begging on her own serve in the 17-minute tiebreaker

before her 10th double fault of the set gave Rybakina her sixth set point and she took it.

Sabalenka, struggling to quell her emotions, was broken to love to open the second set and that was all the opening Rybakina needed.

"It was a rollercoaster," Rybakina said. "With all these dou-

ble faults, I think we were both so tight, because we both knew that it's not easy with our serves to hold it but also to try to break.

"It's been just a rollercoaster and I'm happy that the first set went my way so the second was a bit easier."

An early break was even more important as the blustery wind picked up in the second set.

The Moscow-born Kazakh saved a pair of break points to push her lead to 3-1 and, with Sabalenka in survival mode, she ripped a backhand return up the line for a break that put her ahead 5-2.

Sabalenka wouldn't go quietly, breaking Rybakina to love and holding serve with ease with the wind at her back.

Super disappointed

But Rybakina polished it off with confidence on her first match point when Sabalenka smacked a service return into the net.

"I think I was super disappointed with myself after the first set, especially coming back, and then she had a set point, then you kind of hold it," said Sabalenka, who was kicking herself for going for bigger serves than she needed on her set points."

AFP



Taylor Moore of the United States celebrates with the trophy after winning the Valspar Championship on Sunday (AFP)

American Moore wins shootout for PGA Valspar title

Miami, United States - Unheralded Taylor Moore birdied two of the last four holes to win a back-nine shootout on Sunday and capture the Valspar Championship for his first PGA title.

The 29-year-old American fired a four-under par 67 - the only round in the 60s among the final 11 pairs on the course - to finish 72 holes on 10-under 274 at Innisbrook's Copperhead course in Palm Harbor, Florida.

That was good enough to edge Adam Schenk by one stroke with England's Tommy Fleetwood and three-time major winner Jordan Spieth sharing third on 276.

"It's a pretty awesome feeling," Moore said. "Super happy."

Moore, in only his 46th PGA start, sank a six-foot birdie putt at the par-3 15th and made a 26-foot birdie putt at the par-4 16th, then closed with back-to-back pars while Spieth and Schenk stumbled down the stretch.

"The shot on 15 is really when

I kind of locked in for the finish," Moore said. "Hit a great 9-iron there."

"Then 16. I was trying to just hit the middle of the green there. It got a little closer than I thought it would and made that putt, and finished it off."

World number 103 Moore's best prior PGA finish was a share of fourth in last year's pairs event at New Orleans, but he made all 64 of his putts this week from inside seven feet.

"That was pretty awesome," he said. "I don't think I've ever done anything close to that, so that was really cool. Just a testament to the work I've put in."

"Yeah, that was pretty sick to see."

Spieth, Schenk and Moore shared the lead at 10-under entering the final holes, but Spieth was undone when his tee shot at the 16th found a watery grave and Schenk went left beyond a cart path then over the green.

AFP



Danny Lee of Iron Heads GC poses with the trophy after winning the LIV Golf Invitational - Tucson, Arizona, on Sunday (AFP)

Danny Lee wins LIV Tucson event

Los Angeles, United States - New Zealand's Danny Lee ended his eight-year title drought with victory in a playoff to win LIV Golf's Tucson event on Sunday.

Lee, who defected to the lucrative Saudi Arabia-backed circuit last month, had not won as a professional since his victory in the 2015 PGA Tour Greenbrier Classic.

But the 32-year-old held his nerve in a four-player playoff to nail a 25-foot birdie putt on the second playoff hole to end his

lengthy absence from the winner's circle.

"I haven't won since 2015," Lee said afterwards. "I just felt like winning is just not my thing, but today just changed that."

"It's just good to see I'm capable of playing some good golf again," added Lee, who collected \$4 million in prize money with the win.

Lee had forced his way into the playoff after closing his final round with back-to-back birdies to card a two-under-par 69, leav-

ing him nine under for the tournament after 54 holes.

That helped him into a playoff alongside Carlos Ortiz, Brendan Steele and South Africa's Louis Oosthuizen.

Ortiz was eliminated from contention after bogeying the first playoff hole.

After Oosthuizen and Steele missed their birdie putts, Lee knocked in his long-range effort from well off the green to secure victory.

AFP

Xavi, Ancelotti at odds over Asensio's disallowed goal

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona and Real Madrid coaches Xavi Hernandez and Carlo Ancelotti disagreed over a late Marco Asensio goal ruled offside by VAR in the Clasico on Sunday.

Barcelona won 2-1 as Franck Kessie struck the winner in stoppage time to send his team 12 points clear at the top of La Liga, but with the score poised at 1-1 with 10 minutes remaining, Asensio netted to put Madrid ahead.

However after a VAR check, the goal was ruled out for offside against the Spanish forward.

"We did not win because of an offside that we're still doubtful about," Ancelotti told reporters.

"It was not so sure. We have doubts about it, and we go back to Madrid with this doubt."

However Xavi was in com-

plete disagreement with his opposite number.

"It's clear, offside is clear, it's a scientific thing, no? I am surprised by what Ancelotti said," Xavi told reporters.

"Without VAR, everything is more difficult. It ends up being fairer, above all on off-sides.

"A penalty or a handball, it can be hard to referee it, but this either is, or it isn't, so that's why I'm surprised by Ancelotti."

The coach said the league was not won yet but admitted his team were in the driving seat.

"We have only won the Super Cup (this season), but I have the feeling that this league, only we can lose it," he continued.

Xavi said his team had bounced back strongly after a difficult start the season.

AFP



Barcelona coach Xavi gestures next to Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti during their Spanish league match on Sunday (AFP)

TITLE BLOW

Barca snatch Clasico win over Madrid to move 12 points clear at the top of La Liga

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona snatched a 2-1 Clasico win over Real Madrid with Franck Kessie's late goal Sunday to move 12 points clear at the top of La Liga.

The victory dents Madrid's ambitions of retaining the title and leaves the Catalans close to lifting the trophy for the first time since 2019.

Carlo Ancelotti's Real took the lead through a Ronald Araujo own goal but Barcelona pulled level when Sergi Roberto tucked home just before half-time.

Both sides had chances to win the game and Marco Asensio struck for Madrid, but the goal was ruled offside by VAR, before Alejandro Balde set up Kessie in the 92nd minute.

"We came from a Marco Asensio goal that we didn't know was offside and from losing, we scored Franck's goal, and the truth is it tastes a bit better, winning like that in the last minute," Sergi Roberto told Movistar.

"There are a lot of games left and you can never give Madrid up for dead. 12 points is a tricky distance to have to go, but it's up to us, and that is good."

The build-up to the match was overshadowed by Barcelona's corruption charge in the "Caso Negreira" refereeing scandal.

Madrid joined Spanish prosecutors' complaint against Barcelona last week and their president Florentino Perez snubbed the game for the first time in over 20 years, amid rising tensions between the two Span-



Barcelona's Franck Kessie celebrates after scoring the winner against Real Madrid at Camp Nou on Sunday (AFP)

We came from a Marco Asensio goal that we didn't know was offside and from losing, we scored Franck's goal, and the truth is it tastes a bit better, winning like that in the last minute

SERGI ROBERTO

ish giants.

That fed the match's intensity, both on and off the pitch, in Xavi's sixth Clasico as Barcelona coach

but only his first at Camp Nou.

Xavi asked fans to make the stadium a pressure cooker and they responded, selling it out,

whistling Madrid in possession and conjuring one of the best atmospheres of the season.

Madrid did not manage a single shot on target in their Copa del Rey semi-final first leg defeat by Barcelona earlier in March, but Karim Benzema stung Marc-Andre ter Stegen's palms inside the first minute. Robert Lewandowski responded at the other end by testing Thibaut Courtois as the veteran marksmen exchanged shots.

When Barcelona conceded the opening goal of the game, it was friendly fire. Araujo deflected Vinicius' cross in at the near post, with Ter Stegen helpless.

Araujo, playing at right-back to counteract the Brazilian, has enjoyed his duels with Vinicius in the past but this time the winger triumphed, albeit fortuitously. Barcelona supporters became enraged by his emphatic celebration in front of them.

AFP

PSG lead in Ligue 1 cut after shock home defeat against Rennes

Paris, France - Paris Saint-Germain's march towards another Ligue 1 title was slowed on Sunday as they went down 2-0 at home to Rennes, a result that allowed Marseille to close the gap on the leaders to seven points with 10 games remaining.

Kylian Mbappe had an effort disallowed for offside before Karl Toko-Ekambi put Rennes in front with a magnificent strike right on half-time.

Arnaud Kalimuendo made it

2-0 three minutes after the restart against his former club, as PSG -- faced with a defensive injury crisis -- slumped to a first home league defeat of the campaign.

It is the Parisians' fourth Ligue 1 loss this season, all of them in 2023, and the second time they have been beaten by Rennes. They also lost when the teams last met in Brittany in January.

Marseille responded by winning 2-1 away to Reims later, with

Alexis Sanchez scoring twice.

"A defeat is always upsetting. Obviously I can't be happy with the way the match went but in the context, with the number of players we had out, we knew we were going to have difficult moments in defence," said PSG coach Christophe Galtier.

PSG only have a ninth Ligue 1 title in 11 seasons left to play for after being knocked out of the Champions League in the last 16 by Bayern Munich.

Galtier has insisted that the prospect of what would be a French record 11th top-flight title is sufficient motivation for his team, but their performance indicated otherwise.

"The objective is to win the league. Will this defeat mean the board will consider my future? Maybe. But everything needs to be put into context," Galtier added when asked about his position.

AFP



Rennes forward Karl Toko Ekambi (R) scores against PSG in their French L1 match on Sunday (AFP)

Kostic fires Juve past Inter as ruthless Napoli continue title march

Milan, Italy - Filip Kostic continued Juventus' push towards Serie A's European places with the only goal in Sunday's 1-0 win at Inter Milan, a result which also meant Napoli extended their lead to 19 points thanks to a 4-0 thrashing of Torino.

Serbia winger Kostic rifled home the winner 22 minutes into an underwhelming encounter at the San Siro, his third league goal of the season enraging Inter who couldn't believe it wasn't ruled out for an Adrien Rabiot handball.

Napoli now only need 15 more points to guarantee the league title, even if Lazio win all of their remaining 11 matches. Without the deduction, Juve would still trail Napoli by 15 points.

Victor Osimhen took his league-leading goal tally to 21 with two towering headers with Khvicha Kvaratskhelia scoring a 35th-minute penalty in a simple win for the champions-elect at Torino.

'Unbelievable' Leverkusen stun Bayern to keep Dortmund top

Berlin, Germany - Argentina's World Cup winner Exequiel Palacios struck twice from the spot as Bayer Leverkusen blew the Bundesliga title race wide open with a shock 2-1 win over Bayern Munich on Sunday.

With a little help from VAR, Leverkusen came from behind to hand coach Xabi Alonso a famous win on his first reunion with former club Bayern and keep the champions from regaining top spot.

"It's an unbelievable feeling. I'm so proud of the way we played today," said Alonso, who played for Bayern from 2014 to 2017.

Bayern are a point behind leaders Borussia Dortmund and the two sides set to meet in the next round of games on April 1.

"That is now a must-win game for us, because it will be very difficult to win the title otherwise," said Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann.

"It was a deserved defeat today. Apart from the last 10 minutes, they were the better



Bayer Leverkusen's Exequiel Palacios (R) celebrates after scoring against Bayern Munich in their German Bundesliga match on Sunday (AFP)

team," he added.

Bayern sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic was scathing in his criticism of the performance.

"We let ourselves be overrun by a team who played in mid-week. That's not what it means to be Bayern Munich," he said.

Bayern survived an early

chance from Jeremie Frimpong before taking the lead themselves when Odilon Kossounou deflected a Joshua Kimmich shot into his own net. The hosts continued to cause Bayern problems, however, and fully deserved their equaliser from the penalty spot on 55 minutes.

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Red Bull Racing's Mexican driver Sergio Perez celebrates after winning the Saudi Arabia Formula One Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit on Sunday (AFP)

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Red Bull's Sergio Perez flexed his street circuit muscles with dramatic effect on Sunday by storming to victory ahead of team-mate Max Verstappen at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.

While the top two were clear cut, the next two places remained in confusion long after the race had finished with Fernando Alonso first stripped of third place and then reinstated in the early hours of Monday morning.

Perez, a 33-year-old Mexican, came home 5.355 seconds clear of the defending double world champion as Red Bull reeled off a masterful one-two triumph, the Dutchman having stormed through the field from 15th on the grid.



Verstappen also clocked the fastest lap of the race on the final lap to retain his lead of the embryonic drivers' championship, snatching it back from Perez as they duelled at high speed. It was Perez's fifth career win

It turned out to be tougher than expected. The safety car tried to take the victory from us again here, but not this year! The team did a great job. Now we must keep pushing

SERGIO PEREZ

having previously triumphed in Monte Carlo and Singapore to earn his reputation as a 'street fighter'.

"It turned out to be tougher than expected," he said. "The safety car tried to take the victory from us again here, but not this year! The team did a great job. Now we must keep pushing."

Verstappen was eliminated from qualifying after a drive-shaft

failure.

"It wasn't easy to get through the field," he said. "We settled for second so it's a good recovery in the end."

Two-time world champion Alonso finished a stirring third on track for Aston Martin to claim a 100th podium finish on his record-extending 357th start.

That place was initially taken from him. He had received a five-

second penalty for starting outside his grid position. When he tried to serve it during a pit stop, stewards ruled a jack had touched the car too soon and they hit Alonso with a 10-second penalty. George Russell rose to third for Mercedes.

But Aston Martin requested a review and showed stewards videos of similar incidents that went unpunished. Stewards accepted that it was not clear the offence had broken Formula One rules and lifted the punishment.

Alonso was back to third followed by the two Mercedes cars of Russell and Lewis Hamilton.

Next were the Ferraris of Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc, who started 12th.

AFP



Lewis Hamilton

Mercedes, Hamilton take 'positives' from Saudi Arabia

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Lewis Hamilton said Mercedes could take "positives" out of Sunday's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix after he and teammate George Russell finished fifth and fourth respectively.

For a few hours Russell was, in fact, promoted to third after Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso was handed a post-race 10-seconds penalty for an infringement during his pit-stop when he was serving a five-second penalty for making an incorrect start.

Russell described the decision as "harsh", a view that the FIA agreed with when Aston Martin appealed. Alonso was reinstated for the 100th podium of his career.

That change, however, did not take the gloss off an encouraging weekend for Mercedes although, like everyone else they are struggling to keep pace with the Red Bulls of Sergio Perez and Max Verstappen who completed a third successive 1-2.

"We got some great points as a team today," said Hamilton immediately after the race.

"George got third, which is amazing. I went forward, one foot in front of the other!"

"I'm really grateful to have come from seventh place."

"The strategy didn't work for me. The set-up was a bit off. If I had George's set-up I would be in a better position. There's lots to work on but we can take the positives."

Mercedes still finished far behind the commanding Red Bulls as Perez claimed his fifth career victory ahead of defending double champion Max Verstappen, who came through the field from 15th on the grid. Mercedes once enjoyed similar domination, winning eight consecutive constructors' titles.

"You've got to give credit to what Red Bull have done," said Russell. "The gap is bigger than any since Mercedes in 2014. It's a serious gap and everyone needs to work harder."

Mercedes, who struggled in 2022 and took fifth and seventh in the opening race of this season in Bahrain, have changed direction with their car development.

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Fagor FCC players pose with the trophy

Fagor FCC claim A Division T20 title

Muscat, Oman: Fagor FCC beat Orient Travels by 21 runs in the final of the A Division T20 tournament powered by Khimji Ramdas. Opting to bat first after winning the toss Fagor FCC made 147/9 in 20 overs. Chirag Mandaviya (48 of 47; 1x4,3x6) and Sultan Ahmed (43 of 30; 6x4) were their main run getters.

Tanveer Rana (3/38), Tauseef Ahmed (2/13) and Mudassar Qayyum (2/28) shone with the ball for Orient. But their response with the bat was not that impressive as they kept losing wickets. Syed Amir Ali's (45 of 27; 5x4,2x6) blitz got Orient Travels close to the target

but couldn't take them over the line. Fagor FCC's Aneermon claimed 3/16 while Charles Jacob picked 3/29 to ensure the title for them.

Fagor FCC had claimed the A Division 50 over title as well.

Speaking on Fagor FCC's successful run this year, Parameswaran Shankar, their captain, said: "Our Team has been brilliant in both formats, in all the departments of the game. We have played as a unit and showed aggressive intent throughout the tournament. Our players were up to the challenges thrown to them at any circumstances resulting in our success."

New Zealand demolish Sri Lanka to sweep Test series

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand claimed victory against Sri Lanka by an innings and 58 runs on Monday to secure a 2-0 Test series whitewash despite a late fightback from the visitors.

Sri Lanka notched just 164 in their first innings and were asked to follow on after the Black Caps declared at 580 in Wellington. They were then bowled out for 358.

"It was nice to get the win finished off, especially as the weather forecast wasn't great, which is part of the reason why we asked for the follow on," said New Zealand captain Tim Southee.

"It's been a pleasing few weeks in the whites with a number of guys stepping up at different times," he added with New Zealand on three straight Test wins including last month's thrilling victory over England to level that series 1-1.

New Zealand stuck to their task after Dhananjaya de Silva launched a fightback on Monday,



Tim Southee holds the trophy as New Zealand celebrate after winning the second Test against Sri Lanka in Wellington on Monday (AFP)

passing 3,000 Test runs before being caught on 98, missing a 10th Test century.

The home seamers had already sniffed victory when they broke his 76-run partnership with debutant wicketkeeper Nisshan Madushka, who was caught just before the tea break.

The loss of de Silva signalled the end of the resistance - Sri Lanka lost their last three wickets for 40 runs as the tailenders were picked off. Southee and New Zealand seamer Blair Tuckner did most of the damage with three wickets apiece.

AFP

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PRINCESS OF ARAB POETS

EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Omani poet, **Aisha al Saifi**, the first woman Arab poet to win the UAE-based TV show ‘Prince of Poets’ says Arab poetry is deep-rooted and represents a core form of expression, as old as language itself

Mohammed Taha

On International Women's Day (March 8) this year, 36 year old Aisha al Saifi came home winning a million hearts, a million UAE dirhams, and a symbolic cloak and ring that signified her regal achievement of being crowned the 'Prince of Poets'.

Aisha became the first Arab woman to win the reality TV show 'Prince of Poets', hosted in Abu Dhabi, and was also greatly popular on social media in the run-up to the finals. Her poems were regarded by the jury and the audience not only because they dealt with everyday life issues with simplicity but also because her choice of words had the ability to instantly strike an emotional connection with listeners.

The show has been extremely popular among Arab literary circles ever since it was launched in April 2007 by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage. The current edition, which concluded in early March, was telecast 'live' every week and had involved social media towards attaining a credible verdict.

Elated over her triumph among many a seasoned poet, Aisha considers this as merely a stepping stone towards an illustrious literary journey ahead. Born in Nizwa in 1987, Aisha says she has participated in Arab and international literary festivals across Asia, Europe, and Africa, and was also the first female poet to win at an annual Omani Poetry Festival.

"Even though I graduated from Sultan Qaboos University with Civil Engineering, my love for poetry since childhood was my biggest motivation for writing poetry and participating in local and Arab competitions, Aisha said, adding, "My first poem was written when I was in grade 4 - a poem called 'The White Dove' - which was a great motivation for me to embark on this creative journey in the world of classical Arabic poetry."

In 2005, Aisha started publishing her literary works in Omani and Arabic newspapers. She participated in Arab and international literary festivals across Asia, Europe, and also published five poetry collections - The Sea Changes its Gown, Dreams of the Tenth Girl, and I Don't Love My Father."

"My poems have been translated into several languages, such as Persian, Greek, Spanish, English, German, and Portuguese," Aisha said, asserting that the popularity of poetry in the Arab world cuts deeper, representing a core form of expression as old as language itself. Especially, in the contemporary world full of stress and materialism, classical Arabic poetry serves as a refuge, a unique mode of expressing beauty, emotion, and insights with characteristic grace.

Among stalwarts of Arabic poetry

About the TV show, she said, "In Abu Dhabi, the stalwarts of Arabic poetry were engaged in a fierce competition to win the hearts and minds of the public and the jury. I was crowned 'Prince (or Princess, if you may) of Poets' and honoured as the first Arab woman poet to be bestowed with the title. I look upon this as an encouraging factor, not just for me, but also for many Omani women who as-

PRIZE MONEY PLANS

About her plans for best utilising her prize money of one million UAE dirhams (approx RO100,000) Aisha said, she hopes to pledge half of it for charitable works in Oman. From the rest, she plans to buy a plot of land to convert it into a beautiful garden, one that would take her closer to nature to inspire her further.

pire to participate in the Prince of Poets contest, as well as in other local competitions."

Over 1,800 poets had submitted entries to the competition, and 100 were chosen to participate in the programme to recite their poems live on television during ten episodes telecast over two months. The guidelines specified that each poem must be simple, have an emotional connection, as well as uphold human values to make a mark in the competition. The winner is awarded one million dirhams and a symbolic cloak and ring.

The show has built on that tradition, giving a priceless gift to all Arabic speakers. The programme has added tremendous value to the Arabic literary canon and provided contestants and viewers with valuable literary criticism, furthering insight into the structure and style of classical poetry.

"I did not choose the poem, the poem chose me," Aisha quipped, adding, "Topping the contest was not an easy task. I traveled to many countries, read many Arab and international novels, and watched many plays, all of which has inspired and shaped my 'poetic personality'.



POETS ARE CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

Aisha acknowledged that social media does play a big role in our lives these days. "During the past three years, it has created a large audience for me in various Arab countries, and it was instrumental in helping me win the title of Prince of Poets this year," she said.

Aisha feels, poetry reflects the pulse of a nation, its joys, sorrows, national occasions and accomplishments because poets are cultural ambassadors of their respective countries. Poets help in popularising a country's heritage, promoting its developmental strides as well as the aspirations of the populace, she said.

Acknowledging that Oman does have a lot of creative talent in literary works, especially poetry, Aisha hoped that her win would open up more doors for young literary champions in Oman to excel in at Arab and international forums.

"I am currently coordinating with the UNICEF office in Amman (Jordan) to present a poetic work to celebrate World Poetry Day (March 21). I thank everyone who supported me on my journey, especially my family - this is not the end, it is the beginning!" Aisha said.

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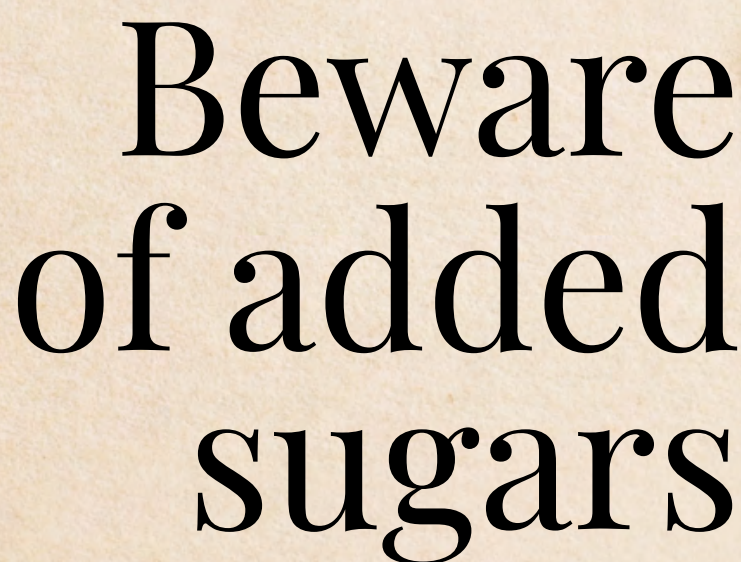
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A dancer who tries to kick her leg over her head without warming up first, or a pitcher who tries to throw a fastball as soon as he steps onto field, are practically asking for an injury. If flexibility becomes severely limited, even everyday tasks (like bending over to pick up something you've dropped or lifting a suitcase) can similarly increase the risk of muscle strains and tears.

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