

ARAB PEACE ON THE BRINK

At least 70 people reported killed in Israel; Gaza authorities release death toll of 198

Sderot, Israel - Palestinian group Hamas launched a large-scale surprise attack against Israel on Saturday, firing thousands of rockets from Gaza and sending ground units, as Israel retaliated with air strikes.

At least 70 people were reported killed in Israel, while Gaza authorities released a death toll of 198 in the bloodiest escalation in the wider conflict since May 2021, with hundreds more wounded on both sides.

"We are at war," said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the military launched a series of air strikes against targets of Iran-backed Hamas in the blockaded coastal enclave where black smoke billowed into the sky.

"The enemy will pay an unprecedented price," the right-wing veteran Israeli premier vowed after Hamas launched its first such combined air, sea and ground offensive, half a century after the outbreak of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.



A man carries a crying child as he walks in front of a building destroyed in an Israeli air strike in Gaza City on Saturday

The Islamist group started the surprise attack at around 6:30am (0330 GMT) with thousands of rockets aimed as far as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, some bypassing the Iron Dome defence system and hitting

buildings. Hamas fighters - travelling in vehicles, boats and even using motorised paragliders - breached Gaza's security barrier and attacked nearby Israeli towns and military posts, sparking gun bat-

Oman calls on Palestine, Israel to exercise restraint

Muscat - Oman has called on Palestine and Israel to exercise utmost restraint, stressing the importance of protecting civilians.

A statement issued by the Foreign Ministry said, "The Sultanate of Oman has been following with great concern the ongoing escalation be-

tween the Palestinian and Israeli sides as a result of continued illegal Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the constant Israeli aggressions in Palestinian cities and villages, which portend serious repercussions and an escalation in intensity of violence'.

ties as panicked residents hid out in bunkers.

Bodies were seen lying on the streets of the town of Sderot near Gaza.

AFP journalists witnessed armed Palestinians gathered around an Israeli tank that was on fire, and others driving a seized Israeli Humvee into Gaza.

Gates of hell

Israeli army Maj Gen Ghasan Alyan warned Hamas had "opened the gates of hell" and would "pay for its deeds".

The army said its forces were battling Palestinian fighters on the ground in several locations near the Gaza Strip, in an operation labelled 'Swords of Iron'.

Hamas claimed to have captured several Israelis - raising the spectre of a far wider escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as international concern mounted. The group released a video showing its fighters holding three men dressed in civilian clothes who were labelled 'enemy soldiers' in the video caption.

The escalation follows months of rising bloodshed, mostly in the occupied West Bank, and tensions around Gaza's border and at contested holy sites in Jerusalem.

Hamas labelled its attack Operation Al Aqsa Flood and called on "resistance fighters in the West Bank" as well as in "Arab and Islamic nations" to join the battle. "We decided to put an end to all the crimes of the occupation (Israel)," said its armed wing, the Ezzedine al Qassam Brigades, claiming to have fired more than 5,000 rockets.

Army spokesman Richard Hecht said Israel had counted at least 2,200 rockets aimed at its territory.

AFP

See also Page 07

UN SECURITY COUNCIL TO MEET TODAY ON MIDDLE EAST

United Nations, United States - The United Nations Security Council will hold an emergency meeting on Sunday on the violence in the Middle East, the body said in a statement issued after deadly attacks by Hamas on Israel.

The council will convene at 3pm local time (1900 GMT) to discuss "the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question," according to a statement released on Saturday.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Saturday urged diplomatic efforts in the Middle East in order to prevent the conflict from widening after Hamas's attacks on Israel.

Unified GCC visa 'coming very soon'

Our Correspondent Muscat

GCC ministers of tourism have unanimously approved a unified Gulf visa and sought feedback on the same by December.

The common tourism visa for the Gulf Cooperation Council "is coming very soon," H E Salim Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, said as the sultanate chaired the seventh meeting of GCC ministers of tourism on Thursday.

The meeting was held at Oman Across Ages Museum in Manah, Dakhliyah.

"There is unanimous agreement, in terms of the importance of this matter. There will be a number of follow-up meetings to see how we can proceed on this to reach a full agreement on it," the minister added.

Stressing on the meeting's goal, H E Mahrouqi said it was to enhance cooperation and facilitate tourism development. "We aim to uplift the GCC's tourism status, enrich our national economies and meet our people's aspirations."

The meeting also discussed



We aim to uplift the GCC's tourism status, enrich our national economies and meet our people's aspirations

H E SALIM MOHAMMED AL MAHROUQI

the development of a GCC Tourism Statistics Platform. In a significant resolution, the ministers approved the Gulf Strategy for Tourism 2023-2030 and agreed to ensure an effective roll-out, monitored via regular reports.

Addressing the potential of tourism in the Gulf peninsula, Jassim Mohammed al Budaiwi, GCC Secretary-General, said, "It

GCC STATISTICS 2022

39.8mn inbound visitors, up 136.6% \$85.9bn tourist spending, up 101.2%

UNIFIED INITIATIVES

- Creation of a centre for unified Gulf statistics
- Introduction of a unified tourist visa scheme
- Establishment of a GCC Tourism Statistics Platform

is emerging as a robust economic and social sector, capable of steering sustainable development."

He highlighted the fact that 17 landmarks from GCC states are currently listed as Unesco World Heritage sites.

Furnishing statistics, Budaiwi informed that record 39.8mn tourists visited the GCC in 2022, a notable 136.6% increase from

the previous year, while tourist spending surged to US\$85.9bn, marking a 101.2% growth. Intra-GCC tourism made up 29.7% of the total tourist numbers, a growth of 98.8% compared to 2021.

Looking ahead, the GCC Tourism Strategy aims for ambitious growth to increase tourist numbers by 7% annually till 2030. It includes enhancing inbound tourist spending by 8% and domestic tourist expenditure by 2.4% in this period. An essential goal is to bolster the direct GDP by 7% annually until 2030.

Providing further insights, Ahmed Aqeel al Khatib, Saudi Minister of Tourism, emphasised a joint vision. "We're considering establishing a unified Gulf statistics centre and a common tourist visa system. With coordinated efforts, the GCC is poised to capture a significant share of the global travel market."

Closing the meeting, a proposal titled 'Our Gulf, the Birthplace of Civilisations' was tabled aiming for member states to finalise their contributions by the end of 2023.



SAYYID THEYAZIN VISITS RIYADH BOOK FAIR

H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, visited Riyadh International Book Fair 2023, in which Oman is participating as a guest of honour, on Friday. He was accompanied by Prince Badr bin Abdullah al Saud, Saudi Minister of Culture. Later in the evening, H H Sayyid Theyazin attended a concert performed by Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh (ONA)



Musandam launches bus route to Ras al Khaimah



Mongolia's circus performers fight to preserve their craft

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman is ranked sixth in the Arab world and 65th globally in the Universal Postal Union's Integrated Index for Postal Development (2IPD) 2022.

The sultanate also won the 'Excellence Award' at the Fourth Extraordinary Conference of the Universal Postal Union (UPU), which was held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia from October 1 to 5.

The 2IPD is based on four factors - reliability, access, connec-



tivity and flexibility. The index monitors development and progress in the postal sector in the 172 member states of UPU.

This progress reflects the level of cooperation existing between the legislative, regulatory and executive authorities to develop the postal sector in Oman, the efficiency of the sector's infrastructure and the remarkable development in the performance of the national operator Oman Post, according to a press statement.

The ranking will enhance the sector's appeal to foreign in-

vestors and encourage e-commerce and technology adoption in the sector.

The index acknowledged Oman, Slovenia and Uzbekistan as 'Rising Stars' for their standout, year-on-year postal development level. Brazil, China, Estonia, Ethiopia and Morocco were recognised as postal development leaders in their respective regions.

'It is highly encouraging for postal sector peers to witness the remarkable strides made in postal development by Uzbekistan, Slovenia and Oman in

2022,' stated UPU.

These nations have not only enhanced their postal systems, but have also set an inspiring standard for other countries to emulate. Their progress serves as a testament to the transformative power of innovation and dedication in the postal sector, it added.

Achieving the highest of ten postal development levels were Austria, France, Germany, Japan and Switzerland, with the Swiss postal service achieving the highest 2IPD score for the seventh consecutive year in 2022.

Car rentals experience resurgence post COVID

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman, with its picturesque landscapes and cultural treasures, has long been a magnet for travellers worldwide. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the tourism and hospitality sectors, including the car rental industry in Oman.

But things are changing for better, if the inputs from the people involved in the sector are anything to go by.

Ajay Krishnan, sales lead at NAB Rent A Car Oman, expressed optimism about the industry's recovery, stating, "Business post-COVID has been picking up gradually. Our overall sales have increased since global tourism has started picking up."

While not yet at pre-pandemic levels, Krishnan anticipates a rebound in the upcoming season.

When asked about the best



season for car rental business, Krishnan pointed to Oman's tourist season, which began this month and will continue till March as the weather remains pleasant. "People have already started arriving from the UK, Russia, Europe, India and the GCC countries."

Gaurav Kumar, retail sales executive at Autorent, talked about how the car rental business has grown after the pandemic subsided. "The business has shown 21% growth in sales volume post-COVID. Market shift has been observed from long term rentals to mid-term and short-

term rentals leading to a higher number of transactions. The product buying and maintenance cost has increased by 10-15%, however the rental rates have remained the same, leading to a decline in the operating margins."

Despite challenges like rising costs, Kumar emphasised the positive impact of improved tourist inflow during khareef and tourist seasons resulting in more business opportunities.

Kumar highlighted the prime seasons for the car rental business, distinguishing them as tourist season from October to March, Eid holidays, and khareef season running from June to August.

The rental industry in Oman is witnessing a steady recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. While challenges persist, including the need to adapt to changing market dynamics and increased costs, the industry is showing resilience.

As international travel continues to rebound, Oman remains a sought-after destination, and the rental business is poised to play a vital role in facilitating tourists' exploration.

(Contributed by Deeba Parween)

GCC looks into exemption of taxes on industrial items

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The GCC Financial and Economic Cooperation Committee on Thursday held its 120th meeting in Muscat under the chairmanship of Finance Minister H E Sultan Salim al Habsi and looked into regulations for exempting GCC industrial products from taxes.

It also looked into the progress made in negotiations on the free trade agreement between the GCC states and China.

The meeting - attended by GCC ministers of Finance and Economy - discussed the outcome of different meetings, including those of the GCC Central Bank Governors' Committee, the GCC Customs Union Authority, the GCC Common Market Committee and the team tasked with analysing G20 meetings.

H E Habsi underscored the significance of the meeting which, he said, focused on enhancing financial and economic

cooperation and integration among GCC states. He called for more efforts to cement financial and economic cooperation for achieving the aspirations of GCC peoples.

Jassim Mohammed al Budaiwi, Secretary-General of GCC, added perspective, stating, "Our current trajectory is driven by directives from the esteemed leaders of the GCC countries. We're meticulously working towards finalising the customs union and the Gulf common market processes. The ultimate aim is achieving economic unity by 2025."

Budaiwi asserted that these pursuits underscore "our commitment to leveraging the council's progress, fostering greater synergy, integration, and alignment among GCC nations for the betterment of our people".

The Financial and Economic Cooperation Committee operates as one of the permanent committees under the Secretariat General of GCC.

Musandam launches international bus route linking Ras Al Khaimah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Musandam governorate welcomed its inaugural international bus service connecting it to the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Friday.

The development symbolises the strong ties between Oman and the UAE. Initiated by the Ras Al Khaimah Transport Authority (RAKTA), this service aims to bolster public transport and tourism between the two nations.

This introduction marks the first international land transport route by RAKTA.

As stipulated in an agreement signed in August, the route originates from Ras Al Khaimah's southern Al Dhait region, ending in Khasab.

The one-way ticket would



cost RO5.250, while children aged three and under travel for free. Prospective travellers can book tickets through the RAK-Bus app, the authority's website, the Ras Al Khaimah bus station, or directly onboard the buses, officials said.

The bus operates on Fridays,

Saturdays, and Sundays, with two round trips between 8am and 6pm.

Stops within Ras Al Khaimah include the Al Rams and Shaam areas, while in Musandam, buses will halt at Tibat, Bukha, Al-Harf, Qada, and Khasab, officials confirmed.

Plain packaging of tobacco from April

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has announced that the mandatory Omani Standard for plain packing of tobacco products will be effective from April next year.

"The ministry requests tobacco companies and local compliance firms to follow Ministerial Decision No 2023/67, which requires implementing Omani Standard OS1655 for plain packaging of tobacco products. This becomes mandatory from April 4, 2024", MoCIIP said in a statement.

The ministry issued a deci-

sion on Omani Standard OS 1655:2022 on plain packaging of tobacco products in March this year, and deemed it a binding Omani standard specification.

The move was appreciated by the World Health Organization (WHO) office for the Eastern Mediterranean, describing Oman's action as 'significant and pioneering'.

In September, the Ministry of Health received the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of NCDs Award for its tobacco control efforts. Plain packaging bans use of logos, colours, brand images or any kind of publicity on tobacco packets.

With the new decision, at

least 65% of the packaging will now include a public health warning, picture and a message to quit, while the rest will have the brand name. The brand name will be in a standardised font and colour, based on regulations of the MoCIIP decision, the ministry made it clear.

According to WHO, tobacco packaging is a mobile billboard promoting consumption of tobacco products.

"If you strip back the decoration, gloss and misleading elements of tobacco packaging, you are left with little more than a box of deadly, addictive products that kill approximately 6mn people a year and harm the health of many more."

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The 'Top Three' most fascinating photographs will be published in Muscat Daily, on October 10, and will win a one-night stay for two persons each at Barceló Mussanah Resort

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Illegal fishing plagues coastal cities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Despite intensified efforts by the government, illegal fishing continues to affect many Omani coastal cities. These activities are further highlighted by recent statistics released by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR).

Reflecting the scale of the problem, MAFWR reported that 60 expatriates were arrested for violating the Marine Fishing Law and Protection of Living Aquatic Resources in the month of September 2023.

Twenty-three expatriate workers were arrested in July, and four in June this year.

In a stark reminder of the growing problem, MAFWR recorded 452 violations of non-compliance with the regulations of the Marine Fishing Law in June, and 570 violations of non-compliance with marine re-



(Supplied photos)

Our fish control teams monitor the Omani coast intensively. The evolving capabilities of the modern fisherman challenge us. Their advanced fishing fleets and extended periods at sea make monitoring more complex

MAFWR OFFICIAL

source fishing regulations and 359 fishing licensing regulations in July. In comparison, a total of 521 expatriates were arrested for similar violations in 2022.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, an official from MAFWR elaborated on the ministry's collaborative approach to combat the escalating problem. "We are actively cooperating with multiple agencies, including Royal Oman Police, the Coast Guard, the Ministry of Labour, Royal Army of Oman and the Public Prosecution."

Detailing the enforcement strategy, the official stated, "Our fish control teams, equipped with control boats and a fleet of designated vehicles in every governorate, intensively monitor the Omani coast. Despite these efforts, the evolving capabilities of the modern fisherman challenge us. Their advanced fishing fleets and extended periods at sea make monitoring more complex."

The official hailed the vital role of the Coast Guard in assisting whenever required. "The ministry, in cooperation with

other agencies, also implements an annual programme of inspections along the coast of the Al Wusta, South Sharqiyah and Dhofar governorates to combat illegal fishing."

Explaining the consequences faced by violators, the official said, "Expatriates found violating the rules are arrested and could face deportation, imprisonment and fines. Additionally, their fishing equipment and catch of fish are confiscated. Their licence can also be suspended."

He noted that Ministerial Decision No 51/2013, emphasises that the sale of confiscated fish benefits the state's treasury. "Seized fish are sold and funds transferred to the state treasury."

According to the official, MAFWR appeals to all citizens to be vigilant and promptly report any illegal fishing activities they come across, thereby contributing to the preservation of Oman's marine resources.

MoSD introduces new donations platform jood.om



(Supplied photo)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) unveiled a new digital donations platform called Jood, meaning 'give generously', on Thursday.

Designed to support charities and volunteer groups in Oman, jood.om facilitates electronic donations for both individuals and institutions via secure payment channels.

The launch ceremony was graced by H E Dr Mohammed Said al Ma'amari, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, H E Dr Laila Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, several royal family members, ministers, and representatives of public and private charity organisations.

Highlighting the essence of the initiative, H E Ma'amari said, "Volunteerism fosters a united and interdependent society. Global needs have driven the formation of bodies dedicated to charitable and volunteer efforts, supporting government entities."

He described the platform as a "gateway to generosity", facilitating easier access to those in need while promoting transparency in charitable activities. It offers donors accurate financial data, insights and statistics.

Global needs have driven the formation of bodies dedicated to charitable and volunteer efforts, supporting government entities

H E DR MOHAMMED SAID AL MA'AMARI

Jood will assess applications sent to charitable entities, maintain beneficiary records and prevent double disbursements to recipients getting assistance from multiple sources. The platform will also produce statistical reports valuable for those offering aid and researchers interested in Oman's charity activities.

At the launch ceremony, Ahlam Abdullah al Tobi, head of Digital Transformation at MoSD, said, "Jood will be pivotal for decisions concerning charity, enabling transparency via real-time data for decision-makers, donors and the charities themselves."

She highlighted jood.om's additional features including dedicated pages for every association and a centralised system overseeing the registration and management of charitable programmes.

MHUP offers 23 plots for investment in 6 governorates

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) is amplifying investment opportunities by auctioning 23 government plots of land and presenting two investment ventures under the Integrated Residential Neighbourhoods - Sorouh - initiative in Dakhliyah governorate.

The distribution of the 23 plots is as follows: ten in North Sharqiyah, six in South Sharqiyah, three in Dakhliyah, two in Muscat, and one each in South Batinah and Dhofar. These plots,



situated in densely populated areas, are versatile and aren't limited to any specific use.

Of the two Sorouh projects, the first - to build 600 housing units - is located in Bahla's Maamour area, spread over

452,000sqm. The second - to build 400 housing units - is set on 137,000sqm in Samail's Al Hob area.

According to Masoud al Hashmi, Director General of Real Estate Development at

MHUP, these initiatives aim to diversify housing options in five investment sites across multiple governorates within the Sorouh framework. "The efforts align with the ministry's objectives of sustainable urbanisation, focusing on comprehensive residential areas that promote community wellness and sustainable growth."

Another MHUP official emphasised the ministry's strategy to augment the GDP and stimulate economic activities in various sectors, supporting the strategic objectives of Oman Vision 2040 by fostering socio-economic progress.

"The Sorouh initiative intends to balance population and economic growth, allowing the private sector to lure investments to the governorates, fostering cohesive and sustainable urban communities," he noted.

Prospective bidders for the plots must register with the Real Estate Development Services Centre using their ID or business registration number.

Recent MHUP data shows real estate transactions worth RO1.4bn were conducted in the first half of 2023. The Amlak platform of MHUP, offered 56 services across sectors serving 57,768 beneficiaries this year.

CPA secures refund of RO33,900 from dealer for defective vehicle

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) in Muscat secured a refund of RO33,914 for a consumer, following her purchase of a defective vehicle from a local dealer.

The consumer purchased a new vehicle and soon experienced technical issues, including an exhaust odour inside the car, heavy handling and vibrations. Despite her efforts to address these issues with the dealer, her concerns remained unresolved. This prompted her to approach CPA.

Upon receiving the complaint, CPA's Complaints Department acted swiftly, liaising with the dealer and confirming the vehicle's defects through tests. These defects were not consistent with the standards of a new car. Consequently, a settlement was reached in which the dealer agreed to a full refund.

This resolution is in line with



CPA emphasises the importance of suppliers adhering to consumer protection laws, meeting their obligations and prioritising consumers' rights

Article 16 of the Consumer Protection Law, outlined in Royal Decree No 66/2014. It states that within 15 days of purchasing a product, barring perish-

able items, a consumer has the right to replacement, return or full refund if the product is defective, doesn't match standard specifications or is unfit for its intended use. However, the consumer must provide proof of purchase, and the defect shouldn't be due to misuse.

CPA emphasises the importance of suppliers adhering to consumer protection laws, meeting their obligations and prioritising consumers' rights. These include ensuring vehicles are safe and undergo thorough technical inspections before being sold.

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Fitch upgrades OQ and EDO ratings to 'BB+'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Fitch Ratings has upgraded the long-term issuer default ratings (IDRs) of Oman's integrated global energy group, OQ, and Energy Development Oman (EDO), to 'BB+' from 'BB'. The agency's outlooks on the ratings of both state-owned companies remain 'stable'.

The upgrade of OQ's and EDO's ratings follows the upgrade of Oman's sovereign rating to 'BB+' on September 25, as stated in Fitch's rating action commentary.

The rating agency mentioned that EDO's and OQ's long-term ratings are constrained by the rating of their sole shareholder, the government of Oman, given their close links, in line with Fitch's Government-Related Entities (GRE) and Parent and Subsidiary Linkage (PSL) Rating Criteria.

Under its GRE Rating Criteria, Fitch assesses OQ's status, ownership, and control; support track record; and socio-political implications of default as 'strong,' and financial implications of default as 'very strong.'

"OQ accounts for a substantial portion of assets transferred to the Oman Investment Authority



OQ repaid \$3.1bn of debt in 2022, and its total reported debt was \$10.6bn at the end of 2022. We assume it will further decline to around \$8.2bn by end of 2023 and \$5.8bn by 2025 under our rating case

FITCH RATINGS

from the Ministry of Finance in 2020. The government exerts significant influence on OQ's business and funding strategy via

OIA. While the state has no plans for privatisation of OQ, we expect disposals of minority stakes in its subsidiaries to con-

tinue,' Fitch said.

According to Fitch, OQ has received significant support from the government in the form of equity injections, asset transfers, shareholder loans, and debt guarantees. The agency believes that financial support from the Omani government is forthcoming, if needed.

Fitch also mentioned that OQ has been proactively managing its balance sheet using strong cash-flow generation and pro-

ceeds from asset sales to prepay debt.

"OQ repaid \$3.1bn of debt in 2022, and its total reported debt was \$10.6bn at the end of 2022. We assume it will further decline to around \$8.2bn by the end of 2023 and \$5.8bn by 2025 under our rating case,' Fitch noted, adding that the strength of OQ's financial profile is further supported by its newly-established financial policy of modest dividend payments.

Asset sales

Fitch said, 'We understand from management that OQ is targeting further asset sales, including potential sales of non-controlling interests in some core operating companies.'

It said, 'While OQ has a record of using asset sale proceeds to reduce debt, we do not assume any additional asset sales in our rating case beyond 2023 and will evaluate the impact of any future disposals on the company's business and financial profile on a case-by-case basis.'

Regarding EDO, Fitch upgraded EDO's senior unsecured rating to 'BB+' from 'BB.' It has also upgraded the rating on the Sukuk program issued by EDO Sukuk Limited to 'BB+' from 'BB' with a Recovery Rating of 'RR4.'

According to Fitch, EDO's 'bbb+' Standalone Credit Profile (SCP) is based on its record of maintaining a prudent financial profile and successfully maintaining the size and scale of reserves and production within the current fiscal framework.

'The SCP is supported by EDO's large-scale oil and gas operations, strong and resilient cash-flow generation due to contracted sales prices for gas and a flexible royalty framework, flexi-

ble dividend policy, and low leverage,' the rating agency said.

Under its GRE Rating Criteria, Fitch assesses EDO's support track record and socio-political implications of default as 'strong' and status, ownership, and control as well as financial implications of default as 'very strong.' The 'very Strong' status, ownership, and control reflect EDO's full ownership by the state with no near-term privatisation plans, Fitch added.

Through its interest in Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), EDO is the largest oil and gas producer in Oman. PDO operates the onshore Block 6 oil and gas concessions, which comprise over 24% of Oman's land acreage and have more than 50 years of production history.

'This somewhat mitigates EDO's focus on a single country of operations. We expect an average output of around 760,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day until 2026 in our rating case forecast,' Fitch said.

Fitch forecasts that EDO will maintain a strong financial profile until 2026 under the agency's oil and gas price deck, despite growing capital expenses and high royalties and tax payments to the government.

OIA invests in Electric Hydrogen

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) on Saturday announced its investment in the US-based company Electric Hydrogen (EH2). Electric Hydrogen manufactures, delivers, and commissions the world's most powerful electrolyzers for critical industries to produce the lowest-cost green hydrogen.

This investment is part of OIA's series of sustainable investments launched by the authority with the aim of diversifying its investment portfolio, in line with Oman's green hydrogen strategy and its commitment to striving toward achieving global leadership in the transition to clean energy sector.

EH2's electrolyzer systems produce green hydrogen from renewable electricity and water. Green hydrogen is essential for decarbonising vital industrial processes such as fertiliser production, steelmaking, base chemicals, and many others. Until now, switching from fossil-based sources to renewable green hydrogen has been too costly to implement at scale.

According to a press release,



Electric Hydrogen plans to deliver and commission 100MW electrolyzer systems, each capable of producing nearly 50 tonnes of green hydrogen per day at a transformational low cost

EH2 is manufacturing and plans to deliver and commission 100MW electrolyzer systems, each capable of producing nearly 50 tonnes of green hydrogen per

day at a transformational low cost to help its customers meet their decarbonisation goals.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, Alwaleed bin Said al Shukaili, senior director of economic diversification investments at Oman Investment Authority, said, "At a time when Oman is taking its first steps in its journey to produce green hydrogen, we believe it is necessary to establish strategic partnerships with partners who have experience and advanced technical capabilities in this field. Our investment in Electric Hydrogen reflects our interest in supporting the development of

the green hydrogen sector in the sultanate."

EH2 is currently installing manufacturing equipment in its 1.2GW factory in Devens, Massachusetts in the US. The factory will begin producing commercial electrolyzer systems in early 2024, with deliveries later in the year, including the first customer-sited electrolyzer plant to be installed in Texas for New Fortress Energy.

As per the company, Electric Hydrogen has more than 5 gigawatts of its electrolysis systems reserved by customers and anticipates strong ongoing demand.

UAE approves mega offshore gas project weeks ahead of COP28

Dubai, UAE - Emirati energy giant ADNOC said it had awarded contracts to build a major gas project, just weeks before the Gulf state hosts the COP28 climate conference.

The company said it would invest in the Hail and Ghasha offshore fields, pledging that it would be the "world's first project that aims to operate with net zero emissions".

But its "net zero" promise was met with derision from the Climate Action Tracker research group, which charged that it was "completely misleading".

The two contracts, signed on the final day of the Abu Dhabi Energy Show, had a total estimated value of \$16.9bn, ADNOC said.

Construction work on the site has been entrusted to a joint venture between the Abu Dhabi-based National Petroleum Construction Company and Saipem of Italy.

Another Italian company, Tecnimont, will be responsible for onshore infrastructure.

ADNOC said the project includes "innovative decarbonisation technologies" to capture and store 1.5mn tonnes of CO2 per year.

The Hail and Ghasha projects are part of the Ghasha concession in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, which aims to produce nearly 42.5mn cubic metres (more than 1.5bn cubic feet) of gas per day



by 2030.

"ADNOC will continue to responsibly unlock its gas resources to enable gas self-sufficiency for the UAE, grow our export capacity and support global energy security," it said.

Mia Moiso of the Climate Action Tracker group said that labelling a fossil gas project as net zero was completely misleading, even if referring only to operational emissions.

"There is no such thing as emissions-free fossil fuel projects," she said. "The majority of emissions from fossil fuels result from their combustion, not their operations."

In a report published in September, the group's experts highlighted the UAE's "dependency on gas for electricity", expressing concern about the COP28 host's commitment to carbon capture.

The UN climate conference, which opens in Dubai on November 30, is being chaired by ADNOC head Sultan Al Jaber.

His appointment to the post has drawn criticism from environmentalists, who denounce the role of the hydrocarbon sector in global warming.

At the opening of the Abu Dhabi conference on Monday, Jaber said the industry was "at the heart of the solution" to climate change, calling on industry representatives to "silence the sceptics".

He reiterated that the gradual phase-out of fossil fuels was "inevitable and essential", while emphasising the global economy's dependence on oil, gas and coal.

ADNOC made a commitment in July to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045 for its own operations. But the target does not take into account the indirect emissions produced by the hydrocarbons exported and burned by its customers, which account for the vast majority of its carbon footprint.

AFP

India's central bank holds rates despite inflation

Mumbai, India - India's central bank left interest rates unchanged again Friday despite an inflation spike that has sparked official concern over the impact of higher food prices caused by extreme weather.

The benchmark repo rate has stood at 6.50% since February, following a series of hikes by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to curb rising prices last year.

Inflation spiked at 7.4% in July before moderating to 6.8% the following month, still well above the RBI benchmark.

The bank had "identified high inflation as a risk to macroeconomic stability and sustainable growth" and "remains resolutely focused on aligning inflation to the four percent target", RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said.



RBI governor Shaktikanta Das

Prices for food staples - including wheat, rice and tomatoes - have shot up in recent months, partly because of floods, record-high temperatures and pest attacks in production belts.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman told parliament in

July that the government was taking steps "to contain high prices which are hitting common citizens".

The government has put curbs on some rice exports to put downward pressure on prices.

Food prices have since eased but "the overall inflation outlook is clouded by uncertainties from the fall in" domestic sowing of key crops and "volatile global food and energy prices," Das said.

India's inflation peaked at 7.8% last year in the wake of the global economic fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which prompted spikes in food and oil costs.

The World Bank this week said India would nonetheless re-

main one of the world's fastest-growing economies this year, with strong domestic demand and investment helping it weather inflation.

India overtook Britain last year to become the world's fifth-largest economy, and recorded 7.8% growth for the June quarter, the most recent figure available.

The world's most populous country is grappling with increasingly frequent extreme weather events -- which scientists attribute to climate change.

India's weather department has declared a heatwave almost every year in the last decade, with temperatures sometimes touching 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit).

AFP

Russia lifts ban on diesel exports

Moscow, Russia - Russian government announced on Friday that it has partially lifted the ban on the diesel exports by pipelines through seaports.

'The government has removed restrictions on export of diesel fuel delivered to seaports by pipeline transport provided that the producer supplies at least 50% of diesel fuel produced to the domestic market,' according to an official statement. The restrictions for gasoline exports, meanwhile, remain

in force.

Also, the government increased the export duty on gasoline from 20,000 rubles to 50,000 rubles (\$494.5) per tonne for sellers which are not producers. The government will also fully reinstate the subsidies, also known as damper payments, for oil refineries starting from October 1.

The Russian government decided on September 21 to limit the export of gasoline and diesel fuel and the Russian En-

ergy Minister Nikolay Shulginov said on October 3 that the limit will remain until fuel supplies and prices stabilise on the domestic market.

Russia, one of the largest global oil producers, exports nearly 900,000 barrels per day (bpd) of diesel fuel and 100,000 bpd of gasoline. Last year, the country's diesel exports totalled 35mn tonnes and gasoline exports amounted to 4.8mn tonnes.

Anadolu Agency

Inflation, high interest rates crimp global trade: WTO

Geneva, Switzerland – Global trade growth will be sharply lower than forecast this year as stubborn inflation, high interest rates and the war in Ukraine pressure economies around the globe, the World Trade Organization.

Strains in China's vast property market also prompted the WTO to cut its trade growth forecast to just 0.8% this year, less than half the increase it had previously projected.

"The projected slowdown in trade for 2023 is cause for concern, because of the adverse implications for the living standards of people around the world," said the WTO director-general, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

The volume of world merchandise trade is now expected to grow by 0.8% this year, "less than half the 1.7% increase forecasted in April", the WTO said in its revised global trade projections.

"The 3.3% growth projected for 2024 remains nearly unchanged from the previous estimate" of 3.2%, it said.

The WTO expects real world GDP to increase by 2.6% at market exchange rates this year, and by 2.5% in 2024.

"A continued slump in goods trade that began in the fourth quarter of 2022 has led WTO economists to scale back their trade projections for the current year while maintaining a more positive outlook for 2024," the Geneva-based organisation said.



WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala attends the opening of a Summit on sustainable finance, in Geneva, on October 2 (AFP)

As per the WTO's revised estimates, the volume of world merchandise trade is now expected to grow by 0.8% this year, less than half the 1.7% increase forecasted in April

Broad-based slowdown

"Positive export and import volume growth should resume in 2024, but we must remain vigilant," said WTO chief economist Ralph Ossa.

Sectors that are more sensitive to business cycles are expected to stabilise and rebound as inflation moderates and interest rates start to fall.

The WTO's forecast does not cover commercial services trade

but its preliminary data shows that growth in the field could be more moderate following a strong recovery in the transport and travel sectors last year.

The slowdown in merchandise trade growth appears to be broad-based, covering a large number of countries and a wide range of goods, though some sectors are more strongly affected, such as iron, steel, office and telecom equipment, textiles and clothing, the WTO said.

"The exact causes of the

slowdown are not clear, but inflation, high interest rates, US dollar appreciation, and geopolitical tensions are all contributing elements," the trade body said.

It also said China's ballooning property-sector crisis was preventing a stronger recovery from taking root in the country following the impact of strict Covid-19 lockdowns.

Fragmentation fears

The trade outlook for 2024 is more favourable.

But the WTO warned that a potential split in global trade between two geopolitical blocs on either side of the war in Ukraine could have a negative impact.

"We do see some signs in the data of trade fragmentation linked to geopolitical tensions. Fortunately, broader deglobalisation is not here yet," Ossa said.

"The data suggest that goods continue to be produced through complex supply chains, but that the extent of these chains may have plateaued, at least in the short run," he added.

Noting the dangers of global economic fragmentation, Okonjo-Iweala said countries should strengthen the global trading framework by avoiding protectionism.

"The global economy, and in particular poor countries, will struggle to recover without a stable, open, predictable, rules-based and fair multilateral trading system," she said.

AFP



A file photo shows containers on ships at the Port of Los Angeles, California (AFP)

US trade deficit narrows to lowest level in 3 years

Washington, US – An increase in exports helped to reduce the overall US trade deficit in August to the smallest since late 2020, according to government data.

The trade gap shrank to \$58.3bn, down nearly 10% from July's revised figure of \$64.7bn, said the Commerce Department.

Analysts had expected a smaller change in deficit and the latest numbers showed exports rose \$4.1bn to \$256bn in August. Imports slipped by \$2.3bn from July to \$314.3bn.

While consumer spending has helped to boost US trade, analysts have warned that this could weaken following steep interest rate hikes by the central bank over the past year – aimed at lowering inflation and cooling demand.

"Trade flows have slowed overall," economist Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics told AFP.

"But quarter-to-date, exports

are up and imports are down, suggesting some softening in domestic demand," she added.

The labor market remains strong and households are still spending.

But Farooqi warned that there could be a slowdown in growth later this year if the job market cools "more materially," weighing on demand for goods and services.

Meanwhile as global growth weakens, including in the United States' major trading partners following monetary policy tightening, exports could take a hit as well.

In August, most of the rise in exports came from shipments of goods, in particular industrial supplies such as crude oil, according to the Commerce Department. Imports of goods, fell on the back of a decline in consumer items and products such as semiconductors.

AFP

Inflation battle will take time, top ECB official says

Frankfurt, Germany – Efforts to bring down inflation will take time, a senior European Central Bank official said, warning that the eurozone had yet to fully feel the impact of higher interest rates.

"While inflation continues to decline, it is still expected to remain too high for too long," ECB vice-president Luis de Guindos said at a conference in Cyprus.

The ECB last month raised interest rates for a 10th consecutive time in a bid to cool consumer prices, taking its benchmark deposit rate to a record high of four percent.

Eurozone inflation eased to 4.3% in September, its lowest level in almost two years, fuelling hopes that ECB's aggressive hiking cycle has come to an end.

De Guindos reiterated that the bank's next moves would be "data-dependent" and said the impact of the ECB's monetary policy tightening was still trickling down to the real economy.

"A substantial share of the



Luis de Guindos

transmission from financing conditions to the real economy is expected to still be in the pipeline," he said. Real estate activity has slowed for example as credit becomes more expensive, he said. But for the economy as a whole, "the bulk of the impact of our tightening is expected to materialise only in the course of this year and thereafter."

According to the ECB, its key interest rates have now reached levels that, "maintained for a sufficiently long duration", will make "a substantial contribution" to returning inflation to the bank's two percent target.

AFP

IMF, World Bank to tackle climate goals among reforms at annual meetings

Washington, US – The World Bank and International Monetary Fund will tackle the thorny issue of institutional reform at their upcoming annual meetings in Morocco this week.

The two international financial institutions are looking to scale up and retool to pursue ambitious global climate goals, while continuing to support emerging market and developing economies struggling to service rising debt levels.

This year's gathering of world leaders will take place in the city of Marrakesh, just weeks after a devastating earthquake in the region left close to 3,000 people dead.

It is the first such meeting to be held on the African continent for half a century, something underscored by IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva during a speech Thursday in the city of Abidjan in Ivory Coast.

During her speech, Georgieva noted that the world was head-



Pedestrians walk past a billboard announcing the World Bank and IMF annual meetings, on the side of the IMF headquarters in Washington, DC, on Thursday (AFP)

ing into the annual meetings in much better economic shape than many analysts had predicted.

"The world economy has shown remarkable resilience,"

she said in prepared remarks, pointing to strong demand for services and tangible progress against high inflation.

"This increases the chances for a soft landing for the global

economy," she added, referring to the prospect of lowering inflation through interest rate hikes while avoiding a damaging recession.

Georgieva also called on

member countries to "bolster" funding levels through an increase in the quotas they pay.

The United States, which has a blocking minority at the fund, has indicated it would back an across-the-board increase in quotas – a move which would leave the overall voting power of member countries unchanged.

The Fund is also looking to replenish popular concessionary lending facilities for low- and middle-income countries which have been exhausted by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Georgieva said.

She added that the IMF will consider changes to its management structure to elevate the voices of developing economies.

"I am looking forward to our members agreeing to a third African Chair at our Executive Board," she said, backing plans to expand the IMF's 24-person management board to add an additional seat for African countries.

AFP

US auto workers' union reports progress, holds off on strike expansion

New York, US – Citing last-minute progress in talks, the head of the US auto workers' union said that the labor group would maintain its current strike but not expand it to other plants this week.

United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain hailed a "breakthrough" concession from General Motors in response to another threatened expansion of the three-week partial stoppage.

Fain maintained the possibility of escalating the strike further down the road, but did not add any new plants to the target list after announcing prior expansions the last two Fridays follow-

ing the initial stoppage on September 15.

"Here's the punchline: Our strike is working," Fain said in a webcast update. "But we're not there yet."

Fain said GM has "leapfrogged" Detroit rivals Ford and Stellantis in agreeing "in writing" to include the auto giant's electric battery plants under the UAW's national agreement.

GM has three battery plants under its Ultium Cells joint venture with Korea's LG Energy Solution in the states of Tennessee, Michigan and Ohio, with one of the plants not slated to come on



Members of the UAW pickett outside of the Michigan Parts Assembly Plant in Wayne, Michigan, on September 26, 2023 (AFP)

line until 2024, according to Ultium's website.

What the agreement means

in terms of how workers at these facilities will be compensated and whether the pay and bene-

fits will match those of conventional jobs was not immediately clear from Fain's statement.

Previously, auto company officials have said they were unable to set terms for the plants because they are joint ventures and not solely under the purview of the Detroit auto giants.

Following Fain's presentation, a UAW press release was headlined, "UAW wins just transition at General Motors."

Fain said GM's shift addresses the worry that that the transition to electric vehicles (EV) will lead to the replacement of high-paid conventional auto jobs with lower-paid EV posts in what the

labor leader has called a "race to the bottom."

GM's statement did not directly comment on the EV battery facilities.

"Negotiations remain ongoing, and we will continue to work towards finding solutions to address outstanding issues," GM said. "Our goal remains to reach an agreement that rewards our employees and allows GM to be successful into the future."

Labor relations expert Harry Katz characterized the EV concession from GM as significant given that much of the EV supply chain is not unionized.

"There are positive signs that

this will settle in the not too distant future," said Katz, a professor at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

Fain plans to attend a rally at Ford's Chicago plant, along with other labor leaders and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson.

Wearing a t-shirt with the slogan "Eat the Rich," Fain reviewed the state of play, with each of the companies in many cases offering slightly different response to key union demands.

Fain said the union is being "strategic" in using the threat of more stoppages to win a better contract.

AFP

Exhibition on Fire, Safety and Security to be held in Muscat from October 9



Oman's Only and Most Comprehensive Exhibition on Fire, Safety and Security, will be inaugurated by Major General Abdullah Ali Hamad al Harthi, assistant inspector general of Police and Customs for Operations, Royal Oman Police, on October 9.

The exhibition will be held on

October 9 and 10, from 9am to 6pm at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Muscat, a press release said.

OFSEC in its 7th Edition will bring together over 90+ exhibitors from over 20 countries who will showcase their avant-garde solutions, latest technologies, cutting edge innovations, cost-effective products and services to meet the requirements of governments, businesses, industrial and commercial entities, aviation, construction, infrastructure, transportation,



manufacturing, oil and gas and utilities sectors.

OFSEC is designed to meet the needs of the local, regional and international markets by linking practitioners, suppliers, distributors and manufacturers from the fire, safety and security industry, with key decision makers from the government and private sectors making it a definitive networking platform, where new projects and partnerships are initiated and visionary objectives are implemented. This event also aims to create synergy and

strengthen the collaboration between the authorities and the industries.

The Event will lay the foundation and be the gateway to the current and future market trends in the fire, safety and security sectors, for the industry professionals to communicate, share ideas, identify solutions, to operate effectively and efficiently and stay abreast with the latest global trends. OFSEC will confluence and strengthen local and international business engagement and encourage investment.

TRA tests reveal unparalleled speed in Ooredoo's 5G

There is fast, there is superfast, and then there is Ooredoo's ultrafast 5G. During tests recently conducted by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), Ooredoo's 5G reached unparalleled and record-high download and upload speeds of up to 596Mbps in Nizwa Souq and 684Mbps in Jabal Akhdar.

During the TRA tests, the company successfully demonstrated a superb 5G network performance and its ability to make the Internet more accessible to customers in remote areas, especially businesses looking to improve their efficiency and productivity.

Ooredoo's 5G boosts reliable connectivity and provides an excellent, hassle-free, and uninterrupted online experience for anyone, anywhere.

On top of the ultrafast 5G data speed of dreams, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can combine ultrafast speed internet with a Maktabi plan.

Ooredoo's one-stop fixed-line and mobile communication solution supports SMEs in running and growing their businesses, while Maktabi was recently further upgraded with many innovative solutions for efficient business management. For example, think of Microsoft 365, CCTV, Tally ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) Software.

"Our increased 5G coverage results in increased connectivity which, together with 5G-powered digital capabilities, can transform how entities, especially businesses, operate while future speeds are expected to increase even further," said Saied al Lawati, Director of Business Marketing and ICT Solutions at Ooredoo. "Although our 5G network upgrades the digital worlds of all our customers, our primary target audience in areas like Nizwa Souq and Jabal Akhdar is the corporate sector, including small and medium enterprises."

MG Oman introduces more savings in maintenance

MG Oman, a leading automotive brand in the region, has revamped its periodic maintenance services to offer MG vehicle owners even greater value. The enhanced maintenance services are designed to provide top-notch care and attention, now with the added benefit of increased savings for customers.

With a wide network of 14 service centers across Oman and 98% availability of genuine parts, MG Oman ensures complete peace of mind. The focus on customer savings is part of MG Oman's commitment to delivering high-quality service without compromising on standards.

The reliable service from experienced professionals, increased availability of service and parts around the region, and quick service with minimal downtime further enhance the value proposition.

The company advises a regular service interval for MG vehicles at either 10,000km or every six months, whichever occurs first. This regimen connects customers with our proficient team of technicians who meticulously

evaluate the vehicle's performance based on a rigorous checklist.

Periodic maintenance services stand as an essential practice in preserving a vehicle's seamless operation, promoting peak performance, prolonging its longevity, and safeguarding its resale value. This underscores MG Oman's unwavering commitment to providing top-tier care for all vehicles.

Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE said, "Our commitment towards quality and affordability is unwavering. At MG, we are dedicated to providing the utmost customer satisfaction. With our enhanced maintenance services, MG owners can now enjoy exceptional care for their vehicles while also benefiting from significant savings."

MG is a British-born automotive brand established in 1924, known for its historic models, awards and achievements throughout the past 99 years. MG was founded by William Morris and Cecil Kimbers and has one of the oldest car club in the automotive industry.

Best known for its two-seat



open sports cars, MG also produced saloons and coupes. Since its acquisition of MG, SAIC MOTOR, as a Global Top 500 company, has opened a new chapter for this British icon.

MG is at the forefront of the introduction of innovative technologies and new energy vehicles for car buyers.

MG Motor is one of the leading automotive brands in Oman with a wide range of products, including sedans, SUVs, and 4WDs. The company has 14 showrooms and 14 service centers across the country, ensuring easy access to customers. Recently voted as Oman's Most Trusted Brand in the Automotive Sedan and SUV category, MG Motor prides itself on its commitment to quality and customer satisfaction.

MHD ACERE, the distributor of MG in Oman, is committed towards the growth of MG brands in the sultanate with a motto of enhanced customer delight and world-class after-sales services. A dedicated network and round-the-clock support have established MHD ACERE as a reliable name in the industry.

Dubai chef Vanessa Bayma brings exciting culinary concepts to Oman, Saudi, UAE

Renowned chef Vanessa Bayma has launched a range of new hospitality projects - from California to Oman - to exhibit her culinary prowess.

Since first starting work at the tender age of 13, Vanessa Bayma has always been called to the kitchen. Inspired by the vibrant cooking of her passionate Sicilian and Brazilian grandmothers, chef Bayma has carved out an impressive 20-year career in the hospitality industry, working as an executive chef, catering chef, and renowned F&B consultant, as well as a private chef to HNWIs, celebrities, and royal families in the Mediterranean, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

Now, chef Bayma's culinary flair and unique flavour combinations are finding new audiences, as the acclaimed professional brings her nous to four hotly anticipated openings and menu launches in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Oman, and the US.

As part of her role as Brand Executive Chef for Toss & Co, chef Bayma has also been busy relaunching the menus for the Dubai-born fast-casual restaurant group with healthy eating at its heart. With three outlets in Dubai, the brand will soon be expanding into Saudi Arabia and Oman, a release stated.

"Toss & Co is all about serving feel-good food that nourishes the body and nurtures the soul. With a focus on great-tasting dishes



that are convenient, affordable and good for you, it's a food philosophy that is close to my heart. I'm delighted to be working with Toss & Co. to help bring their culinary vision to life in Dubai and soon across the GCC," says chef Bayma.

Culinary revival in Oman

A project that has been 14 months in the making, Revival is soon to open its doors in Oman. For this high-end restaurant situated in the exclusive Muscat hills, chef Bayma has advised on the kitchen design and curated the menu development, hosting on-site training of the culinary team and guiding the passionate owners in the direction of their offerings. "I'm excited to see Revival come to life, bringing a new level of dining to the Omani capital," she says.

While these exciting hospitality projects take flight, chef Bayma continues to fly the flag for exceptional event experiences in Dubai. Chef Bayma and her team at CBC are available to hire for private chef experiences for villa parties, yachts, and exclusive events.

Saal comes to Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, chef Bayma has been instrumental in the opening of Saal, a chic new all-day restaurant in Al-Andalus, Jeddah. The

celebrated chef lent her expertise to the design of the kitchen and the menus, training the kitchen team and setting the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the restaurant.

"With a focus on beautiful sharing boards laden with hummus, labneh and figs, alongside virtuous juices and smoothies, Saal exemplifies my commitment to fresh, flavourful produce, simply prepared and beautifully presented," says Bayma.

From Al Ain to LA

It's not every day a UAE success story makes it all the way to the US. Al Ain's Reverse Café is bounding onto the California culinary scene, when it opens in Los Angeles at the end of the year. In order to translate the Al Ain favourite to the American market, chef Bayma has been tasked with adding a Californian spin to the menu.

Local standouts include luscious vegan cheesecakes and fruit-forward desserts that will work a treat in the LA heat. Stay tuned for details on this exciting international expansion.

"It's been such a treat to help bring the Reverse concept to California," Bayma stated.

"All of the things we love about the original Al Ain menu - the brilliant levantine flavours, the icy cold lattes - are perfectly suited to the warm Los Angeles climate."



Jazz legends to perform at Royal Opera House

The Royal Opera House Muscat is set to host a captivating jazz concert featuring two eminent musicians, Igor Butman, Russia's premier jazz artist, and Randy Brecker, a 7-time Grammy winner from the USA, on October 11 and 12 at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts (ROHMA).

Joined by four other renowned musicians, the sextet's performance will draw inspiration from diverse musical giants, including Bruce Springsteen, Frank Sinatra, and Chick Corea, according to ROHM.

This musical treat will unfold in the cosy ambiance of ROHMA's 500-seat auditorium, ensuring an intimate setting ideal for jazz enthusiasts. ROHM also highlighted a study from Johns Hopkins University suggesting that jazz not only heightens creativity but can also enhance memory, mood, and verbal skills.

Emphasising its commitment to bridging cultural divides, the opera house said, 'These dynamic jazz concerts over two nights exemplify how music fosters unity. We remain steadfast in our mission to showcase global talent right here in Oman.'



Igor Butman

ment to bridging cultural divides, the opera house said, 'These dynamic jazz concerts over two nights exemplify how music fosters unity. We remain steadfast in our mission to showcase global talent right here in Oman.'

The opera house is dedicated to creating bridges between countries and cultures and to providing a platform for incredible international artist to perform in Oman.

WORLD IN SHOCK AFTER ATTACKS ON ISRAEL

Iran and Yemen’s Huthis hailed Hamas, while the West, EU and India condemned the attack on Israel

Paris, France - Countries around the world have condemned a wave of Palestinian attacks on Israel by land, sea and air that have left at least 40 dead and hundreds wounded on Saturday, according to Israeli medics.

“We are at war,” Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, vowing severe retaliation after the surprise assault by the Palestinian fighter group Hamas. Here is a roundup of the reactions:

United States

The United States condemned the attack by Hamas fighters against Israel.

“The United States unequivocally condemns the unprovoked attacks by Hamas against Israeli civilians,” a White House statement said, adding that National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan was in close contact with Israeli officials. “We stand firmly with the government and people of Israel and extend our condolences for the Israeli lives lost in these attacks,” it added.

Iran

A senior adviser to Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expressed support for the attack, calling it a ‘proud operation’. ‘We support this operation,’ Yahya Rahim Safavi said, quoted by ISNA news agency.

Safavi expressed backing for the Palestinian fighters ‘until the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem’. At a parliament session on Saturday, Iranian lawmakers chanted ‘Down with Israel’, ‘Down with America’ and ‘Welcome Palestine’, according to a video published by the Tasnim news agency.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry



People try to extinguish fire on cars following a rocket attack from the Gaza Strip in Ashkelon, southern Israel, on Saturday (AFP)

said: “The Kingdom calls for an immediate halt to the escalation between the two sides, protection of civilians, and self-control. The Kingdom is reminded of its repeated warnings of the dangers of an explosive situation as a result of the continued occupation and deprivation of the Palestinian people of their legitimate rights.”

UN

The UN’s human rights chief Volker Turk said: “I call for an immediate stop to the violence,

and appeal to all sides and key countries in the region to de-escalate to avoid further bloodshed.” He said he was ‘deeply concerned at reports that Israeli civilians have been taken hostage’.

EU

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said: “I unequivocally condemn the attack carried out by Hamas against Israel.”

“It is terrorism in its most despicable form. Israel has the right to defend itself against

such heinous attacks,” she said.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said ‘this horrific violence must stop immediately. Terrorism and violence solve nothing. The EU expresses its solidarity with Israel in these difficult moments’. He added: “News of civilians taken as hostages in their homes or to Gaza are appalling. This is against international law. Hostages must be released immediately.”

Russia

Russia’s foreign ministry called

for an ‘immediate ceasefire’.

“We call on the Palestinian and Israeli sides to immediately cease fire, renounce violence, show the necessary restraint and - with the help of the international community - establish a negotiation process aimed at establishing a comprehensive, lasting and long-awaited peace,” ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Ukraine

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, whose country is

fending off a Russian invasion, said Israel had an ‘indisputable’ right to defend itself.

“Terror is always a crime, not just against one country or specific victims, but against humanity as a whole,” he said.

Turkey

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged Israel and Palestinians to avoid further escalation of violence.

“We invite all parties to act reasonably and to stay away from impulsive steps that raise

tensions,” said Erdogan, who strongly supports the Palestinian cause.

France

France expressed ‘full solidarity with Israel and the victims’ and underscored ‘its absolute rejection of terrorism and its commitment to Israel’s security’.

President Emmanuel Macron said he ‘firmly condemns’ the attacks.

Germany

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said Israel ‘has our full solidarity’ and ‘the right, guaranteed by international law, to defend itself against such attacks’.

Britain

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said he was ‘shocked’ by the attacks.

“Israel has an absolute right to defend itself,” he said.

India

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said his country stood ‘in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour’.

“Deeply shocked by the news of terrorist attacks in Israel,” Modi said.

Yemen

In Yemen, Huthis who control the capital Sanaa expressed their support for ‘the heroic jihadist operation’.

In a statement published on the website of the Huthi-controlled SABA news agency, the Iran-aligned fighter group said the attack ‘revealed the weakness, fragility and impotence’ of Israel.

It added that this operation ‘is a battle of dignity, pride, and defense’.

AFP



Part of a group of migrants sit on the pier following the arrival of the Spanish Civil Guard vessel at island of Tenerife, Spain, on Thursday (AFP)

More than 900 migrants arrive on Canary Islands

Tenerife, Spain - More than 900 migrants have reached Spain’s Canary Islands in several boats over the past 24 hours after crossing from west Africa, the country’s maritime rescue service said on Friday.

Their arrival came as European Union leaders met in Granada in southern Spain, with the thorny issue of migration in focus due to the recent surge in arrivals on the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Five boats carrying a total of 526 people arrived at El Hierro, the smallest and most westerly of the Canary Islands, Spain’s maritime rescue service said.

Another two boats arrived in Tenerife and three on Gran Canaria, bringing the total to 908 people, among them women and children.

Late on Friday a rescue service spokesman said two other boats with around 150 people on board were on their way to El Hierro.

The Canaries have experienced a surge in migrant arrivals in recent days as smugglers take advantage of calm weather to try to ferry people to the archipelago, located in the Atlantic Ocean off the northwest coast of Africa. At their nearest point, the islands are 100km (60 miles) from Morocco.

A boat carrying 280 migrants landed on El Hierro on Tuesday, the largest number to arrive in the archipelago in a single vessel.

Over 1,200 migrants have arrived over the past week on the tiny island, which is home to 11,000 people, overwhelming its social services, officials said.

AFP

Train cars massing at N Korea, Russia border

Seoul, South Korea - Train traffic between North Korea and Russia has spiked dramatically following a recent summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin, indicating a ‘likely’ transfer of arms, according to a new report by Washington-based analysts Beyond Parallel.

High-resolution satellite imagery reveals at least 70 freight cars at North Korea’s border Tumangang Rail Facility, the group said on Friday, a number described as ‘unprecedented’ even when compared to pre-COVID levels.

No more than 20 cars had been seen in the railway over the previous five years, the report



This file photo shows Vladimir Putin greeting Kim Jong Un at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia’s Amur region on September 13 (AFP)

said.

The flurry of activity ‘likely indicates North Korea’s supply of arms and munitions to Russia’,

the report concludes, while adding that tarps covering the shipping containers made it impossible to ‘conclusively identify’

Satellite imagery reveals at least 70 freight cars at North Korea’s border Tumangang Rail Facility

their contents.

The analysis comes a day after CBS News cited an unnamed US official as saying North Korea had begun transferring artillery to Russia for use in its war in Ukraine.

Last month’s face-to-face meeting between Putin and Kim

sparked widespread concern among Kyiv’s allies over the possibility of a potential arms deal.

North Korea, which the US has previously accused of supplying shells to Russia’s Wagner Group, is a mass producer of conventional weaponry and is known to be sitting on large stocks of Soviet-era war material - albeit in unknown condition.

Russia has ramped up production of shells this year to a forecast 2.5mn, but analysts have suggested that could fall short of its needs on the battlefield. Moscow’s forces are firing about 60,000 rounds per day, according to Ukrainian figures.

AFP

Iran media slam Mohammadi Nobel Peace Prize win

Tehran, Iran - Media in Iran on Friday lambasted jailed rights campaigner Narges Mohammadi who won the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize, saying she had ‘collaborated with terrorist groups’ and committed ‘anti-Iranian activities’.

The 51-year-old journalist and activist has spent much of the past two decades on multiple charges, including spreading anti-state propaganda and committing acts against national security.

Most recently, she has been incarcerated since November 2021.

Foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani called the move to award Mohammadi the Peace Prize ‘biased and political’.

Iranian media also lashed out at both her and the award.

The official IRNA news agency criticised the Nobel Committee for awarding ‘a

woman who collaborated with terrorist groups’ and who is ‘unknown in her own country, particularly among Iranian women’.

It said awarding Mohammadi the Peace Prize was an ‘interventionist act’ meant to ‘politicise the concept of human rights’.

Tasnim news agency called her a ‘security convict’ who committed ‘subversive’ activities, and said the Nobel Peace Prize had a history of being handed to ‘criminals’.

Mehr published a column by ultraconservative analyst Mo-



Narges Mohammadi (AFP)

hammad Imani lambasting the award.

Western governments ‘pay one person the equivalent of a million euros and set a trap for thousands of mercenaries ready to betray their country,’ he said.

Mohammadi had expressed support for the protest movement which rocked Iran following the September 16, 2022, death in police custody of Mahsa Amini.

AFP



Members of the forensic police enter the Guayas 1 prison in Guayaquil, Ecuador, on Friday (AFP)

Ecuador: Suspects in assassination of candidate killed in prison

Guayaquil, Ecuador - Six Colombian suspects in the August assassination of Ecuador presidential candidate and anti-corruption crusader Fernando Villavicencio were killed in prison on Friday, officials said, just a week to a key election run-off.

Right-wing President Guillermo Lasso, who is on a private trip to New York and was due in South Korea on Saturday for an official visit, called off his foreign trip to immediately return to Ecuador to handle the incident.

The SNAI prisons authority announced that ‘an event occurred’ in the Guayas 1 prison in Guayaquil ‘resulting in six dead people’.

It later clarified the deceased were ‘of Colombian nationality and accused of the murder of former presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio’.

Villavicencio, a 59-year-old journalist, was gunned down on August 9 as he left a campaign rally in the capital Quito days

ahead of the first round vote, 11 days to the first round of voting.

After news broke of the prison deaths, Lasso said he was returning home.

“In the next few hours I will return to Ecuador to attend to this emergency. Neither complicity nor cover-up, here the truth will be known,” Lasso said on X, formerly Twitter.

The public prosecutor’s office said that its agents, along with police and the military, were ‘executing security protocols... in light of the disturbance that occurred Friday afternoon’.

It added in a statement on X that ‘in the coming hours, specialised military personnel will carry out the first raids and reconnaissance of Cellblock 7, where the incidents originated, to take control of the situation’.

Authorities have provided no further details about the killings, which come just days before the second round of voting in the presidential election on October 15.

AFP

US senators arrive in China seeking meeting with Jinping

Shanghai, China - A bipartisan delegation of US lawmakers led by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer arrived in China on Saturday, the latest high-level US officials to visit China as Washington seeks to ease tensions with Beijing.

Schumer is set to meet with senior officials in Shanghai before heading to Beijing, where Bloomberg has reported his delegation is seeking a meeting with President Xi Jinping.

The delegation’s plane landed early afternoon in Shanghai, China’s economic powerhouse, where they were greeted by ambassador Nicholas Burns.

Accompanying Schumer is Republican Senator Mike Crapo, who represents the state of Idaho - home to chip giant Micron, currently in the cross-fire of US-China disputes over semiconductors.

China has said it welcomes the delegation and that it hopes it enhances the lawmakers’ ‘understanding’ of the country.

Beijing’s foreign ministry said the trip would ‘promote dialogue and exchanges between the legislative bodies of the two countries, and inject positive elements into the development of China-US relations’.

US media reported the group will seek to raise issues ranging from the climate for US businesses in China to human rights.

The delegation will also stop off in South Korea and Japan, *The New York Times* reported,



US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and other members of the delegation arrive at Shanghai Pudong International Airport in Shanghai on Saturday (AFP)

Beijing’s foreign ministry said the trip would promote dialogue and exchanges between the legislative bodies of the two countries, and inject positive elements into the development of China-US relations

citing the senators’ offices.

It is the latest in a series of visits by US officials to China, as both sides seek to defuse tensions across a range of security and economic issues that have been at their highest levels in years.

Secretary of State Antony

Blinken, Treasury and Commerce Secretaries Janet Yellen and Gina Raimondo, as well as Climate Envoy John Kerry, have all visited China this year.

And President Joe Biden Friday said he may meet Xi in San Francisco in November as Washington and Beijing push to

reset ties, but added that nothing is scheduled yet.

“There has been no such meeting set up, but it is a possibility,” Biden told journalists after reports that they were set to meet during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco.

Biden is set to host leaders from across the region on November 16 and 17 in the California city, and speculation has mounted that it could be the venue for a rapprochement.

The White House had begun making plans for a meeting on the sidelines of the summit in a

bid to stabilise relations, *The Washington Post* reported, quoting one official as saying ‘it’s pretty firm’.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is expected to visit Washington at some point ahead of the APEC summit.

Beijing however has not confirmed whether Xi will attend the summit or meet with his US counterpart. The White House has also declined to elaborate on a potential meeting with Xi.

The last time Biden and Xi met was in November 2022 on the sidelines of a summit in Bali.

AFP

18 migrants killed in Mexico bus crash

Mexico City, Mexico - A bus carrying migrants overturned in southern Mexico on Friday, leaving at least 18 passengers dead and 27 injured, authorities said - the latest fatal road crash involving US-bound migrants.

The dead, three of them minors, were from Venezuela and Haiti, according to a statement from the prosecutor’s office in Oaxaca state.

The accident happened at around dawn on a highway linking Oaxaca and the neighbouring state of Puebla, it said.

The injured were taken to hospital for treatment, it added.

Images released by state authorities showed the wreckage of the bus lying on its side on a highway winding through hills.

According to Mexico’s national immigration agency, 55



This photo released by Mexico’s Civil Protection shows the site of a bus accident in which at least 18 migrants were killed, in Cuacnopalan, Oaxaca State, Mexico, on Friday (AFP)

foreigners were on board the bus. Peruvians were also among the victims, it said.

Thousands of migrants from

different countries have been traveling across Mexico in buses, overcrowded trailers and atop freight trains in an attempt

to reach the US-Mexican border. They run the risk of fatal accidents, kidnapping by criminal groups and extortion by cor-

rupt officials.

More than 8,200 migrants have died or disappeared in the Americas since 2014, most of them while trying to reach the United States via Mexico, according to the International Organization for Migration.

The US-Mexican border is the ‘world’s deadliest migration land route’, with 686 deaths and disappearances in 2022, the IOM said last month.

On Sunday, at least 10 Cuban migrants were killed and 25 injured when a cargo truck carrying them overturned in the southern state of Chiapas. In early August, at least 18 people died and 23 were injured after a bus carrying local passengers and migrants plunged into a ravine in the state of Nayarit.

AFP

Deforestation down in Brazilian Amazon

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon fell by 59 per cent in September compared to the same month last year, official data showed, confirming a positive trend that began after President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva returned to power this year.

However, it hit new highs in the tropical savannah region known as the Cerrado, south of the Amazon, which has been hit by incursions from farming companies.

Some 590sqkm (230 square miles) were deforested last month in the Brazilian part of the world’s largest tropical forest, com-

pared to around 1,454sqkm in September 2022, according to satellite data collected by the National Institute for Space Research (INPE).

Veteran leftist Lula, who previously held office from 2003 to 2010, began his third term in January with a promise to make preserving the Amazon a priority and to do everything possible to eradicate illegal deforestation by 2030.

Under his far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), deforestation of the Amazon had jumped 75 per cent compared to the average of the previous decade.

AFP

Australia: Protesters rally against Aboriginal deaths behind bars

Melbourne, Australia - Protesters rallied on Saturday against the disproportionate number of Aboriginal Australians dying behind bars, highlighting their plight as the nation prepares for a historic Indigenous rights referendum.

Aboriginal Australians are among the most heavily incarcerated ethnic groups on the planet, according to official figures, and are far more likely to die in state custody than members of the general population.

The many disparities faced by Aboriginal communities have been put under the spotlight ahead of next weekend’s referendum, which will decide if Indigenous Australians are recognised in the constitution for the first time.

The proposal - dubbed the Indigenous Voice to Parliament - would also give First Nations peoples a greater say in national policymaking.

Despite being backed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, a string of high-profile celebrities and some of the country’s biggest businesses, recent polls suggest the so-called Voice is likely to fail.

Some Indigenous activists see the referendum as a compromise solution that does not go far enough to address historical wrongs.

With national debate increasingly dominated by the October 14 vote, the Black Sovereign Movement is instead urging the country to focus on more press-



An Australian national flag and an Aboriginal flag fly from masts next to tourists atop of the Sydney Harbour Bridge on Friday (AFP)

ing issues - such as Indigenous deaths in custody.

Independent Senator Lidia Thorpe told a rally of about 100

people in Melbourne on Saturday that the referendum was set up to ‘appease white guilt’.

“This is not about giving us

any rights at all. No rights,” said Thorpe, who is Indigenous.

Protester Julie Bain said the Voice was an ‘extremely weak’ and ‘divisive proposal’.

“It wasn’t needed to have a referendum,” she said. “There are much higher priorities.”

Demonstrators opened the Melbourne rally with the traditional burning of native plants, holding large photos of Aboriginal Australians who had died while incarcerated.

Similar rallies were organised in other cities such as Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide.

Although Indigenous Australians make up around two per cent of the population, they represent almost 30 per cent of the national prison muster.

A 2020 report by the Australian Institute of Criminology found First Nations people died in police custody at a rate more than six times higher than non-Indigenous.

Since 1991 more than 500 Aboriginal Australians have died in state custody, a trend lamented by the current centre-left government as a ‘national shame’.

PM casts vote

Recent surveys show about 60 per cent of Australians are against the Voice to Parliament, versus 40 per cent in support - a near reversal of the situation a year ago.

Opponents have derided the referendum as a stopgap meas-

ure that could taint the constitution while entrenching racial divisions.

Albanese, who cast his vote in Sydney on Saturday morning as part of early polling, has been scrambling to turn around sagging enthusiasm.

“This is a reminder that these opportunities do not come around every day,” he told reporters.

“(It is) a once-in-a-generation chance to recognise our First Australians in our nation’s founding document.”

Aboriginal Australians, who settled the continent around 60,000 years ago, carry the flame for some of the world’s oldest continuous cultures.

AFP

India flood: Army warns on stray munitions

At least 56 people are confirmed dead in floods that hit India’s northeastern state as of Saturday

Kolkata, India - At least 56 people are confirmed dead in floods that hit India’s northeast as of Saturday, with the army warning munitions washed away by the deluge posed a public safety risk.

Violent torrents struck Sikkim state on Wednesday after the sudden bursting of a high-altitude glacial lake.

Climate scientists warn that similar disasters will become an increasing danger across the Himalayas as global temperatures rise and ice melts.

“So far 26 bodies have been found in Sikkim,” state relief commissioner Anilraj Rai told AFP by phone.

Thirty more bodies had been recovered from the Teesta river basin by search and rescue teams downstream in neighbouring West Bengal state, Jalpaiguri district police superintendent K. Umesh Ganpat told AFP.

“The river stretches up to 86 kilometres,” he added. “The search operation is continuing.”

Among the dead are seven Indian army soldiers posted in Sikkim, which sits on India’s remote frontiers with Nepal and China and boasts a sizeable military presence.

Sixteen soldiers are among the more than 100 people still missing.

India’s defence ministry said in a statement that the floods had washed away ‘firearms and explosives’ from military



Residents walk along a street covered in mud and debris past damaged buildings in Rangpo on Friday, following a flash flood triggered by a high-altitude glacial lake burst (AFP)

The root cause (of glaciers melting faster) is climate change and this going to increase in the future. Similar glacial lake outbursts flood events are very likely

ARUN BHAKTA SHRESTHA

camp.

The army has ‘established lookout teams all along the river’ to recover loose ordnance, the ministry added.

Local media reports on Friday said that two people had been killed and four others in-

jured by a mortar shell that exploded while flowing through the flood waters in West Bengal.

Roads, bridges and telephone lines have been destroyed across much of the state, complicating evacuations

and efforts to communicate with thousands cut off from the rest of the country.

More than 1,200 houses had been damaged by the floods, according to the latest Sikkim government bulletin.

More than 2,400 people had

been rescued while nearly 7,000 others were taking shelter at makeshift relief camps set up at schools, government offices and guesthouses, the bulletin said.

Glaciers melting faster than ever

The water surge came after intense rainfall burst the high-altitude Lhonak Lake, which sits at the base of a glacier in peaks surrounding Kangchenjunga, which is the world’s third-highest mountain.

Water powered downstream, adding to a river already swollen by monsoon rains, damaging a dam and sweeping away houses.

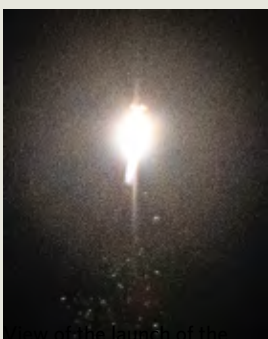
Himalayan glaciers are melting faster than ever due to climate change, exposing communities to unpredictable and costly disasters, according to the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) research group.

“The root cause is climate change and this going to increase in the future,” ICIMOD climate change specialist Arun Bhakta Shrestha told AFP.

“Similar glacial lake outbursts flood events are very likely.”

Earth’s average surface temperature has risen nearly 1.2 degrees Celsius since pre-industrial times but high-mountain regions around the world have warmed at twice that pace, climate scientists say.

AFP



Spanish MIURA 1 rocket in Mazagon, Spain, taken on Saturday (AFP)

Spain’s first private rocket successfully lifts off

Madrid, Spain - A Spanish company launched the country’s first private rocket on Saturday in a step towards bringing Spain into the exclusive club of space-faring nations.

The launch of the small MIURA1 rocket took place at 02:19am (0019 GMT) from a military base in the southern region of Andalusia, according to the company, PLD Space.

The company hailed the launch as ‘successful’ and said it had achieved all its ‘technical objectives’, with the rocket rising 46km (29 miles) above the Gulf of Cadiz. After five minutes in flight, it landed in the Atlantic Ocean, where PLD Space said it would send a team to recover it.

The launch was hailed as a ‘milestone’ by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez in a posting on social media.

“The launch of Miura 1, the first rocket built 100% with Spanish technology, has been successful, a milestone that positions Spanish research, development and innovation at the forefront of space transport,” he wrote on X.

AFP

A GOOD HARVEST



A farmer carries a bale of harvested rice in a field on the outskirts of Srinagar, India, on Saturday (AFP)

Namira becomes first Pakistani to travel into space

Washington, US - Adventurer Namira Salim became the first Pakistani to travel into space on Friday, riding aboard Virgin Galactic’s fifth successful flight in five months, the US company announced.

Salim, who previously traveled to both poles and has also parachuted over Mount Everest, was among the first customers to buy a ticket with billionaire Richard Branson’s space company after it was founded almost two decades ago. “I love my title ‘first Pakistani astronaut’, it’s like being a very special princess of the country. Maybe nicer than being a princess,” Salim told AFP back in 2012.

Virgin Galactic said Salim is also a resident of Monaco and the United Arab Emirates. That makes her the first person from Monaco and the first Emirati woman to travel to space.

American Ron Rosano and



Namira Salim (AFP)

Briton Trevor Beattie were also passengers on Friday’s trip, dubbed ‘Galactic 04’. Beth Moses, a Virgin Galactic employee, and two pilots were also aboard.

Unlike traditional vertical launches into space, Virgin Galactic utilises a specialised, twin-fuselage aircraft to carry the passenger vessel high in the sky.

The mothership then releases the spaceplane, which in turn engages its thrusters to soar into space at speeds approaching Mach-3.

AFP

Magnitude 6.3 earthquake kills 15 in western Afghanistan

Herat, Afghanistan - A magnitude 6.3 earthquake hit western Afghanistan on Saturday killing 15 and injuring dozens more, officials said, predicting the toll could rise after reports of landslides and victims trapped under collapsed buildings.

The United States Geological Survey said the epicentre was 40km (25 miles) northwest of the region’s largest city Herat, and was followed by seven aftershocks with magnitudes between 4.6 and 6.3.

Crowds of residents fled buildings in the city at around 11am (0630 GMT) as the quakes began, lasting just under three hours.

“We were in our offices and

suddenly the building started shaking,” 45-year-old Herat resident Bashir Ahmad told AFP.

“Wall plasters started to fall down and the walls got cracks, some walls and parts of the building collapsed.”

“I am not able to contact my family, network connections are disconnected. I am too worried and scared, it was horrifying,” he said.

Men, women and children stood out in the wide streets, away from tall buildings, in the moments after the first quake and remained wary of returning to homes as aftershocks continued. “The situation was very horrible, I have never experienced such a thing,” said 21-year-old



People gather on the streets in Herat on Saturday, following the magnitude 6.3 earthquake (AFP)

student Idrees Arsala, the last to safely evacuate his classroom as the quakes began.

In a video statement, National Disaster Management Authority spokesman Mullah Jan Sayeq said ‘around 40’ had been injured in tremors felt across three provinces, in addition to 15 killed.

“These are the preliminary numbers. There is the possibility the numbers could increase,” he said.

Earlier in the day he told AFP there had been landslides in nearby rural and mountainous areas.

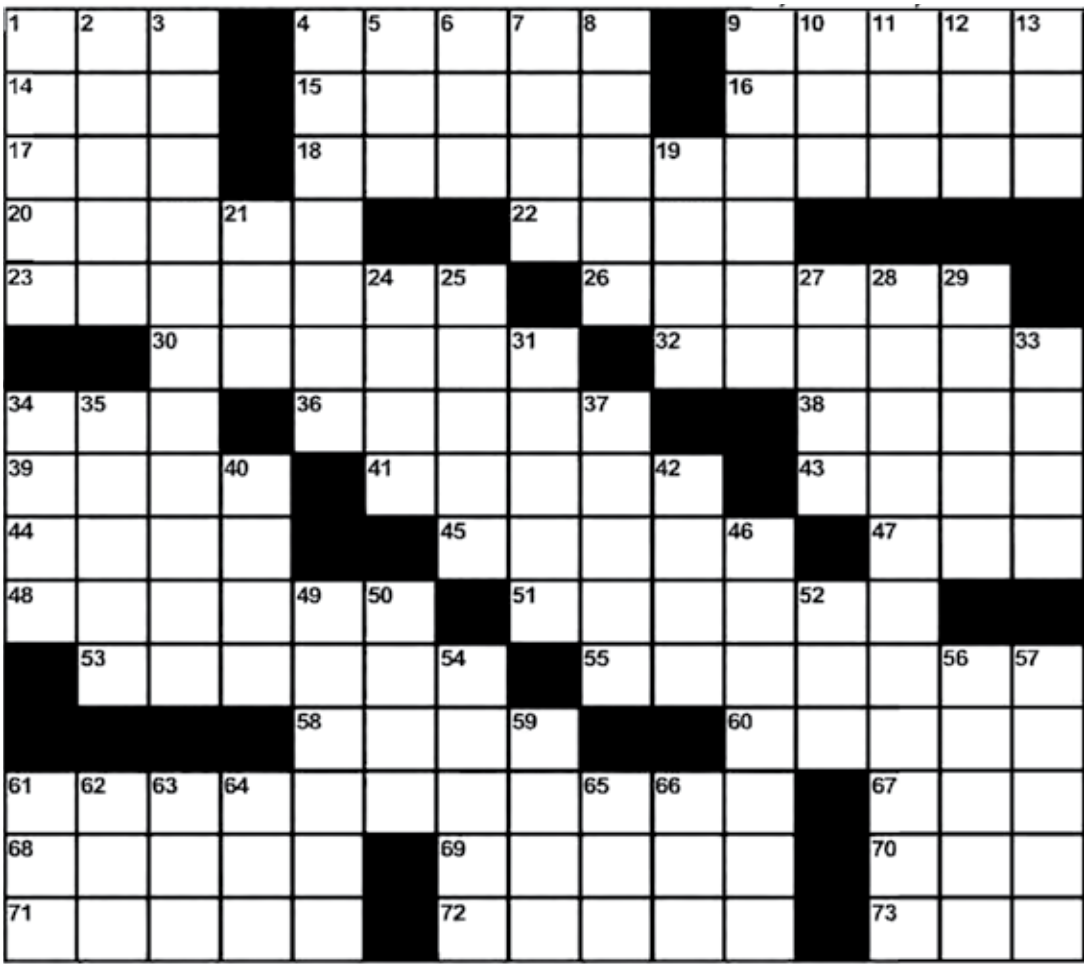
Public health director of Herat province Mohammad Taleb Shahid put the fatality figure slightly lower at 14, with 78 injured, but agreed the tally would likely rise.

“We have information that people are buried under rubble,” he told AFP.

Hundreds of fatalities were possible, according to a USGS preliminary report.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD

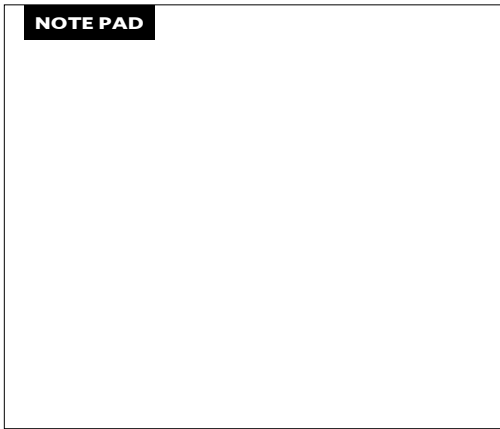


- ACROSS**
- 1) "Gaping" gullet
 - 4) Robin of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous"
 - 9) They measure up
 - 14) Lennon's mate
 - 15) Pool problem
 - 16) Slip the clutches of
 - 17) "Neither" go-with
 - 18) How to announce a boxing match
 - 20) Confuse
 - 22) Eyelid protuberance
 - 23) Makes impure
 - 26) Detonate
 - 30) Complied with commands
 - 32) Two out of 100?
 - 34) Paddle kin
 - 36) Tied the knot again
 - 38) Shelter for birds
 - 39) Stalag inmates
 - 41) Clear, as a cloudy windshield
 - 43) "Let it ride," to a proofer
 - 44) Bumpy gait
 - 45) Hindu dignitary
 - 4 7) Govt. cosmetics

- watchdog
- 48) Undresses
 - 51) "Holy" Ohio town
 - 53) Cleverly skillful
 - 55) Italian seaport
 - 58) Conspirators' plan
 - 60) Draw a conclusion
 - 61) One way to keep up
 - 67) .com relative
 - 68) Just plain bad
 - 69) Place to sweat
 - 70) Cells for women only
 - 71) Survived somehow
 - 72) Fashioned into a sphere
 - 73) Top of many rating scales
- DOWN**
- 1) Single-celled organism
 - 2) Battery post
 - 3) Verbatim
 - 4) Name-affixing tool
 - 5) Right-angle pipe
 - 6) Long ___ and far away ...
 - 7) Bird sounds
 - 8) Tests for weight
 - 9) Cylindrical and tapering
 - 10) Vestment for a priest
 - 11) Afghani coin, once
 - 12) Tokyo, way back when
 - 13) Mend with a needle

- 19) Court call, if tripled
- 21) "Ad" or "women's" fol-lower
- 24) Watched closely
- 25) Setting in "Les Miz"
- 27) Mythical monsters
- 28) "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand" go-with
- 29) Honored with a bash
- 31) Skim, as milk
- 3 3) _ new record
- 34) Makes a choice
- 35) Main blood vessel
- 37) Martial arts schools
- 40) Recipe directive
- 42) Elaborate party
- 46) Whirlybird landing place
- 49) Easy out, often
- 50) Farm storage unit
- 52) Bookcase locale, perhaps
- 54) Human trunk
- 56) Chicken's lack?
- 57) Nose or heart, e.g.
- 59) Old Russian ruler
- 61) Sink in the middle
- 62) Helium's atomic number

- 63) Terrestrial amphibian
- 64) British saloon
- 65) Bathroom fixture
- 66) 67 degrees, 30 minutes



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Try not to get involved in anything that confuses you today. It would only lead to frustration. This isn't a great day to learn new tasks or start new projects. Your mind won't be able to focus quickly on adapting to new methods or ideas. If you feel that you're uncertain about something, get it cleared up right away. Ask someone in the know what the deal is, and don't be worried about looking like you don't know what you're doing. Your pride shouldn't enter into it.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

There are always consequences for your actions, but today they might be the kind you can't predict, so make sure you listen very closely to what other people say. They'll give you all the clues you need to guess how the group will react once you announce your big decision. If you fear their reaction will be unfavorable, that doesn't mean you should change your mind. It just means you should be prepared to explain yourself. They won't take a simple "because I said so" for an answer.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Are you afraid of hearing something you don't want to hear or confused about what you'll do if you do hear what you want to hear? Waiting for news can be excruciating, but there's no getting around it. To distract yourself in the meantime, get in touch with someone who's been through what you're going through. Ask them about their experience and listen to the answer. Not only will it help the time go faster, you'll learn a lot that you can apply to your own life in the future.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You're finally getting a deeper understanding of a task that has been particularly challenging to you. You're getting a handle on things and feeling more empowered about what you need to do. This can be a wonderful day for you. Your power is growing. You're starting to think that you can pretty much overcome any obstacle that comes your way. And you know what? You're absolutely right.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You might be moving too quickly for others today. Your brain is firing on all cylinders, and not everyone is going to be able to keep up. But don't give it a second thought. Let other people go at the pace that feels the most comfortable to them. You can't adjust your timetable to suit the needs of others, and moving on without them won't create any tension. You just have to do what you have to do.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Getting too much attention could be dangerous for you right now. You aren't quite ready for a high level of scrutiny, so beg off making any major presentations today. There's no need to do anything before you're ready to do it, and no one will be pushing you. Don't try to be a star before you've got the material you need to back it up. Hang back and wait until you know you are ready for prime time. If you want to advance a project, just work on it some more.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

The idea of making some big changes in your life is very appealing to you right now, possibly even including a career change. But be careful not to assume that a new job will equal a new life. There's much more to it than that. A different daily monotony is still a daily monotony, no matter what the new title may be. It's important to add a healthy dose of reality to all your wishful thinking. Give this idea a bit more thought before acting on it.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Every goal you set for yourself doesn't have to be a big one. Who are you trying to impress? Everyone who needs to think you're a rock star already thinks it, so take a breather and just relax. Today, set a few smaller goals instead of one big one. And don't get upset if things don't progress at all. You're not in a race, no matter how much you'd like to be the first one finished. Focus your energy on smaller tasks that need to be done.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If you're being pulled and pushed back and forth by two people right now, you have to get out of the middle of it. They have their own issues, and they need to deal with them without you. You don't need the stress, and you certainly don't deserve the responsibility of fixing something that you didn't break. Tell them to count you out of the fight today, and keep yourself busy making some headway on your own goals.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Today, take the time to be grateful for where you are. You have so much good energy around you, and you know that wasn't always the case. The tough times are behind you, and it's a wonderful day to take a deep breath and relax. Take stock and do a mental inventory of the people who leave you feeling energized and good about yourself and the people who leave you feeling drained. Moving forward, make sure you choose to spend time with only positive influences.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Step out of reality when you have the chance and check in with your fantasy life. It's been stuck on pause for too long. You need to get back in there and fill in some blanks. Dream about where you'll be in a decade, fantasize about who you'll be with and what you'll be doing. There's no harm in blurring the line between reality and fantasy right now. In fact, it will make your reality all the clearer. Daydreaming can help your day go by.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

As much as you'd like to, you simply can't be friends with everyone, so why even try? It's not that you should write off certain people or be rude to people who don't fawn all over you. But you should stop wasting your energy trying to charm someone who just doesn't seem to get where you're coming from. Instead, focus your energy on the people who deserve your time and return the kindness and respect you show them.

02. How many legs does a jerry-munglum have?

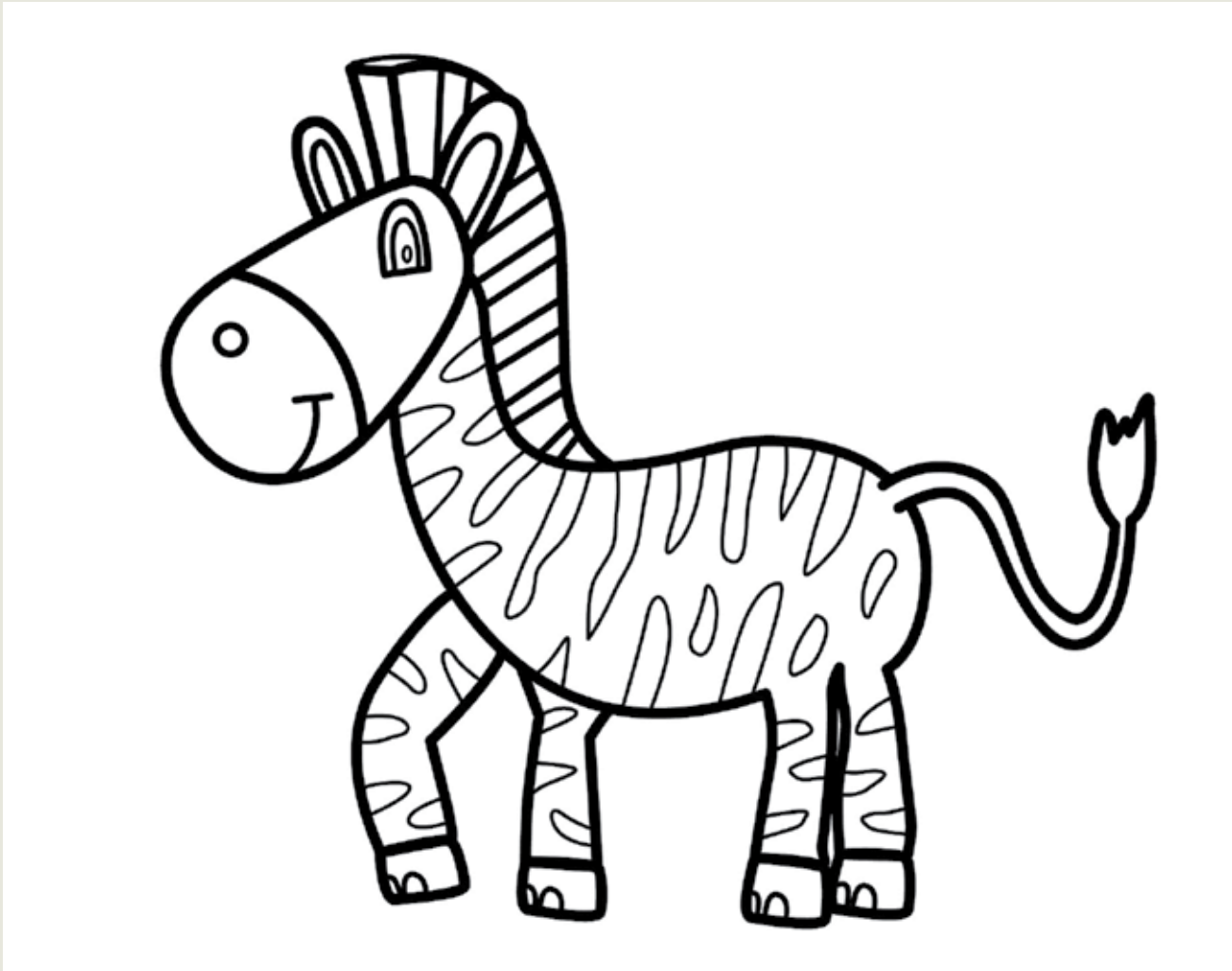
A. 2
B. 4
C. 6
D. 10 (8 true legs plus 2 pedipalps)

03. The women's singles final of the US Open Tennis Championships in 2021 was contested by two teenage athletes. Top teenage players were not uncommon earlier in the US Open's 141 year history, but when was the last women's teenage final before 2021?

A. 1999
B. 2004
C. 1982
D. 1921

Answers: 1.B 2.D 3.A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

S	Z	C	N
T	T	I	L
A	S	T	R
A	P	I	E

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

MARKRAM BLITZKRIEG

Record-setting South Africa defeat Sri Lanka

New Delhi, India - South Africa rewrote the record books on Saturday as they posted the highest ever World Cup total of 428 while Aiden Markram clubbed the fastest tournament century in just 49 balls in a 102-run victory over Sri Lanka.

The Proteas bettered the previous World Cup high of 417 made by Australia against Afghanistan at Perth in 2015.

Their 428-5 was also the ninth highest total in all one-day internationals.

Markram, who went on to make 106, beat the previous record for fastest World Cup century which was claimed by Ireland's Kevin O'Brien off 50 balls against England at Bengaluru in 2011.

His first 50 on Saturday came from 34 balls while he needed only 15 more deliveries to add the next 50.

Rassie van der Dussen (108) and Quinton de Kock (100) also hit centuries in the first World Cup match to feature three tons in the same innings.

Kusal Mendis, Charith Asalanka and skipper Dasun Shanaka all then hit half-centuries but Sri Lanka's reply was always going to be damage limitation.

"We wanted to win the game and that's what we did. I can't find fault with the batting. We



South Africa's Aiden Markram exults after scoring a century in their World Cup match against Sri Lanka in New Delhi on Saturday (AFP)

We wanted to win the game and that's what we did. I can't find fault with the batting. We were not quite clinical with the ball but we will take that confidence into the next game

TEMBA BAVUMA

were not quite clinical with the ball but we will take that confidence into the next game," said

South Africa skipper Temba Bavuma. For Sri Lanka, the figures made

for grim reading with two of their bowlers - Matheesha Pathirana (1-95) and Kasun Rajitha (1-90) - conceding more than 180 runs from 20 overs.

It was a remarkable display of big-hitting by a South African side who were skittled out for just 99 the last time they played at New Delhi's Arun Jaitley Stadium in October 2022.

"From a team like South

Africa, we expected 350 anyway in these conditions. If we'd managed to keep them to 370 it's manageable," said Shanaka.

"We had the momentum especially the way that Mendis and Asalanka played. But their total was a little too much for us."

De Kock, who is playing in his final international tournament, hit his 18th ODI century off 83 balls with 12 fours and three sixes.

De Kock put on 204 runs for the second wicket with Van der Dussen before being dismissed off the next ball he faced after reaching 100, top edging a delivery from Pathirana to Dhananjaya de Silva at mid-on.

Van der Dussen soon reached his fifth century in the format off 103 balls with 12 fours and three sixes.

AFP



Pat Cummins

'Chilled out' Aussies no longer angry young men, says Cummins

Chennai, India - Australia skipper Pat Cummins said Saturday his team are content go about their game "quietly", in contrast to the ultra-aggressive style of earlier Australian sides.

Five-time winners Australia kick off their World Cup campaign against hosts India in a much-awaited Sunday clash in Chennai.

Australia have long been known to play an aggressive brand of cricket with on-field sledging part and parcel of their game, but Cummins and company have displayed a softer version.

"It's more a reflection of who we are as a people. With every team you have different characters," Cummins told reporters.

"Our guys are pretty chilled out, so I am always proud saying the players out there in the field are similar to who they are off the field."

Asked about the in-your-face attitude of past greats, including the late Shane Warne and former captain Ricky Ponting, the fast bowler reflected on the team's more restrained posture.

"Times change, that's 20 years ago," he said. "That doesn't come naturally to our guys, we want to go about our work quietly."

However, the World Cup could prove a different ball game, he added.

"I think you're going to see some boys get fired up at different times. We're all passionate. We're all ridiculously competitive," he said.

"So, I never really mind if a couple of our boys are puffing the chests out and getting themselves into the contest."

Foreign teams on Indian soil must also contend with the home side's immense and impassioned fanbase, but Cummins said he was up to the challenge.

"The home crowd is going to be noisy and very one-sided which is nothing new. It's great," he said.

"It's always tough playing against someone on their home ground, but with that also comes pressure. A billion fans watching them closely, cheering them on."

Australia are waiting on a fitness check for Marcus Stoinis.



Bangladesh's Mehidy Hasan Miraz (L) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Afghanistan's Rashid Khan (AFP)

Mehidy stars as Bangladesh overwhelm Afghanistan

Dharamsala, India - Mehidy Hasan Miraz starred with both bat and ball as Bangladesh launched their World Cup campaign with a dominant six-wicket win over Afghanistan in Dharamsala on Saturday.

The off-spinner took 3-25 as Afghanistan were bowled out for just 156. Mehidy then made 57 after being dropped twice, with fellow 25-year-old Nojmul Hossain Shanto finishing on 59 not out as Bangladesh won with more than 15 overs to spare.

This match also saw Bangladesh captain Shakib Al Hasan inflict more World Cup damage on Afghanistan, the left-arm spinner taking 3-30

while his bowling changes yielded wickets.

Afghanistan, relatively well-placed at 47-1 and 112-2 after being sent into bat by Shakib, lost their last eight wickets for 44 runs.

"It's a great moment for me," said man of the match Mehidy.

"I was a little bit cautious in my mind early on while bowling but the captain (Shakib) told me to bowl at the right areas and told me to be consistent and that gave me confidence so credit goes to the captain."

As for his batting, he said: "I always play at number eight so it was a great opportunity to bat in the top order."

'Unfinished business' as India captain Rohit Sharma channels Tendulkar

Chennai, India - India skipper Rohit Sharma said Saturday that a World Cup win at home was "unfinished business" for his men, channelling the legendary Sachin Tendulkar's words before the 2011 triumph that capped his career.

The hosts open their campaign in the 50-over showpiece event against fellow big guns Australia in a much-awaited Sunday clash in Chennai.

India have suffered a world title drought since the 2013 Champions Trophy and last won the World Cup on home soil in 2011, led by M.S. Dhoni and featuring Tendulkar at the tail-end of his two-decade career.

Rohit, 36, remains one of India's biggest stars but time is running out for him to hoist his own trophy.

"You heard the great man say that 'until he wins the World Cup he has got a bit of unfinished business,'" Rohit told reporters.

"It's the same for us as well," he said. "It is the biggest prize that you can have in your career."

He added: "Luckily for us the seniors, they have played lot of cricket and know how to stay under that radar. And then leave



Rohit Sharma (L) with Rahul Dravid during a practice session in Chennai on Saturday (AFP)

a lot of things to the almighty. We need that luck in the tournament."

Dhoni's India won the title as hosts 12 years ago to add to their 1983 victory, but the team slipped to defeat in the 2015 and 2019 semi-finals under Virat Kohli.

Rohit replaced Kohli as captain in 2021 and led them through their semi-final loss in last year's

T20 World Cup.

"In my books, the 50-over World Cup is the biggest sporting event in cricket history," said Rohit. "This is the biggest event that I will be part of and being the captain is a huge honour," he added. "It was always a dream to be part of the World Cup and then now to be part of the team and then the captain, it's a big

deal for me."

But the job comes with the expectations of a billion fans in cricket-mad India who expect nothing less than a second tournament win at home.

"How you handle that pressure, handle those moments during the game...and not to let that pressure come on to the team" was top of Rohit's mind, he said.

The remarkable rise of Pakistan match-winner Shakeel

Hyderabad, India - Saud Shakeel was nowhere near World Cup selection three months ago but a thrilling half-century in Friday's win over the Netherlands underlined his remarkable and rapid rise up the cricketing ladder.

Shakeel actually made his ODI debut in England in 2021 but he was largely out of the reckoning until he cracked an impressive double century in a

Test in Sri Lanka in July.

The diminutive 28-year-old, originally seen as a Test specialist, was included in Pakistan's squad for the three-match series against Afghanistan in August but he played only one match where he scored just nine.

The team management, however, led by strategy and analytics manager Hasan Cheema and manager Rehan-ul Haq, backed

him and convinced chief selector Inzamam-ul-Haq to retain him for the Asia Cup.

Pakistan crashed out of the tournament with defeats against India and Sri Lanka in the tournament.

Perhaps not playing in a single match did Shakeel a favour - he was included in the 15-man World Cup squad in place of all-rounder Faheem Ashraf.

Shakeel showed glimpses of what he can do in the warm-up match against New Zealand with a gritty 53-ball 75.

On Friday, he became the toast of Pakistan's batting with an innings-reviving 52-ball 68 studded with a six and nine boundaries, guiding Pakistan to a fighting 282 after a precarious 38-3.

"I am very pleased to help my

team win," said Shakeel at the post-match ceremony. "I tried to follow my basics and be positive for my team despite having early nerves."

Shakeel added 120 for the fourth wicket with Mohammad Rizwan who also scored 68.

Pakistan then dismissed the Netherlands for 205 in 41 overs to kick-start their World Cup campaign with an 81-run win.



Pakistan's Saud Shakeel plays a shot during his knock of 68 against the Netherlands in Hyderabad on Friday (AFP)

BEST EVER RAID

India surge past 100 medals in Asian Games but Kabaddi kerfuffle mars milestone

Hangzhou, China - India surged past 100 medals at the Asian Games in Hangzhou on Saturday but the milestone was overshadowed by their controversial gold in a fractious kabaddi final suspended for an hour.

The curtain comes down on the biggest Asian Games in history, boasting 12,000 athletes, on Sunday after two weeks of competition across 40 sports.

Saturday was the most action-packed of the fortnight, with gold medals up for grabs in 24 sports including football, cricket, badminton and hockey.

In early action on a grey and soggy day in Hangzhou, India swept up two golds in archery and another in women's kabaddi.

The Indian team have surpassed all expectations back home by breaching the century mark of medals.

It bodes well for Paris, which is less than 10 months away.

But what should have been a day of celebration came with a large dollop of controversy.

The men's kabaddi final against Iran descended into chaos and was suspended, before India finally sealed the title.

Kabaddi is a tag-meets-rugby contact team sport rooted in Indian mythology and said to date back 5,000 years.

The final was locked at 28-28 with just over a minute left when India went on a crucial "raid" for points, with both teams claiming they should get the decision.

That sparked a prolonged video review, then a standoff and the suspension of the final, as numerous officials checked the footage and attempted to make a



Indian players celebrate after a point against Iran in the kabaddi final on Saturday (AFP)

India approached the end of the day with 107 medals in total, 28 of those gold. But they will still finish a long way behind China in the overall medals table when the Games wrap up on Sunday

ruling. The action in what was an eagerly anticipated showdown was put on hold as both teams at different points appeared to refuse to play and argued their

case. Order was eventually restored with the score at 31-29 in India's favour.

Iran reluctantly carried on but they were deflated and quickly

slumped to a 33-29 defeat, sparking wild Indian celebrations.

But the post-final press conference was cancelled and Iran's coach Gholamreza Mazandarani said of the controversy: "This is very bad, very bad for kabaddi."

India approached the end of the day with 107 medals in total, 28 of those gold.

But they will still finish a long way behind China in the overall medals table when the Games wrap up on Sunday.

The hosts are well ahead of the rest with 374 medals in total, 196 of them gold.

It was not all good news for China. They won bronze in men's basketball but it was far less than fans and their legendary eight-time NBA All-Star Yao Ming wanted. Yao, now president of the Chinese Basketball Association, was scathing of their performance having lost to eventual champions the Philippines in the semi-finals.



Zhang Yufei

Chinese swimmers Zhang and Qin named Asian Games MVPs

Hangzhou, China - Chinese swimmers Zhang Yufei and Qin Haiyang were named the top athletes of the Hangzhou Asian Games on Saturday and then pledged to use their awards as inspiration for the Paris Olympics.

The multi-sports event usually names just one most valuable player, but this time there were separate men's and women's awards.

Olympic champion Zhang collected a leading six gold medals after winning the 50, 100 and 200m butterfly, 50m freestyle and two relays.

"It's a great honour," said Zhang via video-link from Berlin, where she is preparing for a World Cup meeting.

"It was a memorable experience and this is a new milestone for me as an athlete.

"It will leave a lasting mark in my memory and boost my confidence to work harder for the Paris Olympics."

Qin, who claimed an un-



Qin Haiyang

precedented 50-100-200m breaststroke hat-trick at the world championships in Fukuoka in July, repeated the feat on home soil.

He also won two relay gold and a 200m medley silver.

"It wasn't in my plan before the Games to be MVP, I just wanted to make personal breakthroughs," said Qin, who is also in Germany.

"My performance was great, but I aim to hopefully reach new heights in Paris next year."



Badminton gold medallist China's Li Shifeng (2nd L), compatriot Shi Yuqi (L) who won silver, bronze medallists India's HS Prannoy (2nd R) and Japan's Kodai Naraoka celebrate on the podium (AFP)

Backflipping Li wins Asian Games badminton gold

Hangzhou, China - Li Shifeng beat fellow Chinese player Shi Yuqi to win the men's badminton title at the Asian Games on Saturday while India clinched their first ever Asiad gold in the sport. Li defeated former world silver-medallist Shi 23-21, 21-13 in Hangzhou and celebrated by ripping off his shirt and performing a backflip.

The teammates were neck-and-neck throughout the first game before Li pulled away in the second.

In the men's doubles final, Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy made badminton history for India.

They defeated South Korea's Choi Sol-gyu and Kim Won-ho 21-18, 21-16.

In the mixed doubles final, China's Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaqiong defeated Yuta Watanabe and Arisa Higashino of Japan 21-15, 21-14 in 47 minutes.

"This match was stressful for me, but the crowd kept supporting us and gave us a lot of strength," Huang said.

In the women's category, world number one An Se-young beat China's Chen Yufei over

her momentum in the second game, which Olympic champion Chen won 21-17.

The South Korean staged a remarkable comeback in the third game, crushing her opponent 21-8 despite most of the audience

In the men's doubles final, Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy made badminton history for India. They defeated South Korea's Choi Sol-gyu and Kim Won-ho

three games to the gold and add another title to her stunning breakout year.

The South Korean won the first game 21-18 in a close fight in Hangzhou that sent both players diving to the ground to return shots. Top-ranked An hurt her knee during the first game and was attended to by medics.

The scrape seemed to break

cheering for the Chinese player.

An emotional An embraced her coaches after her victory, with both players limping off the court.

In a remarkable 2023, the 21-year-old An has risen to number one for the first time and won a string of titles, including the world championship.

AFP

India win Asian Games cricket gold without having to bat

Hangzhou, China - A proud and emotional India were crowned Asian Games men's cricket champions on their first attempt and without needing to bat in an anti-climatic finish Saturday, consigning Afghanistan to a third consecutive silver.

They were declared winners of the final under an Asian Games-specific rule where the higher-ranked team takes the honours if the match cannot be finished, in this case due to rain.

Afghanistan made 112-5 under the floodlights in Hangzhou before the wet weather arrived after 18.2 overs. With conditions not improving, the final was abandoned.

It completed a golden double for India after they beat Sri Lanka by 19 runs to be crowned women's champions last week.

"It feels good, we're very proud, wearing a medal is not something we're used to and it's



Indian players celebrate after winning gold in the men's cricket (AFP)

emotional for everyone," said India skipper Rituraj Gaikwad.

"It is pretty disappointing because obviously we would love to have had a full game and get the result through that.

"I think even 140 or 150 was a pretty gettable target batting second because of the small ground and with the kind of batting we had," he said. "We were

pretty confident."

Twenty20 cricket has been played at the Asian Games twice before, at Guangzhou 2010 and Incheon 2014, with Bangladesh and then Sri Lanka crowned men's winners.

Afghanistan were runners-up both times, while India did not take part.

Despite another silver, Afghan

captain Gulbadin Naib said his team could be proud.

"I was confident in our bowling, but unfortunately the rain came and they gave the gold to India," he said.

"It's bad luck, but overall in the Asian Games we did well and I'm very proud of the boys. This will give a lot of people (in Afghanistan) hope."

India won the toss and chose to field. Pacemen Shivam Dube and Arshdeep Singh removed openers Zubaid Akbari and Mohammad Shahzad inside the first three overs.

The needless run-out of Noor Ali Zadran, going for a tight second run in the next over, compounded their problems after Ravi Bishnoi's accurate throw.

A gritty unbeaten from Shahidullah 49 and his 60-run partnership and Naib (27 not out) ensured Afghanistan passed 100.

PSG's Lee helps South Korea to third straight gold

Hangzhou, China - Paris Saint-Germain star Lee Kang-in helped South Korea win Asian Games men's football gold for the third time in a row on Saturday - and earn a military exemption.

South Korea retained their crown with a 2-1 victory over Japan in Hangzhou, having conceded a goal in only the second minute. But livewire Lee, 22, who joined PSG from Mallorca in the summer, rallied his team and they got back on level terms midway through the first half.

In a competition featuring under-24 squads plus three overage players, Cho Young-wook scored the winning goal



South Korea's Lee Kang-in (R) fights for the ball with Japan's Hayato Okuda in the football final on Saturday (AFP)

soon after the break to extend South Korea's dominance with their sixth overall title.

Nearly every able-bodied South Korean male is required to perform at least 18 months of military service, but the government rewards Asian Games gold medals and Olympic medals of any colour with an exemption.

South Korea lined up for the final with several players from European clubs while Japan fielded a team mostly drawn from the domestic J-League.

Attacking midfielder Lee had been used sparingly by the Koreans but he took his place in the starting XI.

TOTTENHAM ON TOP

Ten-man Spurs lead Premier League table as Van de Ven sinks Luton

Luton, United Kingdom - Tottenham climbed to the top of the Premier League as they recovered from Yves Bissouma's dismissal for diving to earn a 1-0 win against lowly Luton on Saturday.

Bissouma was sent off just before half-time for his needless second booking at Kenilworth Road.

But Mickey van de Ven's first goal for the club soon after the interval clinched unbeaten Tottenham's sixth win in eight league games.

Ange Postecoglou's side sit two points clear of second placed Manchester City, who travel to title rivals Arsenal on Sunday.

"We showed a lot of character and resilience. We started really well, should have been three or four up, but then you get the red card and it is a different type of game," Postecoglou said.

"I thought we held it together really well. In the end we get three points at a difficult place to go."

The north Londoners' superb start to Postecoglou's first season in charge have awoken dreams of an unexpected title challenge.

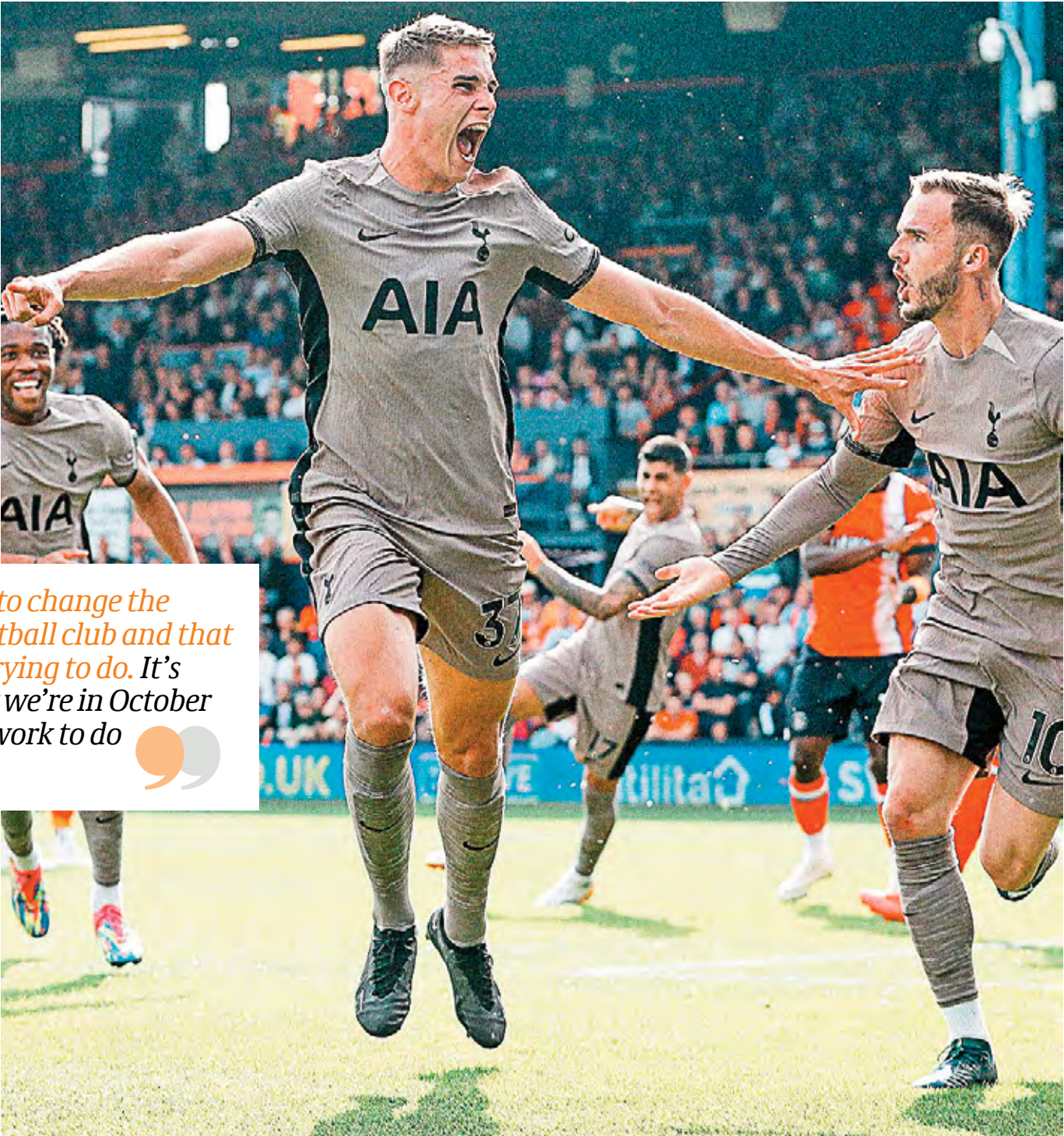
While that may yet prove beyond Tottenham, the Australian has undoubtedly had a huge im-

pact on a club that was in turmoil when he arrived from Celtic.

A toxic combination of Tottenham's poor results and dour displays, combined with Harry Kane's close-season move to Bayern Munich, left many expecting another season of turmoil, but Postecoglou has worked wonders to steady the ship.

He had already earned plaudits for energising Tottenham with his attacking tactics, but this gritty performance will have been equally pleasing.

It is the best unbeaten start any Tottenham manager has ever made and, with fixtures against Fulham and Crystal Palace up next, they could extend their unbeaten start through



Tottenham's Mickey van de Ven celebrates after scoring against Luton on Sunday

The players want to change the destiny of this football club and that is what they are trying to do. It's going alright, but we're in October and have a lot of work to do

ANGE POSTECGLOU

the rest of October.

"The players want to change the destiny of this football club and that is what they are trying to do on the pitch," Postecoglou said.

"It's going alright, but we're in October and still have a lot of work to do."

In their first meeting with Tottenham since a goalless draw in 1992, struggling Luton found it impossible to get a foothold in a blistering start from the visitors.

McTominay's double lifts Man Utd

Scott McTominay scored twice in stoppage time to ease Manchester United's crisis with a badly-needed 2-1 win over Brentford on Saturday.

The Bees looked set to snap their own seven-game winless streak after Mathias Jensen opened the scoring with the aid of some more poor goalkeeping by Andre Onana.

United were staring a third home defeat in eight days in the face until substitute McTominay proved the unlikely hero.

The Scotland midfielder has been in fine goalscoring form at international level, but was only introduced by Erik ten Hag three minutes from time.

McTominay found the net three times, but after his first effort was ruled out for offside, he struck twice in six minutes of added time to ease the pressure on his manager. Victory lifts United up to ninth and within four points of the top four.

Raheem Sterling proved a point to England manager Gareth Southgate by inspiring Chelsea's 4-1 rout of Burnley.

Sterling has again been left out of the England squad for the forthcoming matches against Australia and Italy.

But the winger showed his class by playing a role in three Chelsea goals at Turf Moor as Mauricio Pochettino's team won for a third successive game in all competitions.

Everton cruised to a 3-0 win against second bottom Bournemouth at Goodison Park.

Madrid hammer Osasuna

Madrid, Spain - Jude Bellingham continued his devastating form with a brace as Real Madrid thrashed Osasuna 4-0 to return to the top of La Liga on Saturday.

Girona's 1-0 win at Cadiz temporarily gave the Catalan minnows a one-point lead but Madrid cruised to victory at the Santiago Bernabeu to reclaim first place, with Vinicius Junior and Joselu also scoring in the rout. England international Bellingham, the division's top scorer with eight goals, was at his unstoppable best.

After scoring a brilliant solo goal against Napoli in midweek in the Champions League and adding two more against Osasuna, the midfielder now has 10 across both competitions.

"He's in top form, he's showing the player he is, I hope he keeps on like this," Madrid defender Dani Carvajal said.

Oscar Piastri takes sprint pole with Verstappen third on grid

Doha, Qatar - Oscar Piastri claimed his maiden pole position ahead of team-mate Lando Norris as McLaren locked out the front row of the grid in qualifying for the Qatar Grand Prix sprint race on Saturday.

The McLaren pair pushed run-away series leader Max Verstappen of Red Bull down to third for a race in the evening that could see the Dutchman secure his third consecutive drivers' title by finishing sixth or better.

It was the first front row lock-out for McLaren since the 2012 Brazilian Grand Prix when the top positions were occupied by Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button.

"I'm feeling very happy," said Piastri, a 22-year-old Australian rookie. "I might give the FIA five minutes to make sure I am actually on pole, but it was a good lap. I saw Lando on the big screen at the last corner make a mistake, so I'm happy to be here."

"I struggled a bit earlier, but I got it together in the last part of qualifying so I'm happy with that. Max is third so he's not a million



Oscar Piastri (L) and Max Verstappen

miles away so we'll try out best and see what we can pull off."

He later added: "It would have been even better if it had been yesterday," referring to Friday's qualifying session for Sunday's Grand Prix race when he was relegated from the front of the grid after having a lap deleted.

George Russell took fourth for Mercedes ahead of the Ferraris of Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc, Nico Hulkenberg of Haas and Sergio Perez in the second Red Bull.

Two-time champion Fernando Alonso was ninth for Aston Martin ahead of Esteban Ocon of

Alpine and his team-mate Pierre Gasly with seven-time champion Hamilton qualifying 12th.

Several drivers had their best laps deleted for track limits infringements while several others were reported for running too slowly on non-push laps.

Saturday's qualifying session, known as the sprint shootout, was delayed to accommodate a 'warm-up session' for teams and drivers to become accustomed to changed track limits at Turns 12 and 13.

The changes followed concerns by tyre supplier Pirelli at the damage to their tyres caused by kerbs on Friday.

Circuit officials changed the limits and re-painted kerbs, causing a brief delay before the action began.

The sprint qualifying session began in sweltering conditions with an air temperature of 36 degrees Celsius and the track at 44.

Lance Stroll of Aston Martin was again quickly eliminated, failing to progress from Q1 for a fifth consecutive session.



Carlos Alcaraz hits a return to Gregoire Barrere during their second-round match at the Shanghai Masters on Saturday (AFP)

Top seeds Alcaraz, Medvedev make strong Shanghai Masters start

Shanghai, China - Top seeds Carlos Alcaraz and Daniil Medvedev made strong starts to the Shanghai Masters on Saturday, both winning in straight sets to sail through to the third round.

Italy's Jannik Sinner is also through after battling out an intense first set - saving four set points - against the United States' Marcos Giron.

Alcaraz dominated his first set against 73rd-ranked Gregoire Barrere, winning it 6-2.

But the Frenchman regained

ground in the second, sending 20-year-old Alcaraz scurrying from side to side of the court. The world number two kept his cool and drew ahead towards the set's end, finishing it off at 7-5.

Medvedev, the world number three and defending champion, beat Chile's Cristian Garin in straight sets 6-3, 6-3 to proceed breezily to the third round.

Garin put up a valiant defence, but ultimately the 98th-ranked player struggled with the Russian's relentless pace.



Poland's Iga Swiatek celebrates after beating USA's Coco Gauff

Swiatek ends Gauff win streak to reach China Open final

Beijing, China - World number two Iga Swiatek breezed into the China Open women's final with a one-sided victory over Coco Gauff in Beijing on Saturday, handing the American her first defeat in 17 matches.

Swiatek beat the US Open champion 6-2, 6-3 to set up a clash with surprise package Liudmila Samsonova on Sunday.

The Pole seized the advantage early in the first set and never gave an error-plagued, injured Gauff a sniff of getting back into the match.

Swiatek wasted no time in gaining a double break of serve and wrapped up the opening set when Gauff slammed a forehand into the net.

The four-time Grand Slam winner broke again in the opening game of set two before the match was paused while Gauff received treatment for an injury to her right shoulder.

Afterwards, Swiatek picked up where she left off and sealed the win when the 19-year-old hit yet another forehand into the net.

"I feel like I'm playing less ag-

gressively than past tournaments, and more solidly... I'm making less mistakes than I did before," Swiatek said at a news conference after the match.

"Playing against Coco is tough because she's really good at keeping the initiative, but she can also play great in defence," she said. "You have to really be patient and ready for her to fight for everything... when I felt like the moment was right to push and play faster, I did."

Gauff had not lost a match since falling to compatriot Jes-

sica Pegula in Montreal in August.

"I was feeling (the injury) in the first set," Gauff said after the match. "It's definitely a new experience. I'm not used to playing with pain in general," she told reporters.

"When you're experiencing pain... your whole mind starts (thinking), 'Is it serious? Should I keep playing or not?'"

In the other semi-final, Samsonova upset world number five Rybakina with a 7-6 (9/7), 6-3 victory.

Oman to host Afghanistan A team in bilateral series

Muscat - Oman national cricketers will have a "perfect" buildup to the ICC T20 World Cup Qualifier later this month in Nepal with a bilateral series against Afghanistan A (Afghan-Abdalyan) scheduled to be played at the Oman Cricket Academy (OCA) grounds in Al Amerat from October 12 to 23.

This will be the first time Oman will host any Afghanistan national side and the tour will include two 50-over-matches and five T20 games.

Speaking on the upcoming visit of Afghanistan A squad to Oman, Oman Cricket Chairman Pankaj Khimji said: "Afghanistan's rise in the cricket world is an example. The tour of the A squad, which also comprises few players who have already played for the national side will be a good match practice for our boys ahead of the ICC T20 World Cup Qualifier in Nepal.

"Our boys have just started the domestic season and we wanted to provide them with quality matches and Afghanistan A will be a good test for them."

Khimji added: "The visit also assumes significance as this is the first time the Afghanistan Cricket Board has sent its squad



Zeeshan Maqsood will lead Oman as he returns to the team after recovering from injury

and the visit will help strengthen our bilateral relations with them."

In a statement to the media, Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) Chairman Mr. Mirwais Ashraf: "We are committed to

providing more playing opportunities for the Afghan Abdalyan squad, which includes top domestic players, to gain international exposure and be prepared for national call-ups when neces-

sary. This series is an excellent opportunity for the players to demonstrate their skills and make the most of it. Oman is a strong team, and I am hopeful to witness an entertaining series of

competitive cricket."

Oman head coach Duleep Mendis said: "This is a perfect buildup for our boys as we aspire to book our spot in the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. We have the

Asian Qualifier in Nepal, starting on October 30 and we hope to finish among the top two in the eight-nation tournament to qualify.

Zeeshan Maqsood will lead Oman's squad as he returns to the team after recovering from his injury. The hosts will go into the series high on confidence after the national team recently won the inaugural Gulf T20I title.

Mendis declared the squad for the two 50-over games that will be played on 12 October 12 and 15 October. The coach will announce the T20 squad later with the five-match T20 series.

OMAN 50-OVERS SQUAD:

Zeeshan Maqsood, Aqib Ilyas, Ayaan Khan, Kashyap Prajapati, Shoaib Khan, Mohammed Nadeem, Khalid Kail, Pruthvi Machhi, Jay Odedra, Kaleemullah, Pratik Athawale, Bilal Khan, Hemal Tandel, Samay Shrivastav, Sandeep Goud.

Head Coach: Duleep Mendis, assistant coach: Evert Laubscher, fast bowling coach: Champaka Ramanayake, coach co-ordinator: Mazher Saleem Khan, analyst: Zeeshan Siddiqui, physio: Sean Nowak.

France thrash Italy to reach quarters

Décines-Charpieu, France - Damian Penaud edged closer to Serge Blanco's France try record as Les Bleus secured a Rugby World Cup quarter-final with a 60-7 thumping of sorry Italy on Friday.

Penaud, 26, scored two tries and created a third with a deft chip as he moved to within three of France great Blanco's record of 38 tries for his country.

Victory ensured France topped Pool A with a perfect record of four wins from four and they will play one of Ireland, Scotland and South Africa in the last eight. They will know their opponents after the Irish take on the Scots at the Stade de France in Paris on Saturday.

"The contract has been fulfilled," said Maxime Lucu, who brilliantly covered the absent Antoine Dupont at scrum-half.

"We knew that if we lost, we'd be eliminated, so today we won. And we did it in style, so we're happy. We wanted to put things in order. We wanted to show discipline and realism, and that's what we did from the start."

This was not quite the try-fest New Zealand inflicted on Italy a week ago, but there was nonetheless a gulf in class between two sides that had been separated only by five points in the Six Nations in February.



Brazil's Rebeca Andrade celebrates after winning the women's vault final (AFP)

Brazil's Andrade takes vault gold as Biles settles for silver after fall

Antwerp, Belgium - Brazil's Rebeca Andrade won her second world gold in the women's vault as US star Simone Biles took silver after a fall during the final at the world gymnastics championships in Antwerp on Saturday.

Olympic champion Andrade scored 14.750 points to take the title with Biles falling while landing her first jump, but taking silver with 14.549 and her 28th world medal.

Returning after a two-year break, Biles over-rotated her Yurchenko double pike vault

named the Biles II after her, landing with her feet too far in front of her, and rolling onto her back.

As a result she lost a point on her execution score, to which was added half a point due to the presence of her trainer on the side of the mat.

Andrade, a revelation at the Tokyo Olympics, had already been crowned world vault champion at the 2021 worlds in Japan.

At 24, the delighted Brazilian, silver medalist in the all-around competition behind Biles on Friday, now has five medals on the

world stage. South Korea's Yeo Seo-jeong scored 14.416 to win bronze. On Friday, Biles was crowned all-around champion for a sixth time having also led the United States to a seventh consecutive women's team title earlier in the week.

In the men's competition, Olympic champion Artem Dolgopyat gave Israel their first ever world gymnastics gold in the men's floor final while Ireland's Rhys McClenaghan defended his pommel horse crown.

Dolgopyat scored 14.866

points to take the title ahead of Japan's Kazuki Minami (14.666), with Milad Karimi (14.600) giving Kazakhstan their first world medal since 1997 with bronze.

Ukraine-born Dolgopyat, 26, won floor silver at the worlds in 2017 and 2019, before claiming the Olympic title in Tokyo.

McClenaghan, 24, scored 15.100 points to retain the title he won in Liverpool last year with American Khoi Young, 20, taking silver (14.966) and Jordan's Ahmad Abu Al Soud bronze (14.633).

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CIRCUS SCHOOL



Students practice balancing acts and contortionism at the Flower Studio in Ulaanbaatar

BALANCING ACT

Mongolia's circus performers fight to preserve their craft despite many hurdles and hardships

Mongolian circus performers fly through a cavernous hall inspectors have warned could collapse any time - one of the few places left to train if they hope to travel the world with their country's spectacular big top shows.

The decaying, more than a hundred-year-old venue at the Mongolian Circus School is where hundreds of young artists, many now performing at celebrated outfits like Cirque Du Soleil, started their careers.

Defying gravity in a building shaped like a traditional Mongolian ger, the performers practise acrobatics and trapeze, suspended on ropes lashed to the building's dilapidated rafters.

One performer, 18-year-old Uuganbayar Nerguibaatar, said he hopes to follow in his sister's footsteps and take part in international competitions.

"I want to try and become a circus artist," he said.

With paint peeling off the walls and rusty equipment, the building where the artists practice is simply not safe, authorities have warned. But for the performers, the high-vaulted ceilings provide an ideal space to perfect the daredevil feats that made the Mongolian circus world famous.

"The circus was so popular. We all want to revive it," Gerelbaatar Yunden, a former circus art director, told AFP. "It is our duty."

Meagre prospects

The circus was long one of Mongolia's most popular forms of entertainment, bringing crowds from across the country to see breathtaking shows packed with extreme gymnastics, aerial stunts - and even wild animals.

Its contortionists - known as Uran Nugaralt, a practice dating back centuries - were particularly renowned. But faced with meagre prospects at home, hundreds of the country's top talents have gone overseas in recent years.

"When we go to international competitions and festivals, we're always asked to train international students," Bolortuya Purevdorj, Dean of the Circus Faculty of the Mongolian Conservatory, said. "But we politely say we don't have enough teachers or human resources," she said, adding, "We don't have training facilities."

Performers said they estimated about 85% of their colleagues live and work abroad, with at least 400 artists in Turkey as well as 500 contortionists in the United States and Europe.

"Antarctica is perhaps the only place that Mongolian circus performers have not performed," Gerelbaatar said.

Rise again

Mongolia's only modern circus venue was built in the Cold War by Romania as a gift to the socialist ally. The government sold it in

2007 to Dagvadorj Dolgorsuren, Mongolia's first Sumo champion, who was keen to splash his wealth on investments back home.

Dolgorsuren renamed it Asa Circus and it was intended to provide a rent-free training facility for circus students. But it has instead been used for high-profile concerts and events, with fewer and fewer circus acts taking to the stage in years.

That venue was home to the Mongolian Circus School's only training facilities, leaving few options for performers to hone their craft.

The public school, which has dozens of students and 15 teachers, now severely lacks training spaces, with a new venue having been under construction for years. Performers are demanding the government speed things up.

"Once we build a proper circus school facility, circus art will succeed," Gerelbaatar, the former circus art director, said, adding, "After that, the government can expect results and success and the Mongolian circus can rise again."

In the meantime, the school has rented a space far away from its headquarters, forcing students to endure long commutes to train. "There are a lot of problems. Circus is the art of space, but space is very limited here," Bayarchimeg Erdenebayar, a juggling student, said. "I will keep improving my skills for another year."

Inadequate facilities

In light of the privatisation, many contortionists split away from the main Mongolian circus to set up smaller, more specialised schools.

During a visit to one such school, AFP saw students twisting themselves into all sorts of weird and wonderful shapes and sizes, legs held high as heads poked through hips.

Teacher Erdenetsetseg Badarch, who trained as a contortionist under the country's Soviet-backed regime and performed thousands of times on the stage of the Mongolian Circus, however, said the facilities available are far from adequate.

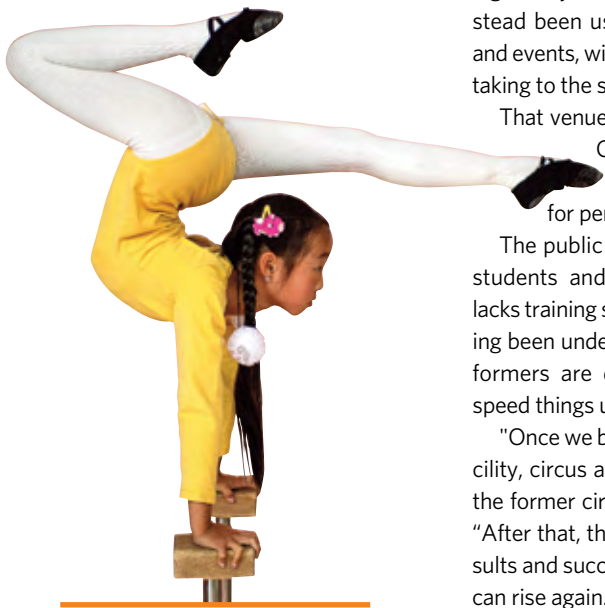
"In order to become a circus artist, we need to learn many other aspects of the art such as costume design, stage speech and body language," she said.

"My little studio cannot teach everything."

Another contortionist teacher there said that despite the obvious talent on display, his hopes for the future were bleak unless the state steps in to help.

"Our own state ignores its talented artists, who deserve better recognition," Bud Tumurbaatar said. "That's why Mongolian artists are leaving Mongolia for other countries for better treatment and a better income."

AFP



In order to become a circus artist, we need to learn many other aspects of the art such as costume design, stage speech and body language

ERDENETSETSEG BADARCH
Contortionist





DIASPORIC CINEMA

Moviegoers run to secure the best seats after being let into the venue, prior to a screening of the film One More Chance, starring Hong Kong actor Chow Yun Fat, during the 28th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF)

A Whiff Of Biff

S Korea's filmmaking diaspora – telling their 'own stories' while featuring several intriguing collaborations at the Busan International Film Festival

The rise of South Korean diasporic cinema has allowed the artists involved to feel less alone, one filmmaker told Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) attendees on Friday.

Six films from the diaspora are unspooling as part of a special sidebar this year in the South Korean port city, including Isaac Chung's Oscar-winner Minari and Celine Song's Sundance favourite Past Lives.

Since Parasite became the first non-English-language film to win a Best Picture Oscar, films made by the Korean diaspora have experienced a remarkable surge, with filmmakers delving into culture-spanning narratives that encompass their varied experiences.

"The main thing it's done, at least for myself, is to know that as I tell my own stories, people are finding common ground to relate with one another," Justin Chon, who directed 2021 adoption drama Blue Bayou, told reporters.

He has since directed four episodes of the successful Apple TV+ series Pachinko, the story of an ethnic Korean family living in Japan, based on the novel by Min Jin Lee.

"When other immigrants and minorities in the United States are telling their stories, the only thing it does is signal to me that I really wasn't alone this entire time", he said.

Minari director Chung said as a second-generation Korean-American, he had always felt "a loss of a place that I don't fully understand that is far away from me".

Korean-American actors Steven Yeun and John Cho were unable to comment on their American projects due to the ongoing Screen Actors Guild strike, but both freely discussed why they believed the work stoppage was important.

"I think the strike is a very righteous act of making sure that we ensure and protect artists and those who are living an actor's life and a writer's life," Yeun said. "And there are many people who don't have safeguards... I sit here with so much privilege to be here and to be able to talk about it."

Cho, who starred in the 2018 thriller Searching which is screening at this year's BIFF, said artificial intelligence - a key concern for striking actors - has put people out of work in the entertainment industry.

"When I go to see a movie, it's to see people enacting a human drama and to have an experience with an audience watching human expression," he said. "And so behind the scenes, if we start taking out people, the art form is going to suffer."

COLLABORATION

The festival's diaspora section features several intriguing collaborations between diasporic and US actor Steven Yeun speaks during a press conference on 'Korean Diasporic Cinema' South Korean artists as well as those from other nationalities.



The main thing it's done is to know that as I tell my own stories, people relate on common ground. When minorities in the US tell their stories, it signals that I really wasn't alone

JUSTIN CHON

Burning (2018), for example, is based on Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's novel, directed by acclaimed South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-dong, and stars Yeun.

Korean-Canadian director Song's Past Lives (2023), meanwhile, co-stars South Korean actor Teo Yoo and Korean-American actress Greta Lee.

Yoo, who is fluent in English, on Thursday candidly expressed the challenges he faced in trying to present himself as an appealing love interest to the American audience.

In Past Lives, he plays a South Korean



South Korean actress Jeon Jong-seo walks along the red carpet for the 28th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF)



South Korean actors Na Moon-hee (2L), Kim Yong-gyun (C) and Kim Young-ok (2R) arrive on the red carpet for the 28th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF)



South Korean actress and film director Bang Eun-jin



South Korean actor and television personality Hong Seok-cheon

character who speaks English with a heavy accent and less-than-perfect fluency.

Director Chon's latest film Jamojaya, which features a collaboration with Indonesian rapper Rich Brian and actor Yuyu Unru, had its Asian premiere at BIFF.

"So this is my fifth film, and the first three were centred around Korean Americans," Chon said after a BIFF screening on Friday, when asked about his collaboration with Indonesian artists.

"To really create empathy and understanding for ourselves as a whole, we should start telling each other stories." AFP



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