

FDI up 10% to RO18.14bn

Efforts paying off to make Oman an attractive destination for investors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's unremitting efforts to attract foreign investments into the sultanate are paying dividends with the volume of foreign direct investments (FDI) going up by 10.4 per cent to RO18.14bn till Q3 of 2022, compared to the same period in 2021.

The statistics show that the volume of trade exchanges between the sultanate and the rest of the world till September 2022 increased 46.18 per cent to reach RO30.421bn. The value of FDI in the manufacturing sector till Q3 of 2022 was RO1.717bn, compared to RO1.512bn over the corresponding period in 2021.

The noticeable increase in the volume of FDI, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) stated, was due to the several Royal Directives as well as efforts in updating laws and regulations related to investment, creating a suitable environment for starting businesses, enhancing digital transformation in all services provided to investors, providing incentives to those who are interested to invest in Oman and strengthening the global competitive position of the sultanate.

Qais bin Mohammad al Youssef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, emphasised that the wise directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and his keen interest in facilitating and devel-



The Royal Directives resulted in the launch of a number of initiatives, such as the National Programme for Investment and Export Development 'Nazdaher'

QAIS AL YOUSSEF

oping the business environment has provided the sultanate a fertile environment for business growth and an attractive destination for investors and entrepreneurs.

"The Royal Directives resulted in the launch of a number of national initiatives and programmes, such as the National Programme for Investment and Export Development 'Nazdaher', the investor residency programme, the fast track initiative, and the Invest in Oman lounge project," Youssef said.

The ministry stated that the government is working in partnership with the private sector to increase investments in the targeted sectors and to attract

more FDI. Accordingly, a number of legislations and regulations were issued to improve the business environment, including the amendment of some provisions of the executive regulations of the Foreign Capital Investment Law, the issuance of the Commercial Companies Regulations, and the issuance of the executive regulations to the Competition Protection and Monopoly Prevention Law.

National Investment Strategy

The ministry informed that one of the most important initiatives started by the government is the unified national investment strategy, which aims at setting

an integrated strategy for investment in the sultanate unifying all investment efforts.

'In this context, an international company has been contracted to work on developing strategies to attract FDI, and on new promotional mechanisms in other countries for the targeted sectors in Oman,' stated MoCIIP.

National Negotiation Team

The National Negotiation Team is a unified body that represents the government of the sultanate in negotiations related to high economic value, with an aim to shortening and unifying the negotiation process.

The team relies on a matrix

that was built internally in accordance with several criteria, including the compatibility of the project with the strategic investment direction of the sector, the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, the economic impact, the realities of the project and the local context.

Fast Track Initiative

The Fast Track Initiative aims at supporting investment projects facing challenges in their implementations. The projects are assessed and the reasons for obstruction reviewed, to take quick and effective decisions ensuring the continuity of business implementation. The first phase of the initiative targeted 39 investment projects, where 27 investment projects were green lighted for implementation with a total value of US\$2.779bn.

The number of investors, who have obtained investor residency from the beginning of the programme till January 1 this year, has reached 1,219.

MoL announces 489 jobs in public, private sectors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Implementing the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to speed up the execution of employment initiatives, the Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Thursday announced the availability of 489 new positions in private sector and government establishments.

A statement issued by the ministry disclosed the creation of 135 job opportunities in various private sector institutions, including 33 positions for holders of university and higher qualifications, 16 for those holding post-secondary diploma, 67 for those holding General Education Diploma, eight jobs below General Education Diploma and one for PhD qualified job seekers.

The ministry also announced



the availability of 354 job opportunities across a number of government units.

The announcement is the first for 2023 in the State's Administrative Apparatus.

'Announcements are made in accordance with set plans and the actual needs of government units,' stated MoL.

Road accidents down 81% in a decade

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Road accidents in Oman went down by 81 per cent in ten years since 2012, according to Brig Mohammed bin Awad al Rawas, director general of Traffic at the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

There were 8,209 road accidents, 4,514 injuries and 1,139 deaths in 2012, compared to 1,539 accidents, 1,621 injuries and 434 deaths in 2021.

Brig Rawas said, "Oman is witnessing a great deal of developments in the road network. The Traffic Engineering Department of the Directorate General of Traffic follows up and monitors the sites prone to traffic accidents and works to address them in coordination with the concerned authorities.

"It takes preventive measures to review road projects to achieve a safe traffic flow and control violators of traffic regulations and rules, with a focus on controlling the reckless drivers, who endanger their lives and the lives of other road users," Brig Rawas added.

The number of road accident injuries reduced by 64 per cent, and deaths by 82 per cent in 2021, compared to 2012 statistics.

The director general of Traffic informed that the number of registered vehicles increased by 57 per cent and the number of driving licences by 71 per cent during the same period.

"With most of the traffic services provided electronically, the ROP e-services achieved a community satisfaction rate of 94 per cent," said Brig Rawas.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information, traffic safety in the five



With most of the traffic services provided electronically, the ROP e-services achieved a community satisfaction rate of 94 per cent

BRIG MOHAMMED AL RAWAS

years from 2017 to 2021, improved considerably, highlighting a reduction in road accidents.

The statistics reveal that the number of accidents in Oman decreased 60 per cent in the last five years - from 3,845 in 2017 to 1,539 in 2021.

In 2017, there was an accident every three hours, which reduced to one every six hours at the end of 2021.

Past figures show 640 people were killed in traffic accidents in 2017, 637 in 2018, 511 in 2019 and 371 in 2020.

The data for 2021 indicates collisions between vehicles constituted the most common type - 41.1 per cent - of all traffic accidents.

Speed was the biggest cause of accidents, with 820 caused by speeding vehicles, constituting 53.3 per cent of the total traffic accidents.

IRAN DRAWS INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION FOR EXECUTIONS



Protesters wearing 'Handmaid's Tale' costumes - signifying a sign of female subservience, hold a silent march through central London on Saturday, to raise awareness about the recent women-led uprising in Iran. Iran drew international condemnation on Saturday after it executed two men for killing a paramilitary force member in November during unprecedented protests sparked by Mahsa Amini's death in custody (AFP)

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Biden administration appoints Ana Escrogima as new Oman envoy

Our Correspondent
Muscat

US President Joe Biden announced a slate of new ambassador nominations last week, including for the posts at the US embassies in Oman and Jordan.

Ana Escrogima, who is currently serving as consul general of the US Consulate General in Montreal, Canada, is Biden's



Ana Escrogima

choice for the US Ambassador's position in Oman.

She previously worked with the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and as the deputy chief of mission at the Riyadh-based Yemen Affairs Unit. Ana will replace Ambassador Leslie Tsou in Muscat.

Former Rusk Fellow at the Georgetown's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Ana has ex-

tensive experience abroad and in Washington, DC. She was the State Department's UAE-based Arabic language spokesperson and served as the Public Affairs Officer in Algeria, where she was responsible for all bilateral, cultural and press engagements.

Ana served as a political officer at the US embassies in Iraq and Syria; she was the special assistant to former under secretary

of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, with responsibility for the Middle East issues - most notably the Iran nuclear negotiations.

For Jordan, veteran diplomat Yael Lempert has been chosen to be the new US ambassador. She is currently the principal deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. She previously served as chargé d'aff-

aires at the US Embassy in London. Yael will replace Henry Wooster, who has been the ambassador in Amman since 2020.

Dorothy Shea, who is currently the US Ambassador to Lebanon, was nominated as the deputy US representative to the United Nations. Prior to Lebanon, her tenure at the State Department included postings in Egypt, Tunisia and Israel.



AI everything at the Consumer Electronics Show



H H Sayyid Theyazin presides over ROP Day

Nizwa - The Royal Oman Police (ROP) held a ceremony at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences (SQAPS) in the wilayat of Nizwa on Thursday to mark the ROP Annual Day, which falls on January 5 every year.

The ceremony was presided over by H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth.

On the occasion, a graduation ceremony was held at the military parade grounds of the SQAPS. The ceremony saw the passing out of officer cadets who obtained a diploma in law and police sciences, university officer cadets, specialised officer cadets and service officer cadets.

The batch included officers from the Royal Court Affairs (RCA), the Internal Security Service (ISS), the Royal Guard of Oman (RGO) and delegates from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The celebration protocols began with a salutation to the chief guest. The commandant of the graduates' column stepped forward, requesting H H Sayyid



Theyazin to inspect the front row of the parade. The graduates performed a military show in front of the dais, following which the chief guest handed over the prizes to the top graduates.

This was followed by the passing of colours of the SQAPS from the graduating officers of the 45th batch to the officers of the 46th batch.

Later, a column of ROP cava-

liers performed a demo in front of the dais, as the ROP band played a succession of musical tunes.

On the sidelines of the celebration, H H Sayyid Theyazin visited the Academic Research and Studies Centre at the SQAPS. He took note of the library's collections of reference books and other resources serving researchers, lecturers and trainees in the fields of security,

law and police sciences. He also listened to a briefing about training labs specialised in criminal research, control of drugs and psychotropic substances and search and rescue operations.

H H Sayyid Theyazin also visited the ROP Music School at the academy. There, he graced the graduation of the first batch of the Level-5 Musicians and other courses. He also attended a musical display presented by the

graduates and viewed the facilities of the ROP Music School and the Music Museum.

The celebration included the announcement of winners of the ROP Awards 2022. Muscat governorate's Police Command won the first place in the Traffic Safety Competition, while the SQAPS occupied the first position in the ROP's Infantry Competition.

Commemorative photos

HM confers medals of commendation on ROP officers

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, conferred the Medals of Royal Commendation and Excellent Service and Proficiency on a number of senior officers of the Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Thursday.

Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, pinned the medals on the meritorious officers. The ceremony was held at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences as part of the celebrations marking the ROP Day.



Sayyid Theyazin congratulated the officers on this honour, which, he said, "comes in appreciation of the continuous efforts of the ROP personnel for the advancement of this dear country under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander".

Lt Gen Hassan Mohsin al Shuraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, attended the event along with several senior ROP officers. ONA

Muscat Rehabilitation Centre in Amerat to get additional facilities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health represented by the Directorate General of Health Services in the Governorate of Muscat on Thursday signed a cooperation agreement to construct the second phase of the Muscat Rehabilitation Centre in Amerat, at a cost of RO900,000.

The agreement - with Al Jisr Charitable Foundation and Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) - was signed by H E Dr Fatima Mohammed Al Ajmi, Un-



dersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs in MoH; Abdul-Amir al Ajmi, PDO external affairs and value creation director; and Nouf Abdulah al Hosni, board executive member at the foundation.

H E Dr Fatima underlined the importance of partnership between the government and the private sectors to serve the public interest, praising the initiative of Al Jisr Charitable Foundation and PDO to finance such vital projects.

The signing of the agreement is part of the strategic partner-

ship to achieve the common good for the society and advance community services and development projects, she added.

PDO's Ajmi said, "Supporting the healthcare sector is one of the social investment programme pillars at the company. This project is not limited to providing medical treatment only, but also to provide the necessary rehabilitation support that facilitates the integration of patients back into society after acquiring the required personal and functional skills."

The company funded the de-

velopment of the first phase of the project with facilities valued at RO2.5mn. The funding was for the medical treatment department, outpatient clinics, an emergency department and a pharmacy, in addition to a staff accommodation facility.

Nouf pointed out that the second phase of the project includes addition of a number of wards for rehabilitation programmes, a swimming pool, a multi-purpose hall, apart from administrative offices and meeting rooms, so as to ensure an integrated service for addiction cases at the centre.

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MOH No: 558/2022

Oman on track to hit net zero target

OMANI ENVIRONMENT DAY

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Environment Authority (EA), will mark the Omani Environment Day on Sunday, observed every year on January 8, along with the private and civil society institutions; citizens and residents.

H E Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, chairman of EA, told ONA that the sultanate has accomplished many achievements in the environmental field as a result of the programmes and initiatives that the authority has been working on, relying on the continuous planning and development with methodologies that were found to be helpful in enhancing the quality of environmental work and ensuring its sustainability.

The authority is working on various projects in environment protection, nature conservation and maintenance of air quality. EA is highly invested in the field of reuse and recycling, as well as in clean and green energy, in addition to carbon management projects and reducing the risks of climate change and global

warming, leading to net zero emissions by 2050.

The EA chairman informed that governance, legislation and digital transformation, in addition to developing research and innovation and promoting environmental culture, directly contributed to the strengthening of Oman's position globally.

"With this, the sultanate was able to raise its position in environmental performance index, while our ambition is to do better, still. This ambition will only be achieved through partnership with various governmental and private institutions and civil society."

H E Amri said that Oman has recorded reassuring numbers that reflect the efforts made at the national level, as it ranked first in the Gulf and fourth in the Arab world in achieving the sustainable development goals.

The authority will hold a press conference on Sunday to review the development in the environmental sector in the year 2022.



The sultanate was able to raise its position in environmental performance index, while our ambition is to do better, still

H E DR ABDULLAH AL AMRI

Initiative launched to support children with special needs



Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to support children with autism, a voluntary team has launched an initiative to educate parents on ways to deal with the challenges of raising children with special needs.

Asrar al Ataa voluntary team's 'Talk to me about Them' initiative is part of its ongoing mission to provide guidelines to parents of autistic children on how to communicate and cope with the challenges of raising their children.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Ismail al Hamdi, head of Asrar al Ataa team, said, "We operate under the umbrella of the Sohar Club and have launched a num-

ber of awareness campaigns in several wilayats including Muscat, Barka, Nizwa, Buraimi, Sohar and Salalah."

The initiative provides workshops on ways parents can positively communicate with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

"We not only aim to help parents raise children with ASD but spread the awareness of this neurodevelopmental disorder among people. The initiative also includes introducing autism and its impact to the larger section of the society, while providing these children with specially made toys and educational activities for their better growth."

The group, which came into being in 2016, runs many chari-

table initiatives. "The team consists of 80 volunteers, who play an active role in serving the community. We are looking forward to running more activities to support the children with autism throughout Oman," Hamdi said.

The Asrar al Ataa team uses virtual reality (VR) technology to better communicate and connect with others and the world around them.

The team now seeks to build a specialised centre to provide courses and programmes related to ASD in Oman. "The team also seeks to establish partnerships with autism centres to provide logistical and guidance support and to train team members to continue to spread awareness among the society."

In a first, turmeric farming project introduced in 12 villages of Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to diversify agricultural crops and achieve self-sufficiency in food, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has introduced turmeric farming in Dhofar governorate.

An official at the ministry informed that the Directorate General of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar has started implementing the first phase of the turmeric cultivation project in the governorate, with the support of the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund.

"The project, in its first phase, targets 60 farmers in 12 villages in the wilayats of Salalah, Taqah,



Dhalkhut and Rakhut. The target is to grow the turmeric crop on seven acres of land and establish a genetic bank for it."

Turmeric, a plant in the ginger family, is native to Southeast Asia and is grown commercially in the region, primarily in India.

Its rhizome (underground stem) is used as a culinary spice and traditional medicine.

Under the project, the ministry will provide farmers a modern irrigation system, and follow up on the stages of its cultivation by deploying agricultural teams.

"The project aims to motivate and encourage farmers to grow turmeric in Dhofar. Turmeric crops are known for their economic value and health benefits. It has a high local demand as well as export potential," said the official.

The official also said that the ministry is conducting a survey to measure the areas under cultivation for various produces - vegetables, field crops and perennial fodder across the sultanate.

"The project aims to provide data and estimate the volume of agricultural production and indicators of self-sufficiency; besides assessing the contribution of the agricultural sector to the gross domestic product of the sultanate."

30 wounded Yemenis get prosthetic limbs

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Arabian Prosthetics Centre (APC) in Salalah on Thursday concluded the rehabilitation of 30 injured Yemenis, bringing the total number of beneficiaries to 930 so far.

The centre is continuing its mission of rehabilitating the victims of the eight-year-old conflict in the neighbouring country, which has killed and crippled thousands over the years.

Wahab al Amer, director of APC, informed that the injured, including women and children,



receive medical care and prosthetic limbs at the centre.

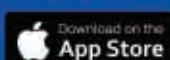
A specialised team trains the maimed Yemenis to use their new prosthetic limbs.

"This is the 16th batch of beneficiaries we have treated successfully and with it completed the rehabilitation of 930 wounded and injured Yemenis."

Amer expressed his appreciation for the humanitarian efforts made by the sultanate towards the affected Yemenis. "APC continues to treat the wounded and alleviate their suffering in a humanitarian project which is the largest of its kind."

APC is a charitable organisation that provides rehabilitation services for amputees in exclusive cooperation with the German prosthetics company Ottobock. APC was started with the aim of serving wounded Yemenis with the support and facilities provided by the sultanate.

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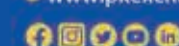
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Projects awarded in Oman double to RO505mn in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The value of projects awarded by Oman's Tender Board in 2022 increased to RO505.3mn compared to RO252.5mn in 2021, recording an year-on-year increase of 100 per cent.

This sharp rise in the value of projects awarded in 2022 came on the back of increased government spending in various sectors. Five largest tenders (in terms of value) were awarded in health, infrastructure, education and information technology sectors, according to an Oman News Agency report.

The biggest tender last year was awarded for the provision of catering and nutrition services, hygiene services, laundry and pest control for the hospitals and health centres affiliated

to the Ministry of Health at a cost of RO59.9mn. The second largest tender was awarded for the supply of medicines, vaccines and serums by the Ministry of Health at a cost of RO52.1mn.

Among other major tenders were RO38.6mn worth of project for the construction of flood protection dam in Wadi Uday in Wilayat of Al Amerat and a RO26.7mn project to design and implement 13 schools in various governorates.

During 2022, health sector received several new projects such as the establishment of the Central Public Health Laboratory at a cost of RO18.2mn and the establishment of Mahout Hospital in Al Wusta Governorate at a cost of RO13.9mn.

The roads sector came second in terms of the value of

awarded tenders during 2022. The sector witnessed the awarding of nine tenders for the maintenance of asphalt and dirt roads for a period of five years in a number of governorates at a total cost of RO63.1mn.

The roads sector also witnessed awarding of tenders for the construction of new roads such as Harweb-Mateen road in Dhofar Governorate a cost of about RO17.4mn.

Moreover, the culture sector witnessed the awarding of a tender for the provision of advisory services for the management and supervision of the Oman Cultural Complex project and the building of the National Records and Archives Authority at a value of RO5.2mn, and the project of upgrading the Museum of Frankincense Land Museum in Dhofar Governorate at

a value of RO129,000.

The information technology sector was among the main sectors that enjoyed a large share of tenders awarded through the Tender Board during last year.

In addition to the tender for the supply, design and installation of the government financial system, last year witnessed the awarding of a tender for the supply of computers for schools affiliated to the Ministry of Education and the General Secretariat of the Tender Board with a value of RO9.2mn, and the expansion of the automatic tax system in the tax authority with an amount of RO5.8mn.

For airports, the renovation and rehabilitation of the parts of corridors and aprons for aircraft parking at the Muscat International Airport was awarded at a value of RO3.9mn.

MSX records five-year high turnover of RO940mn in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) last year recorded the highest trading value in five years, benefiting from increased buying interest from local and foreign investment funds, institutions and Omani individual investors.

With improvement in profits of listed companies and rise in stock and oil prices, total trading value at the MSX rose to RO940.3mn, up for the third year in a row, after it witnessed transactions worth RO441mn in



2020 and RO818.2mn in 2021.

The market turnover witnessed by the Muscat Stock Exchange in 2022 was the highest since 2017 when trading value at the bourse amounted to RO992.7mn, according to an

Oman News Agency report. The MSX also recorded a number of other positive indicators for 2022. The main index of the exchange rose by 17.6 per cent, which is higher than the 12.8 per cent increase recorded by the index in 2021.

Total market capitalisation of the MSX increased by more than RO1.645bn last year reaching at RO23.736bn on December 31, 2022. Closed stock companies and the bond and sukuk market mainly contributed to the increase in the market capitalisation of the exchange.

OQ to inaugurate its new ammonia plant on Jan 15

Salalah - OQ, the sultanate's global integrated energy group, will celebrate the inauguration of its new ammonia plant in Dhofar governorate on January 15, 2023.

The plant will be inaugurated under the patronage of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, as part of Oman's celebrations to mark the 52nd anniversary of its National Day.

The ammonia plant is one of the most significant investments of OQ Group to support the economic diversification policies adopted by the Omani government and to keep up with the targets of Oman Vision 2040 related to maximising the benefits from Omani natural resources and enhancing the



petrochemical industries sector.

The new plant will enhance Omani exports to international markets across the world. OQ has operations across 17 countries that cover the entire value

chain from exploration and production of oil and gas, refineries and petrochemicals to marketing and distribution of end-user products reaching more than 60 countries worldwide.

US Fed officials don't expect interest rate cuts this year

Washington, US - US central bankers do not expect it will be "appropriate" to start cutting interest rates this year with inflation remaining high, according to minutes of the latest Federal Reserve policy meeting.

The Fed has waged an all-out campaign to cool the world's biggest economy as inflation surged to a 40-year high last year, raising the benchmark lending rate seven times to ease demand.

This brought the rate to a range between 4.25 and 4.50 per cent after the Fed's December meeting, the highest level since 2007.

But Fed policymakers believe "a restrictive policy stance would need to be maintained" until data shows inflation is on a sustained downward path, according to minutes from the gathering last month.

The aim is to return inflation to two per cent.

"No participants anticipated that it would be appropriate to begin reducing the federal funds rate target in 2023," the meeting minutes added.

While the Fed had slowed its pace of rate increases in December after several steep rate hikes, the latest report shows officials were also concerned about any "misperception" of their moves. Officials warned that an "unwarranted" easing of financial conditions, especially if driven by public misperceptions, would complicate efforts to restore price stability.

This is because monetary policy works importantly through financial markets, the report said.

A number of meeting participants also emphasised the need



to "clearly communicate" that a slowing in the pace of rate hikes was not a sign of weakening in resolve when it came to the inflation fight.

Tight labor market

For now, inflation remains "persistent and unacceptably high," and a "sustained period of below-trend" GDP growth is needed, the report said.

In the past months, spending has likely been helped by a strong labor market and households tapping their excess savings from the pandemic, and this could continue.

But some officials also noted that budgets are being stretched in lower-income households, with many consumers shifting to less expensive alternatives.

This points to considerable uncertainty around the consumer spending outlook overall, according to the Fed.

The labor market also remains "very tight" with low unemployment, robust payroll gains and elevated wage growth.

This has been a cause for

concern, with officials worried that elevated wages will feed into higher services costs for consumers.

There are tentative signs of improvements on this front, but officials expect labor market supply and demand will "come into better balance" with an appropriately restrictive monetary policy path, the minutes said.

Risk of pain

"Reading the tea leaves, the minutes stress that the Fed is going to reduce inflation at the risk of hurting the labor market and the broader economy," said Ryan Sweet of Oxford Economics in a note.

He added that the Fed plans to rein in cost increases, and "whether they can accomplish that without a recession remains up for debate."

In the minutes, policymakers also stressed the need to balance restrictive policy with "an unnecessary reduction in economic activity, potentially placing the largest burdens on the most vulnerable groups."

AFF

World food prices hit record high in 2022

Paris, France - World food prices fell for a ninth month in a row in December but hit their highest level on record for the full year in 2022, UN data showed Friday.

Food prices soared to a monthly record high in March after Russia invaded agricultural powerhouse Ukraine, a major supplier of wheat and cooking oil to the world.

But prices have dropped since then, with more relief brought by a deal brokered by Turkey and the United Nations in July that lifted a Russian naval blockade on Ukrainian grain exports.

The Food and Agriculture Organization said Friday its price index, which tracks the monthly change in international prices of a basket of food commodities, fell to 132.4 points in December, a 1.9 per cent drop from November.



It was also one per cent lower than in December 2021.

But the index was 14.3 per cent higher overall in 2022 compared to the previous year as it reached an all-time high of 143.7 points.

"Calmer food commodity prices are welcome after two very volatile years," FAO chief economist Maximo Torero said in a statement.

"It is important to remain vigilant and keep a strong focus on mitigating global food insecurity given that world food prices remain at elevated levels," he said. Torero said many staples are near record highs, with prices of rice rising and "still many risks associated with future supplies".

World prices of maize were 24.8 per cent higher on average in 2022 than in 2021, according

to the FAO. Wheat was 15.6 per cent more expensive.

But maize prices fell in December, mostly due to "strong competition" from Brazil, the FAO said.

Wheat was also down for the month "as ongoing harvests in the southern hemisphere boosted supplies and competition among exporters remained strong".

The FAO's vegetable oil price index reached a new record high in 2022 but fell 6.7 per cent month-on-month in December to its lowest level since February 2021.

Dairy and meat prices hit their highest levels since 1990, the agency said. While meat prices fell 1.2 per cent in December, those of dairy rose 1.1 per cent for the month.

AFF

India's GDP growth forecast to slow to 7%

New Delhi, India - India's economic growth will slow to 7.0 per cent this financial year, according to official estimates released Friday, as weaker global demand and high inflation weigh on the world's fifth-largest economy.

The National Statistics Office forecast for the year ending March 31 still ranks India's economic outlook above every other major country but is down from the 8.7 per cent growth recorded in 2021-22.

India bounced back strongly from the coronavirus pandemic but is now grappling with the same headwinds buffeting the global economy.

Rising petrol costs following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have had a ripple effect on prices for



the country's 1.4bn people.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has hiked rates by 2.25 percentage points between May and December in an aggressive response to rising consumer inflation, which hit a high of 7.79 per cent in April before moderat-

ing.

Higher commodity costs and a falling rupee have left India struggling with a deteriorating trade balance and its current account deficit hit a record high of US\$36.4bn in the September 2022 quarter.

The Indian rupee hit record lows last year, plunging more than 11 per cent against the US dollar as the greenback rallied on risk-averse market sentiment.

But India's currency has proven more resilient than its Asian peers, aided by regular central bank intervention.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts 6.1 per cent growth for India this year, down from 6.8 per cent in 2022.

But the figure is still significantly higher than every other major world economy, with IMF deputy managing director Antoinette Sayeh attributing India's resilience to structural reforms and its hawkish approach to fighting inflation.

AFF

Alibaba founder Jack Ma to cede control of Ant Group

Beijing, China – Jack Ma will cede control of Chinese fintech giant Ant Group, the company announced Saturday, following a Communist Party crackdown on the nation's tech sector that targeted the charismatic billionaire. One of China's most recognisable entrepreneurs, Ma once exemplified a generation of Chinese technology moguls with his rags-to-riches personal tale and penchant for public showmanship.

But the former English teacher has retreated from public view since Beijing torched Ant's planned initial public offering in Hong Kong in 2020 following his barbed comments about government regulators.

His company said in a statement on Saturday it was adjusting its ownership structure so that "no shareholder, alone or jointly with other parties, will have control over Ant Group".

Laying out the firm's previous complex structure, the announcement showed Ma indirectly controlled 53.46 per cent of Ant's shares and deemed him the company's "control person".

He will hold just 6.2 per cent of the voting rights following the adjustment, based on information in the statement.

"The adjustment is being implemented to further enhance the stability of our corporate structure and sustainability of our long-term development," the Ant statement said.



This file photo taken on September 17, 2018 shows Alibaba executive chairman Jack Ma preparing to deliver a speech during the World Artificial Intelligence Conference 2018 in Shanghai (AFP)

Ten individuals - including the founder, management and staff - will "exercise their voting rights independently", it said.

The adjustment will not change the economic interests of any shareholders.

Crackdown

Ant's planned IPO would have been a world-record listing at the time and its damaging withdrawal came as Ma's other business interests creaked under official scrutiny.

Beijing also hit Alibaba, the internet titan co-founded by Ma that operates popular Chinese shopping platforms Taobao and Tmall, with a record US\$2.75bn

fine for alleged unfair practices.

In a sign that the official grip may now be loosening, authorities said last month Ant had won approval to raise 10.5bn yuan (US\$1.5bn) for its consumer finance arm. An office of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission in the southwestern city of Chongqing will let the firm raise its registered capital from eight billion yuan to 18.5bn yuan, according to a notice issued on December 30.

News of the approval sent shares in Alibaba soaring almost nine percent in Hong Kong trading, while other tech firms were also boosted on hopes the sector crackdown could be easing.

Alibaba's latest earnings data in November showed a loss of 20.6bn yuan for the third quarter. The company did not release full sales figures for its Singles Day shopping bonanza in 2022 for the first time.

The e-commerce festival is seen as an important gauge of Chinese consumer sentiment, and once saw Ma share a stage with major Chinese and Western celebrities, but has become more muted in recent years.

Ma has maintained a lower profile since Ant's failed IPO, punctuated by appearances at charity events and occasional sojourns overseas.

AFP

Stocks rise as market eyes fewer US Fed rate hikes

New York, US – European and US stocks advanced Friday and the dollar fell as investors digested key American jobs data that dampened expectations of more aggressive Federal Reserve interest rate hikes.

After firm gains in Europe, major indices in New York shook off early weakness and finished firmly higher, with the Dow piling on more than two per cent.

The much-anticipated monthly government jobs report was solid, with the United States economy adding a better-than-expected 223,000 jobs in December as unemployment dipped to 3.5 per cent.

But analysts pointed to a tempering of wage growth, which was up 4.6 per cent on a 12-month basis through December, compared with a 4.8 per cent reading for the prior month.

That was followed by a surprisingly poor services sector report from the Institute for Supply Management.

The report showed the first contraction since spring of 2020, with the business activity index and new orders index both plunging.

"We're still in a 'bad news is good news' type of market reaction," said Nick Reece, a vice president at Merk Investments. "I'm not sure if that dynamic is going to last forever."

"I feel like at some point,



we're going to get into 'a bad news is bad news' dynamic with respect to a potential recession being bad for the stock market," he said.

Global equities have enjoyed a largely upbeat start to the new year after a dismal 2022 marked by concerns over the war in Ukraine and central bank rate hikes aimed at taming soaring prices.

The dollar fell Friday versus the euro and other currencies over what dealers said were dimming expectations of more aggressive rate hikes from the Fed.

"A combination of slightly slower US wages growth, and a disappointing ISM services report for December has seen the US dollar slide back sharply, pulling the pound off its lowest levels since November... as traders pare back bets that the Fed might hike by (50 basis points) in February," CMC Markets analyst Michael

Hewson told AFP.

Optimism

Bourses in London, Paris and Frankfurt all climbed about one per cent or more.

Official data Friday showed that annual inflation in the eurozone dropped for a second month in a row, to 9.2 per cent in December.

It was the first decline into single digits since September and while inflation shows signs of cooling around the world, it remains at sky-high levels.

In Asia, Hong Kong's stock market dipped after three days of gains, while Singapore, Mumbai, Wellington and Manila were also in the red.

Shanghai edged up, with help from reports saying China was considering relaxing strict rules on borrowing for property developers.

Tokyo, Sydney, Seoul, Taipei, Bangkok and Jakarta also rose.

AFP

Amazon to cut more than 18,000 jobs, CEO says

New York, US – Amazon announced it will cut more than 18,000 jobs from its workforce, citing "the uncertain economy" and the fact the online retail giant had "hired rapidly" during the pandemic.

"Between the reductions we made in November and the ones we're sharing today, we plan to eliminate just over 18,000 roles," said CEO Andy Jassy in a statement to staff. He said that stores operated by the group and human resources would be the main areas affected.

US media had reported in November that the company was planning to lay off 10,000 people. Amazon had said that layoffs were planned but did not give a figure until now.

The job-slashing plan is the largest among recent workforce reductions that have impacted the once-unassailable US tech



sector, including at giants such as Facebook-owner Meta.

It is also the largest in Seattle-based Amazon's history.

Jassy said the company's leadership was "deeply aware that these role eliminations are difficult for people, and we don't take these decisions lightly."

"We are working to support those who are affected and are providing packages that include a separation payment, transitional health insurance benefits, and external job placement support," he said.

AFP

US job gains robust as wage growth slows

Washington, US – US job gains exceeded expectations in December while unemployment ticked down, a closely-watched government report said Friday, in a sign the labor market remains hotter than hoped by policymakers seeking to lower inflation.

While a strong labor market may fuel optimism that the world's biggest economy can stave off a major downturn despite an aggressive series of interest rate hikes, it is also an area of concern for the Federal Reserve as high wages can feed into inflation.

But in an encouraging sign for the Fed, the latest data showed a tempering of wage growth.

Last month, average hourly earnings rose less than anticipated by 0.3 per cent to US\$32.82, while November's jump was revised lower, the Labor Department said.

Overall, employers added 223,000 workers, down from the revised 256,000 figure in November, though still higher than analysts expected.

While unemployment is typi-



In this file photo a 'We Are Hiring' sign is posted in front of a restaurant in Los Angeles (AFP)

cally expected to edge up as interest rates rise, the jobless rate dipped to 3.5 per cent as participation moved higher.

Unemployment has hovered between 3.5 per cent and 3.7 per cent in recent months, and the latest figure is the lowest since February 2020.

President Joe Biden touted the fall in joblessness while striking an optimistic note on broader efforts to combat inflation.

"This moderation in job growth is appropriate, and we should expect it to continue in the months ahead, even as we maintain resilience in our labor market recovery," Biden said in a statement.

"We still have work to do to bring down inflation... But we are moving in the right direction," he added.

In December, "notable job gains occurred in leisure and

hospitality, health care, construction, and social assistance," the Labor Department said.

But it added that employment in leisure and hospitality still remains below its pre-pandemic level.

Because the labor market remains tight, "companies are still being forced to raise wages to retain workers, and are still struggling to fill vacancies," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at job

search platform ZipRecruiter. This risks pushing wages higher.

Average hourly earnings have risen 4.6 per cent in the past 12 months, the Labor Department said, as many companies experiencing labor shortages after disruption from the pandemic have been keen to find and retain workers.

In a promising sign, that figure was still lower than the 4.8 per cent annual jump in November and larger spikes earlier this year.

"For inflation to fall, we have to see wages have a healthy pace of growth that doesn't outpace the ability of firms to absorb those costs without raising their prices," said Nela Richardson, chief economist at payroll firm ADP.

"Any slowdown in wage growth is a good signal in terms of inflation," she told reporters this week. Employment data has been signaling "positive momentum in job growth and moderating wages," economist Rubeeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said Friday.

AFP

CES tech show gala looks to shake off global economic gloom

Las Vegas, US – The annual CES consumer electronics extravaganza threw open its doors in Las Vegas on Thursday as the industry looks to the latest innovations to help cure the pain from an ailing global economy.

High inflation, lingering supply chain troubles and company layoffs provide a dark backdrop for technology's premier trade show where more than 100,000 attendees are expected from around the world until Sunday.

Consumer Technology Association research director Steve Koenig reminded CES-goers that much as major innovations like smartphones first seen at the expo soared to success after the last big economic downturn

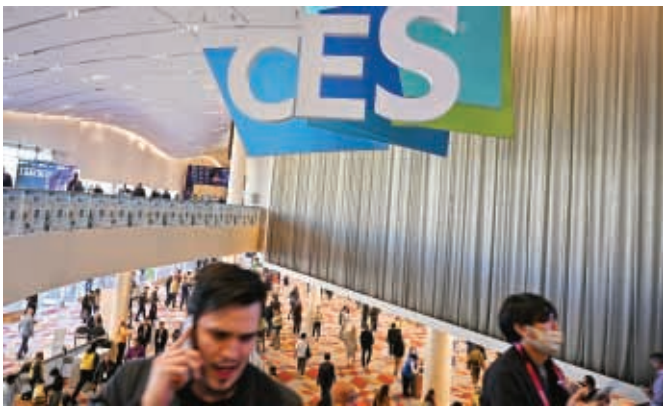
more than a decade ago, the sector could once again help fuel a global recovery.

"This time, I think the powerful new waves of technological change that will really remedy inflation and restore global GDP growth will come from the enterprise side," Koenig said during a presentation by the CTA, which runs the event.

Robotics to make workplaces more efficient, on-the-job virtual reality, and automated vehicles such as tractors that boost productivity will make this happen, according to Koenig.

Homes and cars

CES, which this year features 3,200 exhibitors, has existed for



Attendees walk through the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas on Friday (AFP)

over a half a century, fueled by the promise of technology from companies large and small.

Spreading out from the Las Vegas convention center to ball-

rooms in an array of hotels on the famous Strip in Sin City, crowds pushed through exhibits of televisions, electric roller skates, self-piloting baby strollers and even

an AI-backed bird feeder.

While major TV makers including LG, Samsung and TCL again wowed passersby with stunning displays, gone are the days when CES was first and foremost about TVs, laptops and gadgets, according to Forrester principal analyst Thomas Huxson.

"Now that technology innovation and software is embedded everywhere, expect many brands to showcase innovation around electric vehicles, robotics, and embedded artificial intelligence," Huxson said.

"Don't get me wrong, there is no doubt we will continue to see a ton of robotic toys and gadgets."

CES has, however, increasingly become a place for showing off electric cars (EVs) that are becoming internet-linked computers on wheels.

"Beyond EVs, the recent US laws like the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) will spark more interest in sustainability innovation," Huxson said.

This was a reference to the US government's recently passed IRA that is expected to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into green technology and other climate friendly projects.

While CES organizers say show attendance is taking another step toward a return to pre-pandemic levels, there is a lingering Covid effect.

CES, like many other trade shows, went completely virtual in 2021, and last year mixed real-world with online events drawing a light crowd to Las Vegas.

TV and appliance makers as well as startups at the forefront of artificial intelligence have returned to CES this go-around, with Meta letting people try its latest virtual reality gear and Google showing off its own smart home offerings.

South Korean giant Samsung unveiled a new line-up of televisions, along with kitchen appliances infused with artificial intelligence to work with other connected devices and online platforms.

AFP

Hajj Terminal revamped for Islamic Arts Biennale

The Western Hajj Terminal at King Abdulaziz Airport in Jeddah is no ordinary airport terminal. Designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and a winner of the 1983 Aga Khan Award, it became a port of entry and junction point for hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims from around the world on their way to Awwal Bait – the First House of Allah, the Holy Kaaba in Mecca, a building at the centre of Islam’s most famous mosque.

When the terminal opened, it had the world’s largest cable-stayed, fabric-roofed construction; as it was made on an unprecedented scale, the tensile structure made use of newly developed fabric as a permanent structural element instead of the cable-supported in two directions technique, making it a first-of-its-kind in airport design, a press release said.

Today, the Islamic Arts Biennale (to be held here from January 23 to April 23) re-imagines this pioneering structure as a cultural space. The architectural concept of the design is based on a volumetric abstraction inspired by the module of the existing tent canopy structures and the traditional courtyard houses of the past. Whilst the design intertwines with the current Western



Aya al Bakree

Hajj Terminal design, the Biennale complex expresses its independence in its visual identity. Instead of competing with the canopies present, the complex complements them by adopting the current grid, breaking it down and using it as the basis of a new expression. The result is that the cluster of volumes resembles fragments escaping an ordered grid, transforming an urban space into an inspiring cultural venue.

Aya al Bakree, CEO, Diriyah Biennale Foundation, said, “The Western Hajj Terminal and the city of Jeddah are as integral to the exhibition as the works of art and artifacts displayed. Evoking memory and emotion, the Western Hajj Terminal and Jeddah have symbolised ports of entry to



millions of pilgrims on their way to Mecca, with Jeddah representing a junction point between cultures, where the exchange of goods and ideas has taken place for centuries.

Permanently transforming an urban space into a cultural one is one of our greatest achievements at Diriyah Biennale Foundation, and we are certain that doing so will continue to enrich the art ecosystem in the city for years to come.”

The Islamic Arts Biennale acts

as a platform to mirror the very experience of Hajjis from around the world, by reflecting on the diversity of the Muslim experience through a constellation of 60+ artists from over 20 countries, whose work will complement around 200 loans of artefacts from local and international institutions.

Themed Awwal Bait (‘The First House’), the event interweaves commissioned works and never-exhibited-before historical artefacts that convey a

holistic perspective of the Islamic arts, delivered through a unique sensorial experience aimed at heightening consciousness, and inspiring pause and reflection on the rituals that guide people individually, and that creates a sense of belonging collectively.

‘The unique visitor experience, spread over 12,000sqm of exhibition space, will include an evocative journey through five galleries and the grand canopies. The Biennale will provide two main areas for exhibiting art-

works and artefacts, the first being a linear sequence of galleries whose spaces, ceiling heights and lighting will be modulated to enhance the visitor’s cognitive and emotional experience, and the second part consisting of two pavilions, Mecca and Medina, and an outdoor area under the canopy of the Western Hajj Terminal, for display of artworks and art installations.

Firas Hnoosh, architectural advisor to the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, says, “The filtered

sunlight seeping through the tent structures of the Western Hajj Terminal, long vistas and views of sky and desert will undoubtedly create an inimitable experience from the indoor galleries of the first section of the Biennale. This combined with two stand-alone pavilions of Mecca and Medina, a curated selection of food and beverage outlets, a cinema and theatre, library, gift- and bookshops, workshop spaces for the arts and crafts, indoor and outdoor children’s play areas and VIP lounge, is intended to offer an inclusive, wholesome, and meditative experience for all visiting this landmark Biennale.”

Inspired by Jeddah’s heritage as a port of connection, the extraordinary venue is also a nod to the city’s profound cultural heritage and its current place as an art hub.

One of the first exhibitions in the Kingdom, hosted in 1968, showcased the work of two female artists, Safeya Binzagr and Mounira Mosly at Jeddah’s Dar-Al-Tarbia Al-Hadetha school. The late Mayor of Jeddah, Mohammed Said Farsi, too, also beautified the Red Sea port city in the 1970s with over 400 sculptures by esteemed artists including Aref El Rayess, Henry Moore, and Alexander Calder.

‘Wooden Sculptures’ exhibition opens at Bait Al Zubair on Jan 4

Under the patronage of H E Dr Madiha al Shaibaniya, Minister of Education, Bait Al Zubair, in partnership with the Ministry of Education launched a ‘Wooden Sculptures’ exhibition by fine arts teachers of Al Dhahirah Governorate at Bait Al Zubair on January 4.

The Omani environment is full of materials that inspire artists in various fields of fine arts. Wood is one of the materials that is widespread in the Omani environment and varies in shape, size, and type, opening up avenues to study it deeply. With this in mind, the idea emerged to have a training programme for fine arts teachers, to enrich their artistic expertise, to direct their thoughts to benefit from wood and apply it in various arts curricula, and to transfer knowledge related to it to students, a press release said.

The idea of the exhibition comes through the participation of the Arts Unit to enhance the production of teachers through



programmes and training workshops in which they participate in the professional development plan for fine arts teachers in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

The exhibition, showcasing 30 sculptural works with various techniques and treatments by teachers, will continue till February 5, (Opening hours - Saturday to Thursday, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm)

Zahara turns to Amadeus to enhance customer experience

For more than 50 years, Zahara Travel has become renowned for demonstrating an entrepreneurial and pioneering approach to corporate travel. This strategy has helped the company gain prominence as a premium service-oriented organisation, resulting in winning the ‘Oman Award for Excellence’ in Tourism six times.

Thanks to its collaboration with Amadeus, the corporate travel specialist plans to boost its level of automation to deliver an enhanced and more personalized customer service. In addition to winning the Oman Tourism Excellence Awards, Zahara Travel has won several leading Airline Awards and is recognized by top Corporates for service excellence, a press release said.

Zahara Travel has chosen to implement the latest cloud-based Amadeus Selling Platform, which delivers fast access to a comprehensive range of travel services using real-time connectivity for the most up-to-date in-



ventory and pricing. To benefit customers further, Zahara Travel will deploy Amadeus Productivity Suite, which is a behind-the-scenes set of tools that enable travel consultants to focus on delivering the best customer service rather than the administrative processes that need to be managed. Amadeus Web Services is another key component of the agreement between the two companies.

Gautam Broota, CEO of Zahara Travel and Service Bureau, said, “As a pioneer in the Travel and Tourism business in Oman, we strive to offer our customers the most efficient and seamless award-winning service. Our part-

nership with Amadeus ensures we are using highly advanced products and services that enhance our ability to deliver customer service in a comprehensive and personalized manner. We are excited about the expanded range of solutions included in this agreement as it elevates our offering to the next level for all our stakeholders.”

Ernesto Sanchez Beaumont, Managing Director, Amadeus Gulf, added, “Amadeus’ travel solutions will help enhance the services offered by Zahara Travel and is backed by our commitment to support our customers every step of the way to get the travel industry thriving.”

Thai food fest from Jan 10 at Grand Millennium



Grand Millennium Muscat brings forth an exciting opportunity to experience the rich flavours of Thailand. For the first time, Thai Master Chef Sirlak Sukamran and her team will visit Muscat to showcase their expertise in authentic Thai dishes.

The food festival features delightful Thai cuisine with live street food cooking stations, cooking classes, and Thai entertainment from January 10-31, a press release said.

Every day, Bahriyat Restaurant will serve an ala carte menu of well-known Thai dishes during lunch and dinner. Also, one can learn the specific ingredients and cooking techniques used in each meal while enjoying the delicious meal afterwards in Master Chef Sirlak’s cooking class.

Luca Medda, cluster general manager at Grand Millennium Muscat, said, “We are excited to announce our Thai fest. We invite Omanis and expatriates to try authentic Thai food.”

BPG’s CX First nets big business wins across GCC

On the back of an unprecedented volume of new business wins, award-winning agency BPG (Bates PanGulf, part of WPP) is undergoing a strategic transformation aimed at strengthening its specialist consultancy services and meeting client needs.

Underpinned by a digital first, integrated by intent positioning, the transformation aims to create a simplified, silo-free organisation - ready to seize opportunities across the MENA region. Revenue from these recent wins alone will clock over USD 6mn, a press release said.

Avi Bhojani, Group CEO, BPG, said, “Three pivotal moments have shaped BPG over the last three decades. In 1995, BPG 1.0 was born after winning an integrated mandate from the Dubai Government to build and execute Dubai Shopping Festival. We evolved into BPG 2.0 in 2003, after winning mandates for public advocacy in Iraq. It’s



now time for BPG 3.0 after a significant, game-changing creative win in Saudi Arabia, crowning a host of wins through 2022.

“We are transforming into an agile integrated agency, able to scale up swiftly to meet client demands and deliver disruptive work in a fast-evolving commercial landscape. With our client-centric strategy and execution, we look forward to building and strengthening many more

MENA brands in 2023 and beyond.”

A host of multi-sectoral business wins will supplement a robust pipeline of existing work in 2023. Notably, this includes Jumeirah Group after BPG bagged the remit for design, content, and creative for the global luxury hotel company, which operates a world-class 6,500+ key portfolio of 25 luxury properties across the Middle East, Europe,

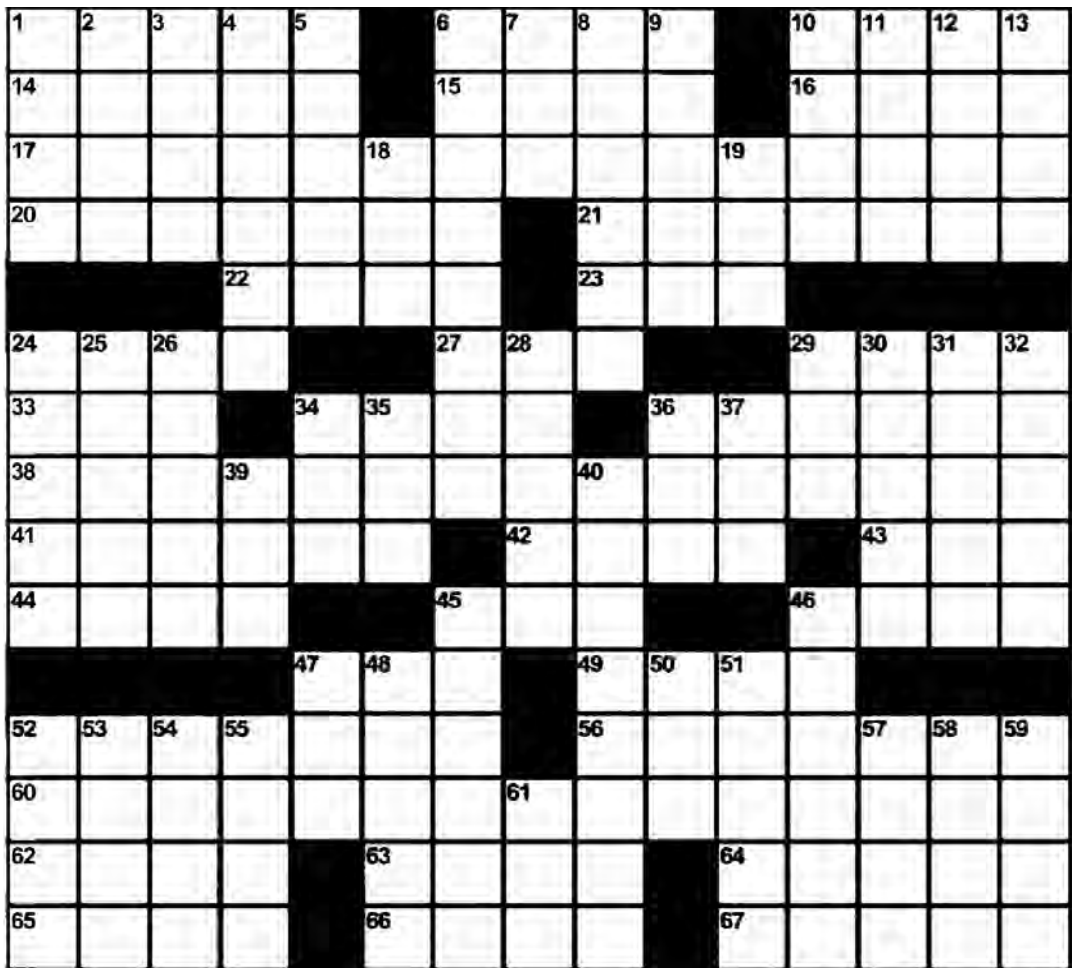
and Asia.

BPG’s multi-year remit with one of the Sultanate of Oman’s larger banks includes delivering brand, advertising, content, and CX across the country, as well as supporting regional expansion. BPG’s wins in fiercely competitive pitches against global network and independent agencies testifies to the power of its compelling integrated by intent offering.

Other significant recent new business wins include GROHE, Kwai, Titan Eyewear, and Zayed Sustainability Prize in the UAE and Assima Hospital, Dhama National Health Insurance, Ooredoo Telecom and Weyay Bank in Kuwait. Mandates encompass integrated marketing, communications, influencer marketing, creative advertising, branding, media services, digital and performance marketing, social media, and content management.

Souheil Arabi, Group Chief Operating Officer, BPG, added, “We are excited to welcome 2023 with a well-articulated vision, clear execution plan and disruptive work with some incredible clients and brands. BPG’s success has been built on our continuous evolution and collaborative culture. With this transformation, we go a step further - leveraging technology to create an agile, integrated and collaborative platform.”

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Quench
- 6) Beach locale
- 10) Issue a caveat to
- 14) Personnel director, often
- 15) Sometime today
- 16) Cookie brand
- 17) It might be jumpin'
- 20) Lay waste to
- 21) When the expectant are expecting
- 22) Type of whale
- 23) Permitted
- 24) Certain beach bird
- 27) "... will be done"
- 29) Taro root
- 33) St. kin
- 34) Chinese dynasty (Var.)
- 36) Worthy of a medal
- 38) It's not proof of future success
- 41) Parting words
- 42) Complain pettily
- 43) When you might come down
- 44) Transmit
- 45) Suffix for a world record

- 46) Expression of praise (Var.)
 - 47) Personals, e.g.
 - 49) Select carefully
 - 52) Like some elephants
 - 56) Scared, to a stereo-typical hayseed
 - 60) From Methuselah's time
 - 62) Connive
 - 63) Common canine name
 - 64) Garden bulb
 - 65) About half of all deliveries
 - 66) Addition column
 - 67) All in
- DOWN**
- 1) Certain herring
 - 2) "That's..."
 - 3) Music and dance are two
 - 4) Continue
 - 5) Baseball miscue
 - 6) One who quarantines
 - 7) Former French coin
 - 8) Like an aristocrat
 - 9) Follow afterward
 - 10) Furniture material
 - 11) La Scala solo
 - 12) Cost of living?

- 13) School jotting
- 18) Soused one's sound
- 19) Boeing 757, e.g.
- 24) Spanish finger foods
- 25) A void doing
- 26) Fir tree exudation
- 28) Angry fits
- 29) Good bit of history
- 30) Beneficiary
- 31) Pronouncements
- 32) Indian or Atlantic
- 34) PC "brain"
- 35) Spell
- 36) Many mins.
- 37) Pair of jammies?
- 39) One of the Kennedys
- 40) Shunned ones
- 45) Break out of jail
- 46) Emphasize the importance of
- 4 7) Consumed
- 48) Performed, in Shakespeare
- 50) Alien craft
- 51) Some boxing blows
- 52) Dangerous snakes
- 53) It holds plenty of fodder
- 54) Get _ a good thing
- 55) Play divisions
- 57) Part in a sitcom

- 58) One of "The Waltons"
- 59) U.S. govt. subgroup
- 61) "Hither" partner

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The delicate balance between power and passivity is something you will be especially adept at today, which makes it a very good day to push your agenda just a little harder. Your powerful fists are encased in some very soft velvet gloves right now, and you will be able to pretty much get whatever you want simply by asking for it with a smile. Your knowledge of what motivates people is going to set you apart from the rest of the crowd.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

How quickly your career grows is a lot more closely tied to the quality of your reputation than you might think. It's not that you have to look good more than you have to be good. It's just that you need to be mindful of how you come off to others, especially those who hold power over your position. Merely doing your job well and then going home isn't enough anymore. You have to show that you're a team player if you want to become the coach.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

If someone starts up some shallow or idle chitchat today, your eyes will glaze right over. Your mind is hungry for something interesting, something challenging, and something that's just a little bit frustrating. It's a great time to strike out on your own and search for a unique experience in an unusual destination. Visit an art gallery or any other place designed for contemplation and thought. There are ideas waiting to be discovered by the analytical part of your mind.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

The amusement you feel in watching someone else struggle isn't necessarily a bad thing! Don't feel bad if you're entertained by watching someone else try to figure something out. As long as you're supportive and not hurting their progress, you can react to what you see however you want to! Censoring how you truly feel is the same thing as lying, so don't make yourself act a certain way just because you think society dictates it. That's not who you are.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Nothing is quite as it seems today, so this great flow of energy you're feeling is going to be hard to deal with. You'll be like a racehorse prancing at the starting gate, eager to go forward but unable to. But things happen when they need to happen, so getting frustrated or assuming that other people are causing the delay is just a waste of time. Distract yourself with something else, anything that takes your mind off things.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Flex your muscles a little bit today. It's been too long since you reminded yourself how powerful you really are, especially in a group or team environment. You have a lot of good ideas to contribute, and it's high time that you became more of a leader. People around you are going to be very receptive to any suggestions you make now, and they're looking for the new ideas that you are sure to have. Push things in the direction you want them to go.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

All sorts of answers come flowing at you today even though you might not be asking anyone any questions! The value of this flood of information won't be completely obvious to you right away, so you'll have to do a good job of organizing what you experience. Be meticulous with recording your experiences today. If you don't have a journal, this would be a particularly good time to start one. What you write down today will be very useful to you later.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You might just meet your match today in terms of charm and sass. When you run into someone you know through a mutual friend, their flattering words and witty conversation will entertain you, but they might end up being even more entranced by you. After all, you're more magnetic and charming than you usually get credit for! Enjoy listening to someone laugh at your humor and take notes on the way they deliver their own zingers. You could learn a lot from them.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Make way for a reunion of sorts today. A couple of old relatives are interested in connecting with you again, and you should hear what they have to say. People from your past are a part of who you are now, even if they didn't figure as prominently as you would have liked. Now is your chance to clarify old misunderstandings, repair broken promises, and (most importantly) forgive and forget. You are ready for a new outlook on this old situation.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

What makes you think that your thoughts aren't as valuable as anyone else's? Just because someone with some silly type of authority has recently made it seem like no one is interested in what you have to say doesn't mean it's true. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth! There are some mind games going on, so ignore anyone who tries to keep you out of the discussion today. You count too. In fact, people want to hear from you much more than they want to hear from the person who's trying to intimidate you.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

The biggest lesson you need to learn right now is that being aggressive and being rude aren't the same thing! You have a right to be forceful or enthusiastic about what you're doing, whether it's pursuing a romantic interest or going for that new job. Don't be afraid to let your bolder side come to the forefront. Sure, it might shock a few people, but it will also signify to everyone that you aren't somebody who will let people walk all over them.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

More than usual, you will be drawn to beauty today. Appearances matter, and you could find yourself making many decisions based on them. Try to surround yourself with natural beauty. Take a walk if the weather cooperates, or look at nature photographs. Seeing nature in its more romantic, poetic form will help ease your stress level significantly. You should also give more thought to your own appearance today. Maybe it's time to go shopping for a few new outfits.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. In 2002 what, possibly unique, reaction was observed in cichlids, a freshwater fish species, in one short stretch of the River Congo?

- A. They became viviparous
- B. The fish in the stretch grew close to 10 times the usual size
- C. They became bottom feeders
- D. Cichlids had genetically diverged on opposite sides of the river

02. Who said "I never hated a man enough to give him his diamonds back"?

- A. Zsa Zsa Gabor
- B. Ethel Merman
- C. Elizabeth Taylor
- D. Diana Dors

03. Where are the vast grass-land plains known as the Pampas?

- A. Mexico
- B. Argentina
- C. Chile
- D. Venezuela

Answers: 1.D 2.A 3.B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

E	Y	R	E
O	P	O	H
A	L	O	T
H	U	S	S

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

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

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

Iran executes two more men in connection with protests

Paris, France - Iran on Saturday executed two men for killing a paramilitary force member during unprecedented protests sparked by the death in custody of a young woman.

The latest hangings double the number of executions to four over the nationwide protests, which escalated since mid-September into calls for an end to Iran's clerical regime.

Two men were put to death in December, sparking global outrage and new Western sanctions against Iran.

Judicial news agency Mizan Online reported 'Mohammad Mahdi Karami and Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, the main perpetrators of the crime that led to the martyrdom of Ruhollah Ajamian, were hanged this morning'.

Prosecutors said the 27-year-old militiaman was stripped naked and killed by a group of mourners who had been paying tribute to a slain protester, Hadis Najafi.

The executions come in defiance of a campaign by international rights groups for the lives of the two men to be spared. Karami's father had also begged the judiciary not to kill his son.

Amnesty International had decried the 'fast-tracked unfair group trial' of the two men which it said bore no 'resemblance to a meaningful judicial proceeding'.

Authorities have arrested thousands of people in the wave of demonstrations that began with the September death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22.

The Iranian Kurdish woman had been arrested by morality police for allegedly breaching



Mohammad Mahdi Karami and Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini attending a court hearing in Karaj on December 5, 2022 (AFP)

The latest hangings double the number of executions to four over the protests, which escalated since mid-September into calls for an end to Iran's clerical regime

the regime's strict dress code for women.

Fear for others

Ajamian belonged to the Basij paramilitary force linked to the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

He died in Karaj, west of Tehran, on November 3 after being attacked with 'knives, stones, fists, kicks' and dragged along a street, a judiciary spokesman said at the time.

The court of first instance had sentenced Karami and Hosseini to death in early Decem-

ber, Mizan said.

On Tuesday the Supreme Court upheld the sentence.

Mahmood Amiry-Moghadam, director of Oslo-based Iran Human Rights (IHR), said both men 'were subjected to torture, sentenced after sham trials... without the minimum standards for due process'.

In a tweet, he said the latest executions 'must have even stronger consequences' for Iran's regime and specifically urged 'new and stronger sanctions against individuals and entities'. Karami's parents had in

December issued a video pleading with the judiciary to spare his life.

"I respectfully ask the judiciary, I beg you please, I ask you.. to remove the death penalty from my son's case," said Mashallah Karami, describing his son as a former national karate team member.

Karami's father had told Iranian media that a family lawyer had not been able to access his son's case file.

Mohamad Aghasi, whom the family wanted to handle the case, wrote on Twitter that Karami had not been allowed to have a final meeting with his family and had foregone food and water in protest.

IHR gave Karami's age as 22. Hossein was 39, according to another Norway-based rights group, Hengaw.

They were among 14 people courts have sentenced to death over the unrest, according to an AFP count based on official information. Four have now been executed, two others have had their sentences confirmed by the Supreme Court, six are awaiting new trials and two others can appeal.

Dozens of other protesters face charges punishable by death, IHR said in late December. "We are mourning as a nation," prominent US-based dissident Masih Alinejad said in a Twitter post. "Help us save others."

British actor of Iranian origin Nazanin Boniadi, an ambassador for Amnesty International in the United Kingdom, said on Twitter that the 'political cost of Iran executions' must increase.

AFP



Palestinian protesters burn a portrait depicting Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu during a rally in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on Friday (AFP)

Israel govt to withhold some PA revenues

Jerusalem - Israel's new hard-right government announced on Friday that it will withhold some Palestinian Authority revenues in response to its move to seek 'consequences' from the United Nations for the Israeli occupation.

The decision was taken at the first security cabinet meeting of the new government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which is regarded as the most right-wing in Israel's history. The prime minister's office said the cabinet was acting in 'response to the Palestinian Authority's decision to wage political and legal war against the State of Israel'.

Last week, at the PA's request, the UN General Assembly asked the International Court of Justice to consider consequences for Israel over its occupation of Palestinian territories, a day after the Netanyahu government took office. The General Assembly voted 87-26 with 53 abstentions on the resolution, with Western nations split but virtually unanimous support in the Islamic world.

"The current government will not sit idly by in the face of this

war and will respond as necessary," Netanyahu's office said.

It said around US\$40mn of the tax receipts it withheld from the PA would be used to compensate 'families of victims murdered in Palestinian terrorist attacks'.

It said it would also withhold a sum equivalent to the amount spent in 2022 on 'payments made by the PA to terrorists and their families', without specifying how much.

The PA has long made monthly payments to the families of Palestinians killed in clashes with the Israeli security forces or while carrying out attacks against Israeli targets.

Under past peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel collects customs duties and other tax revenues on the PA's behalf, which it has often used as a bargaining counter with the Palestinian leadership in the past. The cabinet also ordered a 'moratorium on Palestinian construction plans in Area C', the largest part of the occupied West Bank which falls under Israeli administrative and security control.

AFP

Iran replaces police chief amid protests

Tehran, Iran - Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed on Saturday a new police chief, nearly four months into protests triggered by Mahsa Amini's death.

The Islamic republic has been gripped by unrest since the September 16 death in custody of Iranian Kurdish Amini, 22, following her arrest for allegedly violating the country's strict dress code for women.

Khamenei, who has the final say in major state policies and is commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces, appointed General Ahmad-Reza Radan to replace Hos-

sein Ashtari, said a statement posted on the leader's official website.

Khamenei ordered the police department to 'improve its capabilities' as well as 'train specialised forces for various security sectors'.

Radan, born in 1963, was deputy police chief from 2008 to 2014 and went on to lead the police's Centre for Strategic Studies. He was replaced as deputy by Ashtari, who was made the force's commander in 2015.

Both Radan and Ashtari began their military career in the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. AFP

Thousands march to pay tribute to murdered Kurds

Paris, France - Thousands of demonstrators marched in central Paris on Saturday to pay tribute to three Kurdish activists murdered a decade ago.

The march, an annual event since the killings on January 9, 2013, came two weeks after an eerily similar triple slaying on December 23 at the Kurdish Cultural Centre in Paris - just a few minutes' walk from the site of the earlier shootings.

The organisers said more than 25,000 people from all over Europe had joined the rally.

They carried banners with the pictures of the 2013 victims and slogans such as 'The Turkish government has massacred three more Kurds' as they walked from the Gare du Nord station in the north of the capital towards Place de la Republique, a popular spot



Demonstrators gather on Place de la Republique during a tribute march in Paris, on Saturday (AFP)

for demonstrations.

In 2013, Sakine Cansiz, 54, a founder of the PKK Kurdistan

Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a long insurgency against Turkey, was killed execution-

style with shots to the head.

Two other women were killed in the same way: Fidan Dogan, 28

and Leyla Sayilemez, 24 at the Kurdish Information Centre in Paris' 10th district.

The PKK, which fights for increased autonomy for the Kurdish population, is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

Turkey is a member of the NATO and considered as crucial for the protection of the military alliance's southeastern flank.

A Turkish maintenance worker at Charles de Gaulle airport had been due to go on trial for the 2013 attack, but he died from a brain tumour shortly before his trial was due to start, in December 2016. Kurdish activists in France have always alleged that the Turkish secret service ordered the killings. AFP

29 killed in operation to arrest Mexico drug kingpin's son

Culiacán, Mexico - Ten soldiers and 19 suspected criminals were killed in an operation to arrest a son of jailed drug trafficker Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman, Mexico's government said on Friday, with a dramatic shootout sowing terror at an airport.

Thousands of soldiers retook control of the Sinaloa cartel stronghold of Culiacan, which resembled a war zone after furious gunmen went on the rampage to try to free their boss.

Ovidio Guzman was captured in the northwestern city on Thursday and flown to Mexico City before being transferred to the high-security Altiplano prison in central Mexico from which 'El Chapo' once escaped.

The 32-year-old, nicknamed 'El Raton' (The Mouse), had allegedly helped to run his father's operations since the former Sinaloa cartel boss was extradited to the United States in 2017. A colonel who commanded an infantry battalion was among those killed after his team came under attack following the arrest, Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval told reporters. Another 35 soldiers sustained gunshot wounds and were taken to hospital, while 21 gunmen were arrested.

Sandoval said a civilian airliner that was about to take off from Culiacan International Airport, as well as two Mexican Air Force aircraft, were hit by gunfire



Members of the Mexican army drive on a road a day after an operation to arrest Ovidio Guzman, in Culiacan, Sinaloa state, Mexico, on Friday (AFP)

as cartel henchmen tried to free Ovidio Guzman. The military planes 'had to make an emer-

gency landing' after receiving 'a significant number of impacts,' said Sandoval. No injuries re-

sulted from the plane attacks and Culiacan airport resumed operations on Friday.

Multimillion-dollar bounty

The United States had issued a reward of up to US\$5mn for information leading to Ovidio Guzman's capture. It accuses him of being a key player in the Sinaloa cartel founded by his father. The arrest came as Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador prepared to welcome his US counterpart Joe Biden for a North America leaders' summit next week where security is expected to be high on the agenda.

The drug trafficker's deten-

tion was 'not an insignificant accomplishment by Mexican authorities', US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said. "And we're certainly grateful for that," he said, adding that the United States would keep working 'in lockstep' with Mexico, notably to tackle trafficking of the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl.

Mexico denied that the United States had been involved in the operation to catch Ovidio Guzman.

"We act autonomously, independently. Yes there is cooperation and there will continue to be, but we make the decisions as a sovereign government," Lopez Obrador told reporters.

Ovidio Guzman secured a court order blocking his immediate extradition to the United States. In any case, Mexico's government ruled out a fast-track extradition, saying the proper legal process would be followed.

Authorities said calm had returned to Culiacan, where security forces removed dozens of stolen and burnt out vehicles scattered throughout the city of 800,000 people.

Videos on social media on Thursday had shown passengers and Aeromexico airline employees ducking behind counters as gunfire rang out at Culiacan airport. AFP

Kevin McCarthy named US House speaker

He quelled a rebellion among party’s ranks that paralyzed the lower chamber of Congress for days

Washington, US - Republican favourite Kevin McCarthy was named speaker of the US House of Representatives on Saturday as he quelled a fierce rebellion among his party’s ranks that had paralyzed the lower chamber of Congress for days.

McCarthy was always the frontrunner to lead the Republican-led House, but his victory in the small hours of the morning was almost derailed by a right-wing revolt in his party that extended the contest to a historic 15 rounds of voting.

The speaker wields huge influence in Washington by presiding over House business and is second in line to the presidency, after the vice president.

As he accepted the gavel, McCarthy vowed House Republicans would ‘pass bills to fix the nation’s challenges, from the wide open southern border to ‘America last’ energy policies, to woke indoctrination in our schools’. ‘America’s long term challenges - the debt and the rise of the Chinese Communist Party - Congress must be with one voice on both of these issues,’ he told the House.

Democratic US President Joe Biden congratulated McCarthy in a statement calling for coopera-



Newly elected Speaker of the US House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy holds the gavel after he was elected on the 15th ballot at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on Saturday (AFP)

tion between the leaders of the two parties.

“As I said after the midterms, I am prepared to work with Republicans when I can and voters made clear that they expect Re-

publicans to be prepared to work with me as well,” Biden said.

Republican infighting McCarthy had been hoping to secure the gavel in the 14th vot-

ing round before midnight on Friday but suffered a shock setback amid astonishing scenes of Republican infighting as he came up short of a majority by just one vote out of more than 400 cast.

As Matt Gaetz voted ‘present’ to deny McCarthy the gavel, the disappointed Republican leader went over to talk to the Florida lawmaker-elect face-to-face. Gaetz pointed a finger at McCarthy, who began retreating as Alabama’s Mike Rogers lunged at Gaetz and had to be held back with a restraining arm across his face.

“The ‘Speaker’ selection process, as crazy as it may seem, has made it all much bigger and more important than if done the more conventional way,” former president Donald Trump chimed in on his Truth Social platform. “Congratulations to Kevin McCarthy and our GREAT Republican Party!”

The Republicans, who hold a razor-thin majority, had been mired in internecine warfare as Trump-backed McCarthy failed to win the speakership in multiple ballots, with around 20 conservative hardliners blocking his path since Tuesday.

But the 57-year-old Californian was able to pick up more than a dozen votes among the defectors in two afternoon voting rounds on Friday after offering major concessions.

McCarthy predicted he would win in the 14th round - but suf-

fered a humiliation given wall-to-wall coverage on US news channels before finally bagging his victory in the 15th.

Major concessions

There were more rounds of voting in the fractious 2023 contest than in any speaker election since the Civil War.

McCarthy had projected confidence all week, even as he was bleeding votes rather than adding to the base of around 200 Republicans who have backed him all along.

His party’s takeover of Congress is expected to herald the end of cross-party cooperation, with the legislative process gridlocked and Republicans promising an aggressive agenda of investigations into most aspects of Biden’s administration and his family. Democrats and some of McCarthy’s supporters, in private, are concerned that he has been offering his far-right critics radical policy commitments that will make the House ungovernable.

There were reports, which AFP has not verified, that he had agreed to propose keeping spending at 2022 levels, including a cap on military funding which would have the same ef-

fect as a US\$75bn cut.

That has raised alarm among defense hawks pushing for the United States to project strength amid Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and an emboldened Chinese stance on Taiwan.

No single lawmaker, however senior, has the authority to set budgets, but the fact that the suggestion was being taken seriously underscores the Republicans’ turn towards isolationism under Trump’s leadership.

Other lawmakers-elect were complaining that McCarthy was handing the hardliners plum committee posts and changes to the rules that would severely curtail the role of the speaker.

The renegade Republicans are understood to have flipped their votes in exchange for rule changes making it possible to oust the speaker in a vote called by just one member.

They are also asking for an outsized role in deciding which bills make it to the floor and how they are handled.

Democrats said the speaker role would be a poisoned chalice, as the compromises McCarthy has made will leave him as the weakest speaker in modern history.

AFP

UN urges ‘impartial’ probe after 28 killed in Burkina Faso

Geneva, Switzerland - The UN rights chief called on Saturday on the transitional authorities in militant-hit Burkina Faso to swiftly and transparently probe the killing of 28 people whose bodies were found last week-end.

Volker Turk welcomed that authorities had said they would investigate after the bodies were discovered in the north-west of the country.

“I call on them to ensure it is prompt, thorough, impartial and transparent and to hold all those responsible to account regardless of position or rank,” he said.

“I have sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs underlining this exact message,” the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said. “The victims and their loved ones are owed no less.”

The UN rights office said its local sources had blamed the killings on a volunteer militia, Volontaires pour la Defense de la Patrie (VDP), created to support the army’s battle against militants.

According to the statement, they said VDP members had descended on the town, killing 28 men, ‘in apparent retaliation for an earlier attack on the group’s military base the previous night’ by suspected members of the Al-Qaeda-linked Jama’at Nasr allslam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

Burkina Faso, a landlocked West African country, is one of the poorest and most volatile nations in the world.

Since 2015, it has been grappling with an insurgency led by militants affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group that has killed tens of thousands and displaced around two million people.

Attacks targeting the security forces and civilians have increased in recent months, especially in northern and eastern regions bordering militant-torn Mali and Niger.

The VDP, set up in December 2019, comprises civilian volunteers who are given two weeks’ military training and then work



I call on them to ensure it is prompt, thorough, impartial and transparent and to hold all those responsible to account regardless of position or rank. The victims and their loved ones are owed no less

VOLKER TURK

alongside the army, typically carrying out surveillance, information-gathering or escort duties. Commentators have long worried that the poorly-trained volunteers are easy targets for the militants - and may also dangerously inflame ethnic friction without proper controls.

The UN rights chief had previously ‘raised concerns directly with the authorities regarding the potential human rights risks linked to recruitment, arming and deployment of auxiliaries in Burkina Faso’, Saturday’s statement said.

It stressed the ‘urgent need to strengthen their vetting procedures, pre-deployment training on international human rights and humanitarian law.’

‘Effective supervision by the security and defence forces’ was also needed ‘to ensure inclusion and transparency during their recruitment’, it said.

AFP

Floods devastating Australian towns

Sydney, Australia - Record-breaking floods have had a ‘devastating impact’ on isolated towns in the Australian outback, the country’s prime minister said on Saturday.

Helicopters have been winching people to safety as floodwaters rise in the sparsely populated Kimberley region of Western Australia.

While the worst of the rain has eased, some towns could be cut off for the next few days.

Emergency services have called the unfolding disaster ‘the worst flooding event’ the state has seen.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said it had been difficult

to reach some of the waterlogged areas.

“These floods are having a devastating impact,” he told reporters. “Many of these communities are communities that do it tough. The resources simply aren’t there on the ground.”

One of the worst-hit towns was Fitzroy Crossing, where residents had to wait for the sudden airstrip to dry out before military planes could bring in supplies.

According to authorities, the Kimberley region covers a tract of land three times larger than the United Kingdom but has a population of less than 40,000. Australia has been repeat-



Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (AFP)

edly lashed by heavy rain in the past two years, driven by back-to-back La Nina climate cycles.

Flash floods swept through parts of eastern Australia in November last year, tearing entire homes from their foundations in some country towns.

Tens of thousands of Sydney residents were ordered to evacuate in July when floods swamped the coastal city’s fringe.

And an east coast flooding disaster in March - caused by storms in Queensland and New South Wales - claimed more than 20 lives.

Australian researchers have repeatedly warned that climate change is amplifying the risk of natural disasters.

AFP

Six-year-old boy held after shooting teacher in US

Washington, US - A six-year-old boy opened fire in an elementary school classroom in the eastern US state of Virginia on Friday, seriously injuring a teacher, police said. No students were hurt in the incident at Richneck Elementary School in the coastal city of Newport News.

“The individual is a six-year-old student. He is right now in police custody,” local police chief Steve Drew said.

AFP

Watch out for the ‘once in 50,000-year comet’

Paris, France - A newly discovered comet could be visible to the naked eye as it shoots past Earth and the Sun in the coming weeks for the first time in 50,000 years, astronomers have said.

The comet is called C/2022 E3 (ZTF) after the Zwicky Transient Facility, which first spotted it passing Jupiter in March last year.

After travelling from the icy reaches of our Solar System it will come closest to the Sun on January 12 and pass nearest to Earth on February 1.

It will be easy to spot with a good pair of binoculars and likely even with the naked eye, provided the sky is not too illuminated by city lights or the Moon.

The comet ‘will be brightest when it is closest to the Earth’, Thomas Prince, a physics professor at the California Institute of Technology who works at the Zwicky Transient Facility, told AFP.

Made of ice and dust and emitting a greenish aura, the comet is estimated to have a diameter of around a kilometre, according to Nicolas Biver, an astrophysicist working at the Paris Observatory.

That makes it significantly smaller than NEOWISE, the last comet visible with an unaided



The Comet C/2022 E3 (ZTF) that was discovered by astronomers using the wide-field survey camera at the Zwicky Transient Facility this year in early March (AFP)

After travelling from the icy reaches of Solar System, the comet will come closest to the Sun on January 12 and pass nearest to Earth on February 1. It will be easy to spot with a binocular and even with naked eye

eye, which passed Earth in March 2020, and Hale-Bopp, which swept by in 1997 with a potentially life-ending diameter of around 60km.

But the newest visit will come closer to Earth, which

‘may make up for the fact that it is not very big’, Biver said.

While the comet will be brightest as it passes Earth in early February, a fuller moon could make spotting it difficult.

For the Northern Hemi-

sphere, Biver suggested the last week of January, when the comet passes between the Ursa Minor and Ursa Major constellations. The new moon during the weekend of January 21-22 offers a good chance for stargazers, he said.

“We could also get a nice surprise and the object could be twice as bright as expected,” Biver added.

Prince said another opportunity to locate the comet in the sky will come on February 10, when it passes close to Mars.

‘Rare visitor’

The comet has spent most of its life ‘at least 2,500 times more distant than the Earth is from the Sun’, Prince said.

Biver said the comet was believed to have come from the Oort Cloud, a theorised vast sphere surrounding the Solar System that is home to mysterious icy objects.

The last time the comet passed Earth was during the Upper Paleolithic period, when Neanderthals still roamed Earth. Prince said the comet’s next visit to the inner Solar System was expected in another 50,000 years.

But Biver said there was a possibility that after this visit the comet will be ‘permanently ejected from the Solar System’.

Among those closely watching will be the James Webb Space Telescope. However, it will not take images, instead studying the comet’s composition, Biver said.

The closer the comet is to Earth, the easier it is for telescopes to measure its composition ‘as the Sun boils off its outer layers’, Prince said.

This ‘rare visitor’ will give ‘us information about the inhabitants of our Solar system well beyond the most distant planets’, he added.

AFP

US approves new drug to treat Alzheimer's

Approval was granted despite trial results showing risks of brain swelling and bleeding

Washington, US - The US Food and Drug Administration on Friday approved a highly anticipated new drug designed to slow cognitive decline in patients in mild and early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

The FDA approval of the drug, Leqembi, also known as lecanemab, comes just days after the regulatory agency was harshly criticised in a congressional report for its green-lighting of another Alzheimer's drug, Aduhelm.

And it was granted despite trial results showing the monoclonal antibody treatment carries risks of brain swelling and bleeding. Both drugs were approved through an accelerated process that allows the FDA to fast-track approval of drugs for serious conditions where there is an unmet medical need.

Leqembi and Aduhelm, which were jointly developed by Japan's Eisai and Biogen of the United



This file photo shows a sign for biotechnology company Biogen, Inc. displayed on a building in Cambridge, Massachusetts on March 18, 2017 (AFP)

States, 'represent an important advancement in the ongoing fight to effectively treat Alzheimer's disease,' the FDA said in a statement.

"Alzheimer's disease immeasurably incapacitates the lives of those who suffer from it and has devastating effects on their loved ones," Billy Dunn of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and

Research said in a statement.

Leqembi, Dunn said, is 'the latest therapy to target and affect the underlying disease process of Alzheimer's, instead of only treating the symptoms of the disease'. Approximately 6.5mn Americans suffer from Alzheimer's, which is characterized by memory loss and declining mental acuity.

Preliminary data from a trial of Leqembi was released in September and found it slowed cognitive decline in Alzheimer's patients by 27 per cent.

The phase three trial involved nearly 1,800 people, divided between those given the drug and given a placebo, and ran over 18 months.

The complete trial data, pub-

lished in the New England Journal of Medicine, raised concern about the incidence of 'adverse effects' including brain bleeds and swelling.

The results showed that 17.3 per cent of patients administered the drug experienced brain bleeds, compared with nine per cent of those receiving a placebo. And 12.6 per cent of those tak-

ing the drug experienced brain swelling, compared with just 1.7 per cent of those in the placebo group.

Deaths were reported at approximately the same rate in both arms of the trial of the drug.

In Alzheimer's disease, two key proteins, tau and amyloid beta, build up into tangles and plaques, known together as aggregates, which cause brain cells to die and lead to brain shrinkage.

Leqembi, which is administered intravenously once every two weeks, works by targeting amyloid.

In the trial, patients receiving Leqembi had a statistically significant reduction in brain amyloid plaque compared to the placebo arm, which had no reduction of amyloid beta plaque.

Biogen and Eisai previously brought Aduhelm to market, but there was significant controversy over whether it worked, and its approval in 2021 led to three high-level resignations in the FDA.

A US congressional investigation said the accelerated approval process for Aduhelm, the first drug approved in decades to treat Alzheimer's, was 'rife with irregularities' and criticised both the agency and Biogen.

The Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Biogen set an 'unjustifiably high price' for Aduhelm of US\$56,000 a year, the congressional report said.

AFP

Hope for DR Congo village as M23 rebels quit base

Rumangabo, DR Congo - The M23 rebel group gave back a key military base in eastern DRCongo on Friday, the latest move in its pledge to retreat from conquered territories after months of advancing toward Goma.

Local residents gave a cautious welcome to the handover ceremony near Rumangabo, the Congolese army's largest base in the region, just 40km (25 miles) north of the capital.

"We're happy because God has freed us from this open-air prison," said Nyiramwiza, 35, carrying a baby on her back. "It was a nightmare. We were even scared to go the field just to get water." Taken over by the Tutsi-led M23 two months ago, Rumangabo was silent and already overgrown with vegetation that made it feel abandoned, according to AFP journalists allowed to cover the handover.

It was overseen by Kenyan forces deployed by the East African Community (EAC), and followed a similar handover last month at a base in Kibumba.

AFP

Mali junta leader pardons all 49 convicted Ivorian soldiers

Bamako, Mali - Mali's junta leader on Friday pardoned all 49 Ivorian soldiers whose arrest in July triggered a bitter diplomatic row, a government spokesman said, just a week after the courts sentenced them.

"Colonel Assimi Goita... granted a pardon with full remission of sentences to the 49 Ivorians convicted by the Malian justice system," said a statement from government spokesman Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga, the minister for territorial administration and decentralisation.

On December 30, 46 soldiers were sentenced to 20 years in prison, while three women among the original 49, who had already been freed in early September, received death sentences in absentia.

They were convicted of an 'attack and conspiracy against the government' and of seeking to undermine state security, public prosecutor Ladji Sara said in a statement at the time.

The trial opened in the capi-



Local residents read the headlines of local newspapers after the release of Ivorian soldiers, in Abidjan on Saturday (AFP)

tal Bamako on December 29 and concluded the following day. The court proceedings came in the run-up to a January 1 deadline set by leaders from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for Mali to release the soldiers or face sanctions.

Mali's junta had branded the troops - who were detained after arriving at Bamako airport on July 10 - as mercenaries.

Ivory Coast and the United

Nations say the soldiers were flown in to provide routine backup security for the German contingent of the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali.

Relations between ECOWAS and Mali had already been strained before the arrests, since elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was toppled in August 2020 by officers angered at failures to roll back a militant insurgency.

AFP

Prisoner killed, dozens wounded in riot at Myanmar jail, says junta

Yangon, Myanmar - A prisoner was killed and more than 60 wounded after a riot broke out at a Myanmar prison west of Yangon, the junta said on Saturday.

Myanmar has been in chaos since Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government was toppled in a military coup in February 2021, ending the southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

The riot at the prison in Patheingyi started after guards confiscated a mobile phone from an inmate on Thursday night and took disciplinary action, the junta said in a statement.

About 70 prisoners escaped from their cells and damaged property on Friday morning.

Prisoners used sticks, bricks and pieces of cement to attack security forces, the junta said.

Authorities tried to bring the situation under control but negotiations failed and they resorted to force.

"The authorities fired guns to break up the crowd and bring the riot under control," the state-



Family members wait for prisoners to be released from Insein Prison in Yangon on January 4 (AFP)

ment said.

The junta said one prisoner was killed 'amid fighting' and 63 inmates were wounded along with two police and nine guards.

Local media described the dead inmate as a political prisoner and BBC Burmese said he

was on terrorism charges. The junta flagged the launch of an investigation into the incident.

Last week, the junta announced it would free more than 7,000 prisoners to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from Britain.

More than 2,700 people have been killed since the military seized power and more than 13,000 people are detained as part of a crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group.

AFP

Little let-up in fighting as Ukraine, Russia mark Orthodox Christmas

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukrainians and Russians on Saturday marked Orthodox Christmas under the shadow of war, as fighting persisted despite Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin unilaterally ordering his forces to pause attacks.

Despite Putin's ceasefire order war-scarred cities in eastern Ukraine saw no significant let-up in the fighting as AFP journalists in the town of Chasiv Yar south of the frontline city of Bakhmut heard heavy artillery fire throughout much of Saturday morning.

The Russian defence ministry insisted on Saturday the army was observing the ceasefire but also said that it had repelled the Kyiv forces' attacks in eastern Ukraine and killed dozens of soldiers on Friday.

Ukrainian authorities said that three people were killed on Friday. In Moscow, 70-year-old Putin cut a lonely figure as he stood by himself at a service at a Kremlin church, the Cathedral of the Annunciation, to mark Orthodox Christmas.

In Kyiv, hundreds of worshippers on Saturday attended a historic service at the 11th century Kyiv Pechersk Lavra as Metropolitan Epifaniy, head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, led a Christmas divine liturgy in the pro-Western country's most significant Orthodox monastery.

The service is expected to anger the Moscow Patriarchate. Located in the capital Kyiv, the monastery used to be the seat of a branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that was previously



Believers attend the Christmas service at Kyiv Pechersk Lavra monastery in Kyiv on Saturday (AFP)

under Moscow's jurisdiction but which severed ties after Russia invaded Ukraine in February.

Orthodox Christians observe Christmas on January 7.

'Truly historic event'

Ukrainian worshippers hailed the service led by the head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

"We've waited for this shrine for

a long time," Veronika Martyniuk told AFP outside the church.

"This is a truly historic event, which I think every Ukrainian has been waiting for. Especially after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion," said the 19-year-old head of a choir from the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk.

Yury Slugin, a 33-year-old serviceman, said it was 'especially important' for him to see the Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian church return to the Lavra. "This is a huge step for Ukraine. Unfortunately, I am not at home today, far from my family," Slugin said, expressing hope that he will celebrate Christmas with his loved ones next year.

Security was tight around the monastery. Worshippers had their passports checked and had

to walk through metal detectors.

In Russia and Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion and used to be seen as one of the strongest bonds tying the nations.

Ukrainians have now largely turned their backs on the Russian Orthodox Church whose head Patriarch Kirill has backed the invasion. Even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has sought to distance itself from Russia. But the branch has still come under pressure from Ukrainian authorities.

The security service last year raided the Lavra, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, over suspected links to Russian agents. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was established in 2018. The Moscow Patriarchate

does not recognise the new church.

On Saturday, the general staff of Ukraine's armed forces said that Russia launched one missile strike and fired 20 rounds from multiple rocket launchers over the past 24 hours. In the eastern region of Donetsk, two people died and seven were wounded, while in the southern region of Kherson one person lost his life and another seven were injured on Friday, said Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of Ukraine's presidency.

"Peaceful settlements in the region were attacked with artillery, anti-aircraft guns, mortars and tanks," said Yaroslav Yanushkevych, the head of the Kherson regional administration.

AFP

INDIA

Air India 'pee-gate': Mishra in judicial custody

New Delhi, India - Delhi's Patiala House Court on Saturday sent accused Shankar Mishra, who had allegedly urinated on a co-passenger onboard an Air India flight between New York and Delhi on November 26 last year, to 14 days judicial custody.

The Delhi Police had sought three days of police custody of Shankar Mishra. Advocate Manu Sharma appearing for Shankar Mishra submitted that in the FIR only one non-bailable offence is mentioned, others are bailable offences.

Metropolitan Magistrate Anamika recorded the submission made by Police that Shankar Mishra has been non-cooperative. It further recorded that the same court issued a non-bailable warrant against him.

"Accused Shankar Mishra's mobile phone was traced and he was located in Bengaluru. He could not even be traced at his workplace. The entire material points out that he was deliberately not joining the probe," noted the Delhi Court.

Meanwhile, accused Shankar Mishra's lawyer moved a bail



Accused S Mishra is seen in Police custody after being arrested from Bengaluru in the Air India passenger urinating case, in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

plea in Delhi's Patiala Court. The plea will be heard on January 11.

Before taking to the Patiala House Court in Delhi, the accused was taken to Safdarjung Hospital for a medical examination. He was arrested by Delhi Police from Bengaluru last night.

Notably, the Delhi Police has so far recorded the statements of three crew members of Air India today in connection with the case.

to Air India.

The police registered an FIR under sections 354, 509, and 510 of the Indian Penal Code and Section 23 of the Indian Aircraft Act. Both the accused and the victim are from outside Delhi.

US-based financial services company Wells Fargo on Friday also terminated its employee Shankar Mishra.

"Wells Fargo holds employ-

ees to the highest standards of professional and personal behaviour and we find these allegations deeply disturbing. This individual has been terminated from Wells Fargo. We are cooperating with law enforcement and ask that any additional inquiries be directed to them," the company said in a statement.

The company's statement came after Delhi Police reached out to Wells Fargo to cooperate with investigations against accused Mishra.

Meanwhile, after facing backlash, Air India has issued show cause notices to four of its cabin crew and one pilot and de-registered them pending investigations. On Friday, Air India chief executive officer (CEO) Campbell Wilson also asked the airline staff to report any instances of 'any improper behaviour on board to authorities at the earliest even if the matter appears to be resolved'.

In a letter to Air India employees, the CEO stated that timely action is necessary against those who don't follow the flight rules.

Campbell said: "This week has, regrettably, been dominated by media headlines of which you are no doubt familiar. The repulsion felt by the affected passenger is totally understandable and we share her distress." He reiterated the importance of reporting untoward incidents onboard flights to authorities, even if the crew believes it has been resolved.

ANI

Mishra had allegedly urinated on a 70-year old woman in an intoxicated condition in business class of an Air India flight on November 26, last year

Mishra had allegedly urinated on a 70-year-old woman in an intoxicated condition in business class of an Air India flight on November 26, last year.

The accused was arrested by the Delhi Police today from Bengaluru and brought to Delhi, police said.

Delhi Police had registered an FIR against him on January 4 on a complaint given by the woman

Hit and run: Eyewitness Nidhi was arrested in drug smuggling case

New Delhi, India - Eyewitness Nidhi, who was riding pillion with Anjali Singh, the 20-year-old who died after her scooter was hit by a car that dragged her for several kilometers in the national capital on New Year's Day, was earlier arrested in a drug smuggling case, Delhi Police said.

Nidhi was arrested in Agra in a Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, (1985) case according to an FIR registered in December 2020. Currently Nidhi is out on bail, police sources said. Nidhi had been intercepted and arrested on December 6, 2020 at the Agra railway station for bringing ganja (drugs) by train from Telangana. She was subsequently placed under arrest. Two boys named Sameer and Ravi were also arrested along with Nidhi.

Meanwhile, in the Kanjhawala case, Delhi Police said on Friday that Nidhi has been asked to join the investigation and clarified that she has not been arrested.

"There are media reports that Nidhi (eyewitness) has

Nidhi had been intercepted and arrested on December 6, 2020 at the Agra railway station for bringing drugs from Telangana

been arrested by police. It is clarified that she has been called by Police to join the investigation," Delhi Police official said.

On Tuesday, Nidhi who was with Anjali at the time of the incident told the media that the latter was drunk on the day of the incident.

"She was in a drunken state but insisted on driving the two-wheeler. After being hit by the car, she came under the car and got dragged with it. I was scared and ran away and returned home, didn't tell anything to anyone. It is the fault of the girl who was driving in an inebriated state. I insisted that she shouldn't drive. I told her 'I am con-

scious, let me drive'. She didn't trust me and trusted herself instead," Nidhi had claimed on Tuesday.

Anjali's body was found on January 1 in the Kanjhawala area of the national capital. She was dragged for over 12km by a car that hit her scooter near Sultanpuri. Seven accused in the case are now in the custody of Delhi Police.

"In the Sultanpuri case, the sixth accused Ashutosh has been arrested who had given false information to the police. Further investigation is on," the Special Commissioner of Police (Law & Order) Delhi Police Sagar Preet Hooda said on Friday. The other five accused in the case- Deepak Khanna, Amit Khanna, Krishan, Mithun and Manoj Mittal were arrested earlier. The five were driving the car that they borrowed from Ashutosh.

All the accused were taken to Sanjay Gandhi Hospital on Thursday night for a medical examination. Police said that they were taken during the night as a security precaution.

ANI

Joshimath: Plea seeks SC intervention

New Delhi, India - A plea has been filed in the Supreme Court to immediately intervene to assist the reparation work of Uttarakhand and to provide urgent relief to the people of Joshimath facing extremities and danger to their life and property.

The plea filed by Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, a religious leader, seeks direction to declare the current incidents of land sliding, subsidence, land sinking, land burst and cracks in the land and properties as National disaster and direct the National Disaster Management Authority to actively support the residents of Joshimath in this tough time. The petition seeks to provide immediate financial assistance and compensation to the people of Uttarakhand losing their houses and lands on account of land sliding, land sinking, subsidence and cracking of houses and properties.

"In the name of and/or for the cause of development the respondents have no right to push the people in the mouth of death and the religious sacred town in extinction and thereby infringe the fundamental right of



A view of the landslide-affected areas in Joshimath on Saturday (ANI)

the people of the Joshimath including the petitioner as well as inmates of his Monastery guaranteed under article 21, 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India," it stated.

The entire mess of environmental, ecological and geological disturbances occurred due to large-scale manly intervention in the form of Industrialisation, urbanisation and destruction of natural resources by the Union and State government in the State of Uttarakhand, the petition said.

It further said: "No development is needed at the cost of human life and their ecosystem and if anything such is happening it is the duty of the State and Union government to stop the same immediately at war level."

It said the petition was filed to secure the life and personal liberty of the people of Joshimath town in the Chamoli District of Uttarakhand, wherein the life of the people is lurching large due to imminent and sudden cases of land subsidence, land sliding, the sudden eruption

of water, cracking of houses and subsidence and cracking of agriculture plots resulted on account of man-made activities.

"Issue direction to the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) to provide insurance coverage to the residents of Joshimath and to duly compensate the affected residents from the disaster caused by land sliding, land sinking, land burst, subsidence resulting into cracking of houses and lands," it said.

ANI

Hawaii volcano erupts again after a month of quiet

Los Angeles, US - One of the world's most active volcanoes has burst into life again in Hawaii, a month after it stopped erupting.

Fountains of lava spewed out of Kilauea, flooding the crater at its peak with molten rock.

Scientists at the US Geological Survey said the first stirrings were recorded on Thursday afternoon when occasionally intense sprays of lava gushed through the crater floor.

"The high initial effusion rates are declining rapidly as lava stored within the magma system over the past month is erupted," the USGS said.

AFP

Prince Harry faces growing criticism over revelations

London, UK - Prince Harry faced a backlash on Friday over his memoir *Spare*, with criticism from the media, commentators, army veterans and even the Taliban, while Buckingham Palace kept silent on its widely leaked contents.

Days before the official publication on Tuesday, disclosures from the book dominated headlines and airwaves after a Spanish-language version of the memoir mistakenly went on sale in Spain.

Revelations, including an alleged physical attack on him by heir to the throne Prince William, how he lost his virginity, took drugs and killed 25 people in Afghanistan, have prompted both condemnation and derision.

Writer A N Wilson called the ghostwritten tome - the biggest royal book since Harry's mother Princess Diana collaborated with Andrew Morton for a 1992 biography - 'calculated and despic-

able' and a work of 'malice'. Describing his decision to go public 'idiotic', Wilson said the book had merely succeeded in making the public sympathise with the royal family, 'not with him'.

'Idiotic'

The book is the latest broadside from Harry and his American wife Meghan after they quit royal duties and moved to California in 2020.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are formally known, have since cashed in on their royal connections with several lucrative contracts for tell-all books and programmes. The Spanish-language version of the book was hurriedly withdrawn from shelves after the blunder on Thursday but not before it had been purchased by media outlets, wrecking the publisher's strict worldwide embargo.

The Sun tabloid said public sympathy for Harry over losing



A poster advertising the publication of the book Spare by Prince Harry is pictured in the window of a book store in London on Friday (AFP)

his mother as a child could not justify the destructive, vengeful path he has chosen, throwing his own family under a bus for millions of dollars'.

In an editorial, it pointed to 'countless discrepancies' in his claims and advised him to listen to friends who have urged him to 'stop for his own good'.

The Guardian's Gaby Hinsliff said the book had moved beyond issues of 'awkward public interest' into the 'washing of dirty linen' in public. The US edition of the left-leaning newspaper was the first to publish a leaked extract of the book this week, in which Harry described his physical altercation with William.

"The details of the brothers' alleged punch-up in a palace cottage are at once almost ridiculously trivial and heartbreakingly sad," she wrote.

'Trashed'

Harry's claim to have killed 25 people in Afghanistan and likening his actions to removing 'chess pieces' from a board, has been seen as boastful and inappropriate, and enraged some veterans.

Retired colonel Tim Collins, who led a British battalion in Iraq in 2003, condemned a 'tragic money-making scam', adding: "That's not how you behave in the army. It's not how we think."

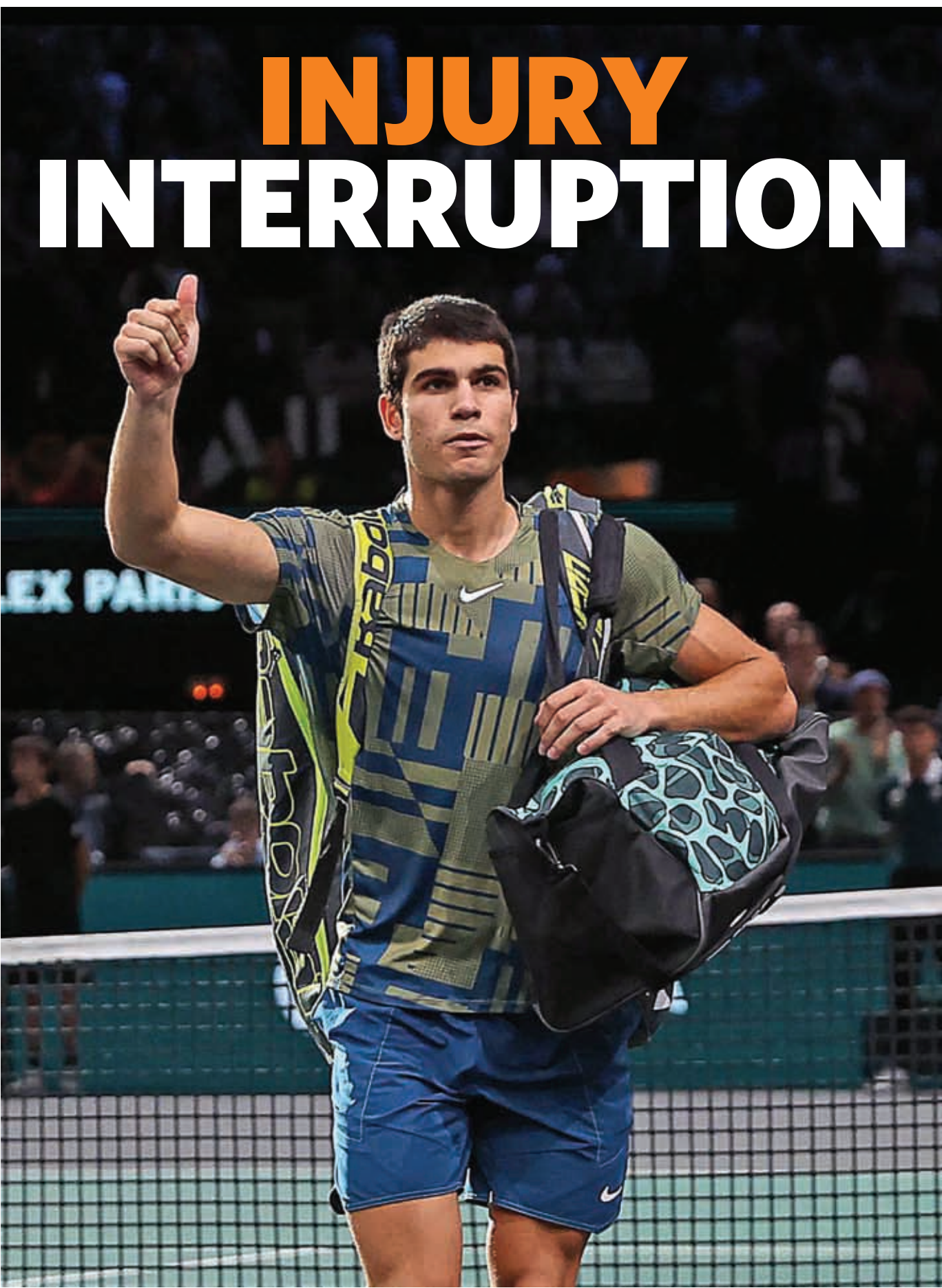
"Harry has now turned against the other family, the military, that once embraced him, having trashed his birth family," he added. Another high-ranking veteran who served in Afghanistan, colonel Richard Kemp, said his comments would 'feed militant propaganda'.

Senior Taliban official Anas Haqqani tweeted: "Mr Harry! The ones you killed were not chess pieces, they were humans; They had families who were waiting for their return."

As the hashtag #ShutUpHarry began trending on Twitter, The Sun quoted sources close to his father, King Charles III, as saying he had been saddened by the book. But there was no official palace comment.

In fresh claims in the memoir reported by the Daily Telegraph late on Friday, Harry alleges that his father wanted to avoid supporting him and Meghan financially because he was jealous of her. The duke writes he realised Charles feared 'a novel and resplendent' royal who would 'dominate' the limelight after the now-king raised concerns about the monarchy supporting the couple monetarily after their 2018 wedding.

AFP



INJURY INTERRUPTION

World No. 1 Alcaraz to miss Australian Open with leg injury

Paris, France - US Open champion Carlos Alcaraz said on Friday he will miss the Australian Open, the first Grand Slam of the season, after injuring his right leg in training.

"I picked up an injury through a chance, unnatural movement in training," the 19-year-old Spaniard wrote on his Twitter account.

"I'd worked so hard to get to my best level for Australia but unfortunately I won't be able to play," the world's top-ranked player added.

"It's tough, but I have to be optimistic, recover and look forward. We'll see you at the Australian Open in 2024."

Alcaraz's withdrawal means defending champion, 22-time major winner and fellow Spaniard Rafael Nadal will be promoted to top seed at the Australian Open which starts in Melbourne on January 16.

Novak Djokovic, the nine-time champion and a 21-time Grand Slam title winner, will move into the top four seedings.

That will mean he cannot face old rival Nadal until the semi-finals at the earliest.

Djokovic will return to the Australian Open after being deported from the country last year over his refusal to be vaccinated.

Alcaraz became the world's youngest world number one since the creation of the ATP rankings in 1973 by winning his first Grand Slam tournament at the US Open last September.

He then became the youngest player in history to finish the year at the top of the rankings, and the first outside of Djokovic, Nadal, Roger Federer and Andy Murray to do so since Andy Roddick in 2003.

However, an abdominal tear forced him to retire in the quarter-finals of the Paris Masters in

November which in turn meant he had to miss the season-ending ATP Finals in Turin won by Djokovic.

Alcaraz also had to sit out the Davis Cup Finals.

Alcaraz, who will also miss the Kooyong Tennis Classic in Melbourne next week, admitted recently that 2023 will come with new experiences for him.

"I have to be prepared for that, the pressure. The people, the players as well, are going to have all their eyes on me and I'm going to have to be prepared for that," he explained at an Abu Dhabi exhibition event last month where he was beaten by top 10 rivals Casper Ruud and Andrey Rublev.

"Probably it's going to help me a little bit to try not to think about the people, the expectations, and the ranking, and that kind of stuff," he said.

"I'm just going to see myself better, trying to push myself to a high level. Right now I'm focused on myself, on recovering my level."

Alcaraz has played twice at

the Australian Open, reaching the second round after coming through qualifying in 2021 while last year he was beaten in five sets by Matteo Berrettini in the last 32.

"We're sorry we won't be seeing you this year @carlosalcaraz. Wishing you a swift recovery. See you back on court soon," tweeted the Australian Open on Friday.

Last season, Alcaraz captured five titles as he won 57 times in 70 matches. He started 2022 at 32 in the world and made the biggest rise to finish top in 50 years of the rankings.

Alcaraz hit the giant-killing jackpot at Madrid in May when he became the only man to beat both Nadal and Djokovic at the same clay-court event. When he then broke into the world top five in July, he was the youngest man to do so since 2005.

His coach former world number one Juan Carlos Ferrero believes that if Alcaraz stays fit, he is capable of winning 30 Grand Slam titles.

AFP



Djokovic enters final, qualifier stuns Jabeur

Adelaide, Australia - An intense Novak Djokovic brushed aside Daniil Medvedev on Saturday to set up an Adelaide International final against Sebastian Korda and played down injury concerns after appearing to tweak his hamstring.

The top seed, who has an ominous 22-1 record since September, was breathtaking at times as he cruised past the former world number one Russian 6-3, 6-4 in preparation for the Australian Open, where he is a nine-time champion.

In the women's draw, unheralded Czech teenager Linda Noskova stunned world number two Ons Jabeur 6-3, 1-6, 6-3, with the qualifier into her first-ever final against second seed Aryna Sabalenka.

World number five Djokovic broke in both sets on Medvedev double-faults before lifting his intensity to storm home.

But he had a scare in the first set, clutching his left hamstring

I was just trying to keep the momentum going and don't allow him to break my serve

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

as he attempted to reach for a Medvedev cross-court forehand. He continued but then took a medical timeout.

"Thankfully nothing too serious, if it was I wouldn't be able to continue," he said.

"I just tried with some anti-inflammatories and it kind of settled in after a few games.

"I was just trying to keep the momentum going and don't allow him to break my serve. The longer the match went my hamstring was warmer, I guess, and bothering me less.

"Hopefully for tomorrow it will be all fine," he added.

Unseeded Korda, son of former world number two Petr Korda, was in charge 7-6 (7/5), 1-0 of his match when Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka called for a medical timeout for treatment in his upper right leg before pulling out of the match.

"Very excited for the way I'm playing and a lot of confidence leading into the big one (final)," said Korda, 22, who won his first and only title on clay in Parma in 2021, while making two finals last year.

Noskova, 18, had already upset two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka en route to the semis and carried that into her clash with Jabeur in only her sixth tour-level event.

"I don't think either of us played 100 percent and I'm glad I got that last point to win, just really glad to play like this," said the world number 102. "I'm just going for it 100 percent all the time, just trying to push through."

AFP

Top-seed Gauff to face qualifier Masarova in Auckland final

Auckland, New Zealand - Top seed Coco Gauff said she couldn't have made a better start to 2023 after dispatching another opponent with ease on Saturday to cruise into the final at Auckland.

American teenager and world number seven Gauff provided further evidence she will be a force at this month's Australian Open with a 6-0, 6-2 demolition of Montenegrin seventh seed Danka Kovinic. The hard-hitting Gauff is yet to drop a set at the WTA 250 tournament in New Zealand and will start firm favourite in Sunday's final against Spaniard Rebeka Masarova.

Masarova, ranked 130th, beat Belgian Ysaline Bonaventure 6-3, 6-3 in a semi-final featuring two qualifiers - their advancement deep in the tournament encapsulating a week in which the seeds



Coco Gauff hits a return to Danka Kovinic (AFP)

have struggled.

The exception is Gauff, who hasn't dropped a set in her four matches and has conceded a total of just 20 games.

It will be a fourth career final for the 18-year-old and her first since losing the French Open de-

cider to world number one Iga Swiatek seven months ago.

"I didn't expect this outcome coming into the tournament," Gauff said. "I couldn't have asked for a better start to the season, regardless of the result tomorrow."

Italy into United Cup final against USA despite Tsitsipas's victory

Sydney, Australia - Stefanos Tsitsipas battled from a set down to topple Matteo Berrettini Saturday but it was in vain as an unstoppable Lucia Bronzetti powered Italy into the final of the inaugural United Cup against a dominant United States.

World number four Tsitsipas came through a do-or-die clash in Sydney 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 to earn a crucial point for his country and boost his confidence ahead of the Australian Open.

But it wasn't enough with Bronzetti pummelling Greece's Valentini Grammatikopoulou 6-

2, 6-3 in the following match to give Italy an unassailable 3-1 lead.

They meet the United States in Sunday's final after the red-hot Americans swept past Poland 5-0.

Italy went into day two of the semi-finals with a 2-0 advantage after a gutsy Martina Trevisan upset world number six Maria Sakkari 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 7-5 in a gripping encounter on Friday.

Trevisan's teammate Lorenzo Musetti then crushed Greek teenager Stefanos Sakellaridis 6-1, 6-1.



Lucia Bronzetti celebrates victory against Valentini Grammatikopoulou

With Tsitsipas winning, the pressure was on Grammatikopoulou, a late replacement for Despina Papamichail.

But she was outgunned by Bronzetti and reduced to tears in

the first set.

Berrettini, ranked 16, took a grip on his high-quality match with an unanswered break in game seven of the first set.

They went toe-to-toe in set two before the pumped-up Tsitsipas prevailed in a tiebreaker to take it to a third set where he ground down his tiring opponent.

"I hung in there and was just waiting for my chances, he's a big server," said Tsitsipas. "I was able to play with a lot of intensity."

Earlier, a composed Taylor Fritz beat Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in a battle of top 10 players to power the United States into the final.

The world number nine was too good for his big-serving opponent, ranked one place behind him, winning 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5).

Fritz came into the match with the United States already 2-0 up after Jessica Pegula stunned world number one Iga Swiatek 6-2, 6-2 on Friday and Frances Tiafoe swept past Kacper Zuk 6-3, 6-3.

His victory gave them an insurmountable lead before Madison Keys made it 4-0 by beating

Magda Linette 6-4, 6-2.

Fritz earned break points at 4-4 in set one after putting pressure on Hurkacz's booming serve, but the lanky Pole saved them both and turned the tables to earn two set points at 5-4.

But he too was denied and it went to a tiebreak, where the American dug deep.

Nothing separated them in the second set, with Hurkacz slamming his racquet to the ground as his frustrations grew.

It again went to the tiebreak, where two unforced errors from the Pole handed Fritz victory.

AFP

SURYAKUMAR SHOW

Explosive batsman's ton powers India to T20 series win over Sri Lanka

Rajkot, India - Suryakumar Yadav smashed a blazing century to help India extend their unbeaten streak of Twenty20 series wins at home to 12 with a 91-run thrashing of Sri Lanka on Saturday.

The hosts rode on Suryakumar's unbeaten 112 off 51 deliveries to post 228-5 after electing to bat first in the series decider in Rajkot.

India then bowled out Sri Lanka for 137 in 16.4 overs for a 2-1 triumph and keep their win record in bi-lateral series on home turf which stretches back to February 2019.

Suryakumar, known as a 360-degree player for his ability to play all around the ground, stood out with his third T20 hundred - in 45 balls - as he stamped his class as the world's number one batsman in the format.

The T20 sensation smashed seven fours and nine sixes in-



India's Suryakumar Yadav plays a shot en route to his hundred against Sri Lanka in their third T20 in Rajkot on Saturday (AFP)

cluding three off his trademark scoop shot over fine leg to entertain the raucous home crowd.

India lost two wickets inside six overs after electing to bat first but Suryakumar and Shubman Gill, who hit 46 off 36 deliveries, put on 111 runs to lay the founda-

tions for the total.

Left-arm quick Dilshan Madushanka struck in the opening over to send back the left-handed Ishan Kishan, caught at slip for one by Dhananjaya de Silva.

Rahul Tripathi, 31, who made

his debut in the previous match, then hit back with Gill for company as he hit Maheesh Theekshana for three fours in the fifth over.

Tripathi smashed fast bowler Chamika Karunaratne for two successive sixes but got caught

out in an attempt to get another boundary. He made 35 off 16 deliveries. Suryakumar, who reached his fifty in 26 balls, then took charge with his all-round hitting including three sixes with his scoop shot over fine leg.

Gill joined in the charge as he

up the charge till the end.

In reply, Kusal Mendis started briskly but fell to Axar Patel's left-arm spin for 23 in the fifth over.

Wickets kept tumbling at regular intervals with skipper Hardik Pandya, fellow quick Umran Malik and leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal taking two each.

Left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh took three including the final wicket.

Skipper Dasun Shanaka, who helped the tourists bounce back from their opening loss in the previous match, hit 23 off 17

India's top stars, including Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli, will return for the three one-day internationals between the two teams starting Tuesday

Cummins bowls Aus into contention for whitewash



Australia's captain Pat Cummins celebrates after dismissing South Africa's Khaya Zondo on Saturday (AFP)

Sydney, Australia - Skipper Pat Cummins bowled Australia into contention to pull off a stunning victory with a fiery spell against South Africa in an absorbing third Sydney Test on Saturday.

Cummins captured three for 29 in a hostile 14 overs to set up the Australians for a dramatic final day charge for victory to complete a series clean sweep against the hapless Proteas.

At the close on day four, South Africa were batting for survival at 149 for six in reply to Australia's 475 for four declared first innings with Marco Jansen on 10 and Simon Harmer six.

The outgunned South Africans have only passed 200 once so far in this series.

The Australians need 14 more wickets to pull off an astonishing victory despite so much time lost and cannot be counted out after rocking the tourists in Saturday's two compelling sessions of the rain-marred Test.

"I'm pretty excited about tomorrow," said spinner Nathan Lyon. "It's going to be an exciting day's cricket, we know what we have to do."

Josh Hazlewood made the initial breakthrough, removing

Dean Elgar for 15 continuing the Proteas' skipper's wretched series of low scores.

Hazlewood, bowling a lively opening spell, got Elgar with a brutal short-pitched delivery which clipped his glove for a catch by wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

I'm pretty excited about tomorrow. It's going to be an exciting day's cricket, we know what we have to do

NATHAN LYON

Lyon stunned Sarel Elwee who did not play a shot and was bowled top of off-stump for 18 leaving the tourists 37-2 in the 18th over.

Four balls later Cummins claimed his first victim with Heinrich Klaasen, caught off a vicious lifter leg-side by Carey for two.

Hazlewood broke through again after tea with an inswinger

that kissed the edge of Temba Bavuma's bat for Carey to do the rest.

Bavuma clouted two sixes off Lyon in his 35 off 74 balls but was a big wicket for the Aussies to leave the visitors 85-4 in the 39th over.

"Reverse swing is in play, with a little bit of variable bounce, the short ball is difficult to play because of how slow it is coming off the wicket," Hazlewood said.

"I think Ash (Agar) and Gazza (Lyon), it's a big day tomorrow for them with the ball spinning with lefties and righties for them both to work with, there will be plenty happening tomorrow."

Cummins removed Khaya Zondo with a superb yorker that trapped him leg before wicket for 39 and South Africa's fifth wicket.

The skipper charged in to lead the Australian bowling assault with two fearsome deliveries thudding into Marco Jansen's upper body.

Cummins quickly got another wicket, with Kyle Verreynne edging to Steve Smith at slip for 19 for Smith's 151st Test catch.

AFP

PSG leave out big three but beat Chateauroux in French Cup

Paris, France - Paris Saint-Germain rested their biggest stars but still won 3-1 at third-tier Chateauroux in the French Cup round of 64 on Friday night.

With Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Neymar not even on the visiting bench, PSG took the lead after 13 minutes with a right-foot shot from Hugo Ekitike.

The home team hit back with a 37th minute goal by Natanael Ntolla and created several other chances before fading in the closing stages.

Carlos Soler put the visitors back in the lead in the 78th minute, knocking in the rebound after home goalkeeper Paul Delecroix had saved Ekitike's header.

Another Spaniard, Juan Bernat, scored the third goal in added time.



Paris Saint-Germain's Juan Bernat (C) scores against Chateauroux in their French Cup round of 64 match in Chateauroux, central France, on Friday (AFP)

In the one mild upset of the night, second-division Pau eliminated Ligue 1 strugglers Montpellier.

Mons Bassouamina gave the

hosts the lead from close range after 25 minutes.

Montpellier dominated possession and levelled with a Valere Germain header in the 70th

minute, but Pau struck on the counter attack as Mayron George scored an 81st minute winner following a defensive mix up.

In a meeting between the two

bottom teams of Ligue 1, neither side managed to score but last-placed Angers eliminated Strasbourg 5-4 on penalties.

AFP

Kane fires Spurs into FA Cup fourth round

London, United Kingdom - Harry Kane fired Tottenham past third-tier Portsmouth and into the FA Cup fourth round on Saturday as 2021 winners Leicester emerged unscathed from a tricky tie against lowly Gillingham.

Elsewhere on a packed day of third-round action, Southampton came from behind to beat Crystal Palace 2-1 in an all-Premier League tie.

Antonio Conte rang the changes for Spurs for the match against League One Portsmouth but retained a heavyweight forward line including Kane and Son Heung-min.

The in-form Kane broke the deadlock in the 50th minute,

receiving the ball on the edge of the box and bending a fine curled effort past the despairing dive of Josh Griffiths.

The England captain, with four goals in four matches since the World Cup, now has 265 goals for Spurs -- just one behind the club's all-time record scorer, Jimmy Greaves.

Spurs, who have won the FA Cup eight times, were unable to add to their tally but saw out the match fairly comfortably.

Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers, who led his side to the trophy two years ago, made multiple changes after his team's third straight Premier League defeat this week but retained veteran forward Jamie Vardy for the match against

Gillingham, who are rock bottom of England's Football League.

Vardy was the provider as Kelechi Iheanacho scored the only goal of the game in the 56th minute.

Palace took the lead against Premier League basement club Southampton through Odsonne Edouard.

But Saints levelled in the 37th minute after some poor defending from the hosts.

James Ward-Prowse sent what looked to be an innocuous free-kick into the area but Joel Ward mistimed his effort to head clear.

The ball took a bounce inside the box before evading goalkeeper Vicente Guaita, who

moved in the right direction but could not stop it from going into the net.

Southampton took the lead for the first time midway through the second half.

Guaita was attempting to make a routine clearance from outside the area when Adam Armstrong rushed in, stole the ball from the Spaniard and had plenty of time to find the empty net.

Preston came from behind to beat Huddersfield 3-1 while Reading beat Watford 2-0.

Liverpool take on Wolves in the standout match of the day later on Saturday, with Manchester City hosting Chelsea on Sunday.

AFP

ARAB DOMINATION

Saudi Arabia’s Yazeed al Rajhi wins seventh stage of Dakar Rally, Qatar’s Nasser al Attiyah retains overall lead

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Saudi driver Yazeed Al Rajhi won the seventh stage of the Dakar Rally on Saturday with Qatari Nasser al Attiyah holding the overall lead in the car race.

The motorbike stage was cancelled because of heavy rain.

Toyota driver Al Rajhi and his German co-driver Dirk von Zitzewitz mastered the testing stage in Saudi Arabia to bounce back after losing over five hours on Fri-

Yazeed al-Rajhi and co-driver Dirk Von Zitzewitz in action at the Dakar 2023 (AFP)



day because of technical problems.

Despite starting in 40th place near the back of the field, Al Rajhi finished 8min 54sec ahead of

Lithuanian driver Vaidotas Zala after the shortened 333km timed special to Al Duwadimi.

The Saudi picked up his third career Dakar stage win and the

first one in this year’s race, but remains over five hours behind the overall leader.

“I’d say I have the best co-driver,” said Al Rajhi.

“We attacked. It wasn’t easy to start from the back and overtake all the little cars, often going left and right in the wadis, but we did a great job.”

Al Attiyah finished 14th but retains a comfortable lead of one hour and one minute in the overall race. His South African Toyota teammate Henk Lategan is second overall.

Organisers decided Friday to cancel Saturday’s motorbike stage because heavy rain had delayed the arrival of the competitors and put their safety in danger.

American rider Skyler Howes is leading the motorbike category.

Earlier, on Friday, France’s Stephane Peterhansel, a record 14-time winner of the Dakar Rally, crashed out of the 2023 edition as Al Attiyah won the sixth stage.

The 57-year-old Peterhansel, whose nickname is ‘Mr Dakar’ after eight car victories and six on a motorbike, “had an accident after 212km of the day’s special”, organisers said.

“His co-pilot Edouard Boulanger has been injured by

the impact leaving him with pain in the back. He has been evacuated by the Dakar medical team to the hospital in Buraydah to undergo further examinations.”

Peterhansel said that he did not remember the car landing such was the violence of the accident, suggesting that Boulanger had taken hold of the steering wheel before their car came to a halt.

Peterhansel’s Audi teammate Carlos Sainz, a three-time former Dakar car winner, also suffered an accident at the same place.

Sainz and his co-pilot were unharmed, according to organisers, but any hopes of victory were washed away after hours spent trying to fix their Audi in the middle of the desert.

In the absence of Peterhansel and in light of Sainz’s problems, Al Attiyah made no mistake in notching up his third stage victory despite mechanical problems of his own.

Didier Deschamps to remain France coach

Paris, France - Didier Deschamps said on Saturday he will remain France coach until the 2026 World Cup after leading the team to the final of the last two editions.

Deschamps’ contract expired after the World Cup in Qatar where defending champions France lost to Argentina in a penalty shootout after a thrilling final on December 18.

It had been reported that French Football Federation (FFF) president Noel Le Graet only wanted to give Deschamps a two-year extension until the



Didier Deschamps

2024 European Championship but the 54-year-old coach had insisted on staying in charge until the next World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

“I am going to announce something which for me is an immense pleasure, and that is that the president has decided to extend (my contract) until 2026,” Deschamps said at the FFF general assembly.

“I thank the president for his constant support and his continued confidence in me,” Deschamps added. “It is essential for the France team to function

well.”

Former Marseille and Juventus midfielder Deschamps captained France on home soil when they won their first World Cup in 1998 and he became coach of the national team in 2012.

He guided France to the Euro 2016 final where they lost to Portugal and two years later led Les Bleus to glory at the World Cup in Russia, where they beat Croatia 4-2 in the final.

In Qatar, France overcame the loss through injury of world player of the year Karim Benzema to reach the final.

Algeria extend coach Djamel Belmadi’s contract to 2026

Algiers, Algeria - Djamel Belmadi has extended his contract as Algeria coach until 2026, Djahid Zefizef, the president of the national football federation, announced on Friday.

The decision ended speculation over Belmadi, who was dubbed Algeria’s “minister of happiness” after leading the Fennecs to the Africa Cup of Nations title in 2019.

But he faced a social media campaign for his dismissal after



failing to qualify for this years African finals and for the World Cup

“Belmadi is currently focused on his work, and does not pay attention to what is said or the criticism aimed at him lately,” Zefizef said.

He said that Belmadi’s coaching staff had also been retained.

“We have set clear objectives for the next two Africa Cup of Nations,” Zefizef added.

Belmadi, 46, has been Algeria coach since August 2018.

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Mancini grieves death of ‘little brother’ Vialli

Milan, Italy - Roberto Mancini is grieving the loss of a man he considered his brother after Gianluca Vialli’s death following a long battle with pancreatic cancer.

Vialli passed away at the age of 58 in London on Friday, devastating Italy coach Mancini who was his best friend and long-time strike partner in their playing days at Sampdoria in the 1980s and 90s. The former Italy forward’s death came less than a month after another of Mancini’s friends Sinisa Mihajlovic succumbed to leukemia.

“Only a few days after Sinisa passing away I’ve lost another brother, or little brother as I liked to call him,” the *Corriere Dello Sport* quoted him as saying on Saturday.

“We met at 16 years old and never left each other’s side: Italy’s youth and senior teams, Samp, the highs, the lows, the victories and the defeats.”

In eight years together at Sampdoria, Mancini and Vialli won the club’s only Serie A title in 1991, the previous year’s Cup Winner’s Cup and three Italian



Roberto Mancini (R) with Gianluca Vialli (AFP)

Cups. They also came to within a hair’s breadth of winning the European Cup in 1992, being narrowly beaten at Wembley by Johan Cruyff’s Barcelona ‘Dream Team’.

The duo, nicknamed “the goal

twins” during their Sampdoria days, were reunited in the Italy set-up when Vialli was made chief of the national team delegation in 2019, with Mancini already head coach.

Their tearful embrace after

winning Euro 2020 at the same ground where they tasted bitter defeat to Barca became one of the iconic moments of Italy’s emotional triumph.

“Those two nights at Wembley. Many years ago we cried

“Gianluca was the best of us, a perfect, courageous man... It was a privilege to be his friend his teammate in football and life

ROBERTO MANCINI

with pain and bitterness, and then we cried with joy as though we were united by destiny before he passed away,” Mancini added.

“He played a key role in us winning the European Championship. The players loved him,” said Mancini. “Gianluca gave us courage that we didn’t know and which he used to fight his illness so hard that he managed to be with us (the team) as long as he possibly could.

“Gianluca was the best of us, a perfect, courageous man... It was a privilege to be his friend, his teammate in football and life.”

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TECH EXPO

AI

ALL THE WAY

From tracking moods to putting on a show, it's Artificial Intelligence—everything at the CES, the world's biggest tech extravaganza, in Las Vegas, United States



An attendee tries the Valeo 'eXtended Reality Experience' during the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas

Entrepreneur Antony Perzo introduces a small device called Emobot, which looks like a cross between a speaker and a piece of abstract art, and explains, "It's an emotional thermometer!"

Like hundreds of other exhibitors at Consumer Electronics Show (CES), the world's biggest tech expo, French engineer Perzo is selling the merits of an object that depends on the latest breakthroughs in artificial intelligence.

AI is the big buzzword at the Las Vegas tech extravaganza, with companies big and small unveiling anything from TVs to toothbrushes that depend on big data and connected computing to impress.

Perzo's Emobot, shown in a corner of Sin City's Venetian hotel, is used to detect possible psychiatric disorders in the elderly and could help caregivers in nursing homes adjust treatment without waiting for the psychiatrist.

"The technology can analyse micro facial expressions that reflect human emotions, themselves a magnifier of our psychological and psychiatric



Maryana Romanyak, of the Ukrainian sustainable startup Rekava, displays coffee cups made from recycled coffee grounds and a set of candles made from natural materials

state," said the engineer.

Nufa, another startup, defines itself as a pioneer in body transformation through AI. The mobile app allows users to edit a photo to see themselves with a slim and athletic body, and motivate themselves to follow a 90-day plan.

In Last Vegas, AI-powered gadgets

cram the hallways - there are AI bird feeders, baby carriages or fatigue-fighting wristwatches - to the point that some wonder if the phenomenon is being oversold, noted tech analyst Avi Greengart.

The technology "is used in smartphone cameras, in factories to spot defective products, in agriculture to



A Hispano Suiza Carmen Boulogne electric super car is displayed in front of a NB 480 electric vehicle power charging station at the Power Electronics booth

identify weeds and spray them with weed killer. AI is here to stay," he said.

Using AI to explore emotions is also the ambition of Emil Jimenez, who founded MindBank AI in a "quest for immortality... so my daughter could always ask her daddy a question." His app asks users to record their answers

to deeply personal questions ("What does love mean to you?") in order to "save your mind forever on the cloud" by creating a personal digital twin.

Huge opportunity

AI can also be used to understand crowds. Canadian company Advanced Symbolics has developed askpolly,

which trawls through social media to conduct market research in minutes.

The user asks it a question - for example, 'Is this a good time to buy an apartment?' and the programme scans social networks Twitter/Instagram to survey public opinion on a large scale.

The biggest AI headlines lately have been on algorithms that make it possible to create original content at the click of a mouse.

California-based company OpenAI has impressed with ChatGPT, an easy to use software that generates a poem or school essay in seconds, and DALL-E which creates visual art. In a similar way, French start-up Imki has designed a sound and light show for an ancient Roman theatre.

"This allows us to create content quickly with very low production costs," said Marie Lathoud, marketing director, Imki. While he sees AI as a tool for artists, Saket Dandotia, director of operations at Magnifi, admitted that so-called generative AI represented a threat to the designers it will replace, much like robots in factories. AFP

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METRO MUSICIAN

LICENSED BY PARIS METRO OPERATOR RATP, ELI JADELOT IS ONE OF THE 300 ODD AUTHORISED BUSKERS, WHO PERFORMS EVERYDAY TO SUPPLEMENT HER INCOME. WITH HER OUTSTANDING TALENT AND CHARM, SHE MANAGES TO WARM COMMUTERS HEARTS AS THEY PASS BY IN A HURRY



Eli Jadelot, performs in a wedding dress at the subway station 'Arts et Metiers' in Paris

Stressbuster

SONGSTRESS

In the morning, Eli Jadelot sells chocolate eclairs in a bakery. In the afternoons, she swaps her apron for a wedding dress and sweet pastries for sweet melodies.

Jadelot is a busker in the Paris metro, one of 300 musicians authorised by the French capital's transit network to perform in its vast network of corridors.

"I don't see it a career spring-board, but as another way to make music, in a different environment," said the 39-year-old Jadelot, who usually works as a street artist near the touristy Sacre Coeur area of Montmartre after countless odd jobs since she moved to Paris from Lorraine 16 years ago, driven by dreams of an acting career in the capital.

"I want to see how I manage in a place where people only pass through. Will they react, or won't they?" she said as she got ready to perform at the Saint-Lazare station, one of Europe's busiest commuter hubs.

Faced with overwhelming numbers of would-be buskers - without a permit and, often, without talent - Paris metro operator RATP decided 25 years ago to licence the best 300 to perform legally, and ban everybody else.

Every six months, a jury made up of RATP staff listens to around 1,000 applicants and selects its favourites who get to play in the corridors of metro stations, although not on platforms or aboard trains.

This does not stop, of course, unofficial musicians seeking to

serenade commuters on the trains themselves.

Astonishing talent

Jadelot applied for the first time last year, and her selection of songs about love, work and everyday life got her in straight-away. Her stage outfit, a stunning wedding dress borrowed from a friend, may have helped.

"She's astonishing, with her wedding dress, plus her charming smile," said Cherif Medouni, an educator who often stops to listen to buskers on his commute. "Her songs are beautiful, poetic, with a rebellious edge,"

he said.

For its selection, the RATP jury doesn't rule out any instrument, said Stella Sainson, in charge of the 'Metro Musician' label, "although some are hard to manage, like the Djembe which is very loud."

Arnaud Moyencourt, who has been playing his barrel organ in the metro since 1992, made the cut again this time. "He represents the Paris of old," said a juror, Sofia Tondinelli. "I would definitely stop for him."

Camille Millian, who sang a Whitney Houston cover to renew her licence, also got se-



I want to see how I manage in a place where people only pass through. Will they react, or won't they?

ELI JADELOT



lected. "The metro is one of my best venues," she said.

Riana Rabe, applying for the second time, also got through with suave interpretations of a song from Disney's 'Mulan' film, and one by Radiohead, accompanying herself on a pink electro-acoustic ukulele. "I've always been a little scared of people, but now I've discovered that they are really extremely friendly," she said.

Licences were also won by Dominique, who followed in his uncle's footsteps as a musical saw virtuoso, by Ukrainian Anna Leonid Byulakh, who accompa-

nies her violin performance with artistic jumps, by Abram Lacoste, who gave up his analyst day job for music eight months ago, and by Hugo Vaxelaire with his nyckelharpa, a harp-like contraption that is Sweden's national instrument.

Need to attract attention

Unlucky applicants include another ukulele player - "Poor thing, she's not ready," said Sainson - and a 28-year-old Chinese violinist with wide glasses who was judged to be too shy for the challenge.

"They need to be able to at-

tract attention, otherwise people just pass them by, lost in their thoughts," said Tondinelli.

Some buskers move on to above-ground careers, even France-wide fame, including singer-songwriter Zaz, singer-accordeonist Claudio Capeo and pop group Arcadian who made it onto talent show 'The Voice' and released two albums.

But for most of the metro performers, it's not about fame or money, and that's probably just as well. "On a good day, you make 25 euros (US\$27)," said Jadelot.

AFP



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