



H M RECEIVES SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASSAD

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq received President Dr Bashar al Assad of the Syrian Arab Republic, who paid a visit to Muscat on Monday.

His Majesty led the welcoming party for the guest. When the jet touched ground at the Royal Airport, His Majesty the Sultan met the guest at the foot of the ramp, welcoming him and wishing him and his official delegation a pleasant stay in Oman.

Later, His Majesty and President Assad held an official session of talks at Al Barakah Palace.

At the outset, His Majesty the Sultan renewed his sympathy and condolences to the guest and the Syrian brotherly people for victims of the devastating earthquake that hit Syria and the Republic of Turkey. His Majesty affirmed that the sultanate continues support for its Syrian

brethren to overcome implications of this natural disaster.

On his turn, the Syrian President expressed his utmost thanks to His Majesty the Sultan, the government and the Omani people for their solidarity and stand with Syria. He also expressed his appreciation of the Omani relief efforts that contributed in alleviating impacts of the earthquake.

During the session, His Majesty the Sultan and President Assad reviewed the march of the bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries and fields of joint cooperation. The two leaders also exchanged viewpoints on regional and international developments, as well as the endeavours to consolidate pillars of security and stability in the region and the world.

After that, His Majesty the Sultan and the Syrian President

held a closed-door session.

President Assad and his accompanying delegation left in the evening after concluding his visit to Oman.

The official session of talks was attended from the Omani side by Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, Sayyid Khalid al Busaidi, Minister of Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Nuamani, Minister of Royal Office, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, Dr Hamad bin Said al Awfi, Head of Private Office, Dr Madiha al Shaibani, Minister of Education, Abdul-salam al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority, and Sayyid Turki al Busaidi, Ambassador of Oman to Syria.

ONA

Work begins on cities of future

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) announced on Monday that it has set out to establish sustainable 'Greater Cities' or future cities in Salalah, Nizwa, Sohar and Muscat.

MHUP has formed an executive committee to implement the urban strategy for different governorates. The committee has started work on preparing structural plans for Greater Muscat, Greater Salalah, Greater Nizwa and Greater Sohar, in addition to accelerating development in the wilayat of Jabal Akhdar.

The cities, spread over 5mn sqm, will have 10,000 to 30,000 housing units and accommodate 50,000 to 130,000 people.

In its third annual media meeting on Monday, MHUP stated that it is preparing the Jabal Akhdar development plan, which will be completed this year. The project is a mixed-use investment destination aimed at stimulating the economy.

H E Dr Khalfan bin Saeed al Shuali, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, affirmed the ministry's aspiration to achieve the highest level of service efficiency, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, and move housing services and urban planning to advanced levels with community partnership.

During the meeting, it was revealed that the ministry aims to distribute 23,000 residential plots of land, register more than 30,000 applications for property registration, and support 1,200 families within its housing assistance programme in 2023.

H E Shuali added that 50 per cent of the previously distributed plots of land have been constructed. "We are now seeking to distribute land to those who are

- 1,200 families to get housing assistance
- 23,000 residential plots to be distributed
- 250 usufruct land contracts to be offered for investment opportunities



Muscat 7th least expensive in world for home buyers

Our Correspondent Muscat

In most countries, house prices continue to rise faster than wages, making home ownership an increasing struggle for aspiring owners. However, a new study has found that Muscat has the seventh least expensive properties in the world - at US\$751/sqm.

That's according to NetCredit, a global online lender, which analysed over 800,000 online property listings for 73 global capitals and calculated the median house price for each city in total and per sqm.

According to the research, a home in Monaco (US\$52,000/sqm) costs three times more than any other capital.

Least expensive cities		Most expensive cities	
Havana	234	Monaco	52,000
Ankara	432	Singapore	15,009
Tripoli	500	Seoul	11,244
Pretoria	568	Luxembourg	10,897
Dhaka	672	Paris	10,880

(Figures in US\$/sqm)

At the other end of the spectrum, the city with the least cost per sqm is Havana in Cuba (US\$234/sqm).

Muscat and Pretoria are where homes are most affordable when taking into account yearly salaries and median home price. It takes 4.7 years in Muscat and Pretoria to buy a home, while it takes 6.9 years in Belfast in Northern Ireland, 7.6 years in Bucharest in Romania and 8.7 years in Bandar Seri

Bagawan in Brunei, making them the five most affordable cities for home buyers.

'COVID-19 radically shook up our idea of where and how we wanted to live, and it also radically altered many peoples' options for doing so. On balance, prices rose, but now, in the fallout of the pandemic and with the added complication of the energy crisis and war in Ukraine, they're on their way down,' stated NetCredit.

eligible in an organised way."

About social housing programmes, the ministry informed that 1,400 families benefited from housing assistance worth RO35mn in 2022, while 1,200 families will be provided assistance worth RO35mn in 2023.

Around 700 families, whose monthly income was less than

RO350, benefited from exemption of housing loans in 2021 at a financial cost of RO13mn, and more than 1,600 families whose monthly income was less than RO450, benefited in 2022 from a total housing loan exemption of RO29.7mn.

Real estate trading amounted to RO2.7bn in 2022 compared to

RO2.6bn in 2021.

The ministry also offered 700 government land plots for investment and collected RO8.6mn from renewal of contracts in 2022. It will offer 400 usufruct land contract via electronic bidding and 250 usufruct land contracts for investment opportunities in year 2023.

► NEWS BRIEF

NEW 6.4-MAGNITUDE QUAKE HITS SOUTHERN TURKEY

Hatay, Turkey - A 6.4-magnitude earthquake was recorded on Monday in Turkey's southern province of Hatay, the hardest hit by the February 6 tremor which left more than 41,000 dead in the country, the disaster response agency AFAD said.

The quake hit the town of Defne at 8.04pm (1704 GMT) and was strongly felt in Antakya and Adana, 200km to the north.

The walls of badly damaged buildings crumbled while several injured people called for help.



'All Quiet on the Western Front' claims seven BAFTAs

BIDEN IN KYIV BEFORE INVASION ANNIVERSARY



US President Joe Biden on Monday made a trip to Kyiv organised in strict secrecy, promising US\$500mn in fresh arms deliveries and "unwavering" American support ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion. Air raid sirens rang out across the capital at one point as Biden walked alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during what was the US president's first visit to the country since Russian troops invaded on February 24, 2022. "One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands," Biden said, speaking alongside Zelensky at the Ukrainian president's official residence, the Mariinsky Palace (AFP)

Two Omanis win gold at Middle East's biggest innovation fair

Our Correspondent Muscat

Two Omani innovators have bagged one of the biggest prizes in the Middle East for innovation. Mohammed Saud al Balushi and Al Haitham Mohammed al Kalbani won the gold medal at the 13th International Invention Fair in the Middle East (IIFME), organised by the Kuwait Scientific Club from February 12 to 15 in Kuwait.

IIFME is a specialised invention fair and - according to the organisers - is considered the second most important of its kind worldwide.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Balushi, HSE specialist and instructor, said, "The International Invention Fair is held annually and attracts the best inventors from around the Middle East and beyond. This edition saw 183 participants from 40 countries, including Egypt, Qatar, Mexico, Thailand, Iran, Iraq and Russia."

Balushi described their project as "a novel method of flow assurance for transporting heavy crude oil in pipelines". The objective of the project is to accelerate oil production, preserve the envi-



Al Haitham Mohammed al Kalbani and Mohammed Saud al Balushi

ronment and the safety of workers, and reduce the cost of oil production.

"My friend Kalbani and I developed the project using solar energy instead of electricity, making it sustainable."

He informed that two other teams from Oman emerged winners. Hajar al Shueili and Balqis al Hosani won the silver medal for designing eco-friendly interlock tiles made from recycled materials, which could be a substitute for cement tiles. Additionally, Salim Abdallah al Kaabi claimed a silver for developing an eco-friendly varnish from frankincense.

IIFME aims to provide a platform for Arab inventors to meet their counterparts from non-

Arab countries, strengthen cooperation between investors and inventors, and attract well-known inventors to participate in the fair and socialise with investors and Arab inventors.

Elaborating further on the project, Balushi said, "I obtained a patent for it in 2021 from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. I faced financial constraints to complete the project, but the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation helped me."

He is now hopeful of obtaining financial support from the government and private agencies to implement his project and help achieve Oman Vision 2040.

RO18.2mn central health lab to be built in Seeb



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) will lay the foundation stone of the Central Public Health Laboratory costing about RO18.2mn and spread over 18,155sqm in Seeb, Muscat, on Tuesday.

Medical laboratories constitute a basic pillar of healthcare systems, epidemiological investigation and disease monitoring.

In June 2020, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik ordered the establishment of a new central laboratory for public health that keeps pace with technical

The ministry seeks to establish a modern, integrated building for the laboratory with the latest technologies and equipment required for lab tests in speciality facilities

developments and the latest technical systems in order to cover requirements in all circumstances.

A statement issued by MoH said, 'The main building of the central laboratory will have several departments, including chemical, biochemistry and bacteriological laboratories.

'The main building will also include a department for quality and risk management, public health affairs, and a virology laboratory (Regional Polio Reference Laboratory, Regional Measles and Rubella Laboratory, National Influenza Laboratory and Regional SARS-Covid Virus Laboratory among others). Its facilities

will include a pulmonary tuberculosis reference laboratory, epidemiology and surveillance laboratory, besides administrative and financial departments.'

The ministry seeks to establish a modern, integrated building for the laboratory with the latest technologies and equipment required for lab tests in speciality facilities.

'This central laboratory will be the first one of its kind in the region, which confirms the leadership of the Sultanate of Oman in several sectors and success in many health initiatives and programmes,' the MoH stated.

MAFWR to tackle palm bugs in 66 villages in Dhahirah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) started a campaign to combat the spread of red palm weevil in 66 villages in Dhahirah on Sunday.

A statement issued by MAFWR said, 'Forty-five teams started the extensive field campaign to combat the red palm weevil from the wilayat of Yanqul in Dhahirah on Sunday.'

The campaign, which will continue till March 2, aims to ensure the safety of palm trees and take precautionary measures to prevent the spread of insects to uninfected palm trees in 66 villages.

The ministry also revealed the results of an integrated management programme carried out in the first half of 2022 to curb red



palm weevil infestation.

The results showed an increase of 16.4 per cent in the number of infected palm trees across Oman from 19,278 to 22,444 last year.

Efforts of field teams and the ministry specialists led to the treatment of 18,213 palm trees, or 81.2 per cent of the total infected in H1 2022. 'This is 14.3 per cent

more than H1 2021, when 15,937 palm trees were treated.'

In 2022, 4,231 infected palm trees were felled, or 18.9 per cent of the total infected, compared to 3,341 felled in 2021, representing 17.3 per cent of the total infected.

Field teams trapped 50,312 red palm weevils using 3,867 trapping devices in 2022, compared to 42,915 in 2021.

ICAO Secretary-General visits Muscat airport

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Juan Carlos, Secretary-General of International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), who is visiting Oman to take part in the second edition of the Civil Aviation Legal Advisers Forum (CALAF/2), visited Oman Airports company and Muscat International Airport on Monday.

During the visit, he met Sheikh Ayman Ahmed al Hosni, CEO of Oman Airports.

The two sides reviewed prospects of joint cooperation in a bid to serve joint objectives and boost travel and aviation movement among countries of the world.



Oman Airports gave a presentation on its airports and plans of increasing operational capacity.

Carlos viewed preparations and facilities offered by Muscat

airport to aviation companies and passengers.

CALAF/2 will start on Tuesday and see the participation of 63 countries and three international organisations.

OCCI launches commercial franchise programme



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, launched a commercial franchise programme on Monday that will start from Muscat and later be implemented in other governorates.

The launch ceremony was attended by H E Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, in the presence of Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of OCCI.

The chamber seeks to support Omani companies become franchisees or enable them to reach franchisees

HAMOUD AL SAADI

The programme, to continue till February 23, aims to educate business owners and qualify and develop Omani companies to take advantage of the opportunities in commercial franchising. This will be done by organising

seminars and workshops for commercial franchising in the chamber's branches in the governorates.

On the occasion, Hamoud bin Salim al Saadi, Chairman of OCCI's branch in South Batinah, said, "The chamber seeks, through the programme, to support Omani companies become franchisees or enable them to reach franchisees. The programme also aims to establish companies specialised in commercial franchising and organise the work mechanism between the parties according to the best experiences in the field."

WEATHER WATCH		
	Max	Min
Muscat	24	18
Abu Dhabi	26	15
Doha	27	13
Kuwait City	18	10
Manama	22	14
Riyadh	27	11

PRAYER TIMINGS	
Fajr	5.21am
Sunrise	6.37am
Duhr	12.26pm
Asr	3.43pm
Maghrib	6.10pm
Isha	7.20pm

SEND YOUR
COMMENTS TO
[muscatdaily@
apexmedia.co.om](mailto:muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om)



Tender Announcement

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tender:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Nonrefundable)	Tender Purchase deadline	Clarification deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2023/02/ENG/004	Replacement of the existing fuel storage UG tanks including the fuel pipelines and related works at Ghubra North filling station.	50 OMR	26.02.2023	28.02.2023	05.03.2023
Bank Name & Account Number		Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)			

The Conditions:

- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om The tender may be collected on any working day between 08:00 AM – 03:00 PM.
- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- Offer Submission:** Tender bid should be submitted a sealed envelope and addressed to the **Chairman of Tender Committee**, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without giving any reasons.
- For any enquiry email us at (procurement@almaha.com.om) or by calling 24610289/24610287/24610355

MARKET WATCH

MSX304,664.16

Sensex60,691.54

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian	215.17
Pakistan	680.58
Bangladesh	276.26
Philippines	142.98
Sri Lanka	941.48

Rates as on February 20

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

IMF, Ukraine reach deal paving way to full-fledged loan

The IMF said it has reached a staff-level agreement with Ukrainian authorities that opens doors to a full-fledged loan, which would also support the country's bid to join the European Union.

Ukraine was seen to have "strong" performance under a four-month program with the International Monetary Fund, meeting its targets and benchmarks, said Gavin Gray, who led the IMF mission.

The government submitted a package of draft tax laws to Parliament aimed at lifting revenues, and is taking steps to address arrears, among other efforts.

"A fully-fledged IMF program would be supportive of the Ukrainian government's efforts toward EU accession," Gray said in a statement.

He added that authorities are "making progress in reforms to strengthen governance, anti-corruption and rule of law, and lay the foundations for post-war growth."

Oman's oil output rises 4% in January, but exports decline

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's daily average production of crude oil continued to remain above 1mn barrels per day (bpd) in January, up by nearly four per cent in comparison to daily average output recorded in the same period of last year.

Daily average oil output during January 2023 increased to 1.065mn bpd compared with 1.028mn bpd in the same period of 2022, the data released by National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) showed on Monday.

The sultanate's total oil production in January 2023 grew by 3.6 per cent to 33.023mn barrels compared to 31.869mn barrels in the same period of last year.

Of the total production, crude output rose by 3.5 per cent year-on-year to 25.978mn barrels during January, while condensates output increased 4.1 per cent to 7.045mn barrels during the first month of 2023.

The sultanate's total oil production for the full year 2022 had increased by nearly 10 per cent to 388.4mn barrels compared to 354.5mn barrels recorded in 2021.

Exports decline 6.9%

Oman's oil exports declined by 6.9 per cent in January this year to 26.046mn barrels compared with 27.978mn barrels recorded in the corresponding period of 2022.

In contrast, total oil exports

for the full year 2022 had increased by 10.6 per cent to 319.5mn barrels in comparison with 288.9mn barrels in 2021, the NCSI data showed.

Exports to China, the biggest buyer of Oman's crude, accounted for 83 per cent of the sultanate's total oil exports in January 2023. However, total exports to China decreased by 13.7 per cent to 21.639mn barrels during January this year compared to 25.061mn barrels in the same month of 2022. On the other hand, exports to India also dropped by 29 per cent to 1.714mn barrels in the first month of 2023 from 2.416mn barrels in the same period of 2022.

Average price at which Oman sold its crude during January 2023 rose by 7.3 per cent to \$86.2 per barrel against \$80.3 per barrel recorded in the same period of 2022

Oman crude price remains elevated

The average price at which Oman sold its crude during January 2023 rose by 7.3 per cent to US\$86.2 per barrel against US\$80.3 per barrel recorded in the same period of 2022.

However, January price remained lower than December 2022 price when Oman crude averaged at US\$90.8 per bar-

rel, the NCSI data showed.

Oman crude price (for April delivery) on Monday gained 0.5 per cent to close at US\$82.64 per barrel at the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME).

Global oil prices have softened in recent weeks from their above US\$100 per barrel levels recorded during last year. The average price at which Oman

Oil demand to hit record in 2023 as China reopens: IEA

Paris, France – World oil demand is set to hit a record in 2023 as top consumer China emerges from Covid restrictions and air travel recovers from the pandemic, the International Energy Agency said.

Demand is expected to reach 101.9mn barrels per day on average in 2023, an increase of two million barrels per day from last year, the IEA said in its monthly oil market report.

It would be up 1.4mn barrels a day from the pre-pandemic level in 2019 as consumption of fossil fuels behind global warming has yet to peak.

Independent energy research firm Rystad puts the turning point at no earlier than 2025.

The Asia-Pacific region accounts for most of the increase in demand, with China alone accounting for nearly half of the expected 2023 growth after it lifted its zero-Covid policy in December.

China's reopening is also expected to boost air travel, which has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels, driving demand for jet fuel up by 1.1mn barrels per day.

Demand for oil products is expected to drop given weak manufacturing activity and demand for petrol will decline further as vehicle efficiency improves and electric vehicles gain market share.

On the supply side, production remained stable at around 100.8mn barrels per day in January, according to the IEA.

AFF

مسندم للطاقة

MUSANDAM POWER

Musandam Power Company SAOG

P.O. Box 228. PC 134, Al Qurum, Jawharat Al Shatti, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

www.musandampower.com

INVITATION TO ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF MUSANDAM POWER COMPANY SAOG

The Board of Directors of Musandam Power Company SAOG invites its respective shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting ("AGM") which shall be held at 3:00 pm, on Monday, 06-March-2023 on the e-portal for convening general meetings which may be accessed through the Muscat Clearing and Depository SAOC ("MCD") website (www.mcd.gov.om).

Failing quorum of the AGM, a second AGM shall be convened at 3:00 pm, on Sunday, 12-March-2023 on the e-portal for convening general meetings which may be accessed through the Muscat Clearing and Depository SAOC ("MCD") website (www.mcd.gov.om). The agenda include the following:

- To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
- To consider the Corporate Governance Report for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider the Auditor's report and to approve the Financial Statements in respect of the Company for the year ended on 31 December 2022.
- To approve the proposal authorizing the Board of Directors' to determine and distribute cash dividends to the Company's Shareholders who are registered with the MCD as of the dates to be decided by the Board of Directors in March 2023 and September 2023 out of the retained earnings as per the audited financial statements for the financial year ended 31 December 2022, provided that the amount shall not be more than 27.6 Baisas per share.
- To disclose the transactions that the Company entered into with related parties during the financial year ended on 31 December 2022 (Annexure 1).
- To consider and approve the proposed transactions to be entered by the Company with related parties during the financial year ending on 31 December 2023 (Annexure 1).
- To ratify the payment of sitting fees to the Board of Directors and Sub-Committees for the financial year ended 31 December 2022 and to determine the sitting fees of the Board of Directors and Sub-Committees for the next financial year ending on 31 December 2023 (Annexure 2).
- To ratify the payment of Directors' remuneration for an amount of RO 141,350 (Rials Omani one hundred forty-one thousand and three hundred and fifty) for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
- To appoint the statutory auditors for the financial year ending on 31 December 2023 and approve its fees.

In accordance with the Rules for Convening General Meetings via Electronic Means, issued by the CMA we would like to call your attention to the following:

- only a corporate person may authorize a natural person to attend and vote on its behalf on decisions/resolutions of the AGM general meeting, through electronic means, provided such natural person must have an investor number at MCD;
- voting on any item of the agenda shall commence prior to the convention of the AGM general meeting at a maximum of three (3) days and ends on the day of the AGM. If a shareholder's balance is changed either by increase or decrease the voting process shall stand canceled and must revoke at the AGM.

Please attend at the e-portal at least 30 minutes prior to the AGM.

For more information, please contact Mr. Abdulhamed Al Jabri of Musandam Power Company (SAOG) on telephone No. 24063555.

Chairman

Auditor

Legal Advisor

أبراج لخدمات الطاقة

العرض الترويجي

Abraj Energy Services

organises IPO roadshow in South Sharqiyah

Muscat – Abraj Energy Services, a subsidiary of Oman's global integrated energy group OQ, on Monday organised an informative session on its initial public offering (IPO) in collaboration with Oman Chamber for Commerce and Industry's (OCCI's) branch in South Sharqiyah Governorate.

This move comes as part of the efforts exerted by the company to educate investors about how to invest in its IPO which runs from February 20 till March 1, 2023.

In a press release, Anwar al Sinani, board member of OCCI and chairman of OCCI's South Sharqiyah branch, said, "The Abraj IPO is extremely vital as it is a means of investment for citizens and residents in profitable investment schemes. The subscription of Abraj, which is affiliated to Oman Investment Authority (OIA), is the first of its kind in the oil and gas sector in Oman. It falls under the direc-

tives of the government to attract national and foreign investments and reuse its resources in other areas of investment. This company is highly trusted because of its affiliation to the OIA."

Sinani pointed out that the IPO prospectus shows the potential of Abraj Energy Services, its capabilities, the profits it achieved during the past few years and the plans for profit distribution.

During the session, Eng Saif al Hamhamy, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, presented his views on the IPO subscription in which he explained that this IPO is being floated after the company obtained the required regulatory approvals from the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

He said, "Abraj's shares are offered for subscription in two parallel categories. The first category is allocated for major Omani and non-Omani investors including individuals and legal entities. It will account for a maximum of 85 per cent of the total public offering. The subscription price in the first category is set within the range of 242bz to 249bz per share."

"The second category of shares will be offered for small investors and will account for no less than 15 per cent of the total public offering. It is allocated for individual investors in the sultanate. The shares of this second category will be offered at a maximum discounted price of 224bz per share, calculated at a maximum price of 249bz with a discount of 10 per cent," he added.

The IPO subscription period for the first category will be ended on March 2, whereas subscription period for second category will be ended on March 1. The selling shareholders will maintain their right to adjust the size of the IPO at any time before the end of the subscription period.

Facebook parent Meta to launch paid subscription

San Francisco, US – Meta platform users will soon be able to follow in Twitter denizens' footsteps in affixing a blue badge to their profiles as a token of authenticity and boosting their posts – all for a fee.

Meta boss Mark Zuckerberg announced the subscription service for platforms Facebook and Instagram on Sunday, after almost 20 years of defending an economic model based on free services and advertising.

Two-speed system

Subscribers to Meta Verified will be able to verify their account on Facebook and Instagram by providing an official ID and getting a blue badge, indicating they are who they say they are.

Their account will also be better protected against identity theft thanks to pro-active monitoring.

If problems arise, these subscribers will be able to contact customer service teams directly.

And their posts, photos and videos will have a higher profile than those of non-subscribers by appearing atop search results, commentaries and recommendations.

Meta is also promising new creative functionalities.

Meta Verified will be rolled out in Australia and New Zealand this week before coming



This file illustration photo shows a smartphone and a computer screen displaying the logos of Facebook and its parent company Meta (AFP)

to markets in the United States and other countries.

The new service will cost US\$11.99 a month for users who sign up via the Internet and US\$14.99 for those using mobile apps. The higher price is to offset commissions taken by Apple on the iPhone or Google on smartphones operated by its Android system.

Priority for influencers

The subscription will be voluntary. And only users who are over the age of 18 will be allowed to subscribe. The service is not yet available to businesses but Meta does not rule this out in the future. The new service

mainly targets content creators.

Meta told AFP it conceived of the subscription idea because of requests from creators who are on the rise in their business undertakings.

Meta is acting as traditional social networks are seeing their numbers of users and their revenue both decline.

In 2022, Meta saw its ad revenue decline for the first time since the California-based group went public in 2012.

Inflation is eating away at online advertisers' budgets, and users' attention is divided among many apps. The latter can not harvest as much personal data as they could before the intervention of regulatory

authorities – mainly in Europe – and Apple to better protect people's online privacy.

So the battle among platforms "is becoming a bit of a battle for attracting and retaining the creators, because, at the end of the day, it's the creators who have the content that keeps the eyeballs," said Carolina Milanese, an analyst at Creative Strategies. But that is not enough.

Snapchat, Reddit and Discord are all proposing that users cough up a few dollars a month for supplementary tools.

Twitter, bought by Elon Musk last year, made a chaotic launch of an account verification feature that costs US\$7 a month on the Internet and US\$11 a month on an iPhone.

Twitter Blue's coveted check mark lets users promote their posts better, see much less advertising and have more writing freedom, with longer tweets.

Milanese said she thinks Meta wants to diversify its revenue sources.

After Twitter launched its subscription service, other social media groups thought "well, we might as well try," she told AFP.

"Justifying that from a creator perspective I think is more of a marketing pitch than of true value to creators," she added.

AFP

‘OPEC decisions are flexible, in line with market realities’

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia – The energy minister of de facto leader of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Saudi Arabia, defended the group's oil pact decision on Monday.

International reports disclosed that Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Abdulaziz bin Salman said that decisions by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) are not 'politicised' and can be altered in line with market fundamentals.

Speaking at the Saudi Media Forum in the capital city of Riyadh, Salman added that the group is 'sufficiently flexible to adjust policy as needed.'

The group has been cutting its oil output by 2mn barrels per day (bpd) since October.

In its oil market report published last week, the group predicted that oil demand would increase by 2.32mn bpd in 2023 to reach 101.87mn bpd.

The group was widely criticised for reducing the output by 2mn bpd while most western countries had been urging the group to add more barrels in the face of supply disruptions caused by the Russia-



Abdulaziz bin Salman

OPEC has been cutting its oil output by 2mn bpd since October 2022. The group predicts that world oil demand would increase by 2.32mn bpd in 2023 to reach 101.87mn bpd

Ukraine war and sanctions on Russian oil and gas exports.

Saudi Arabia, however, denied accusations that political motives were behind the decision.

'Saudi Arabia does not politicise oil. We don't see oil as a weapon. We see oil as our commodity. Our objective is to bring stability to the oil mar-

ket,' Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al Jubeir told news channel CNN on October 13.

Jubeir reiterated that the decision was purely economic 'to maintain stability in the oil markets,' adding that they were not siding with Russia on this issue.

Anadolu Agency



Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG

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DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2022

In its meeting held on 13 February 2023, the Board of Directors approved Shell Oman Marketing Company's (the Company) audited financial results for the year ended 31 December 2022.

SUMMARY FINANCIALS

In OMR'000	Quarter			12 Months		
	Q4/22	Q4/21	%	2022	2021	%
Revenue	126,564	110,323	15%	499,912	398,429	25%
Gross profit	8,357	7,424	13%	35,367	30,039	18%
Add: Other income	1,083	880	23%	4,146	4,035	3%
Less: Selling, distribution and administrative expenses	(7,823)	(7,560)	3%	(30,432)	(28,030)	9%
Less: Financing and taxation	(875)	(516)	70%	(3,375)	(2,433)	39%
Profit and comprehensive income	742	228	226%	5,706	3,611	58%

- Twelve Months Revenue was OMR 499.912 million, 25% higher than the same period last year.
- Twelve Months Gross Profit was OMR 35.366 million, 18% higher than the same period last year mainly due to the increase in volumes and higher sales margins of some products.
- Twelve Months Profit and Comprehensive Income was OMR 5.706 million. This is 58% higher than the same period in 2021 mainly due to the increase in overall sales volume and higher gross profit.

BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

Mobility Business continued its commitment towards offering world class customer experience through its operational excellence with HSSE remaining a core focus area.

In pursue of its aim to increase network portfolio expansion whilst maximizing returns, the business continued its accelerated growth in volumes in 2022 compared to the previous year and strengthened its presence in the Sultanate by adding six new service stations in prime locations across the Sultanate to bring our total number of sites to 206 Shell service stations.

The business continued its focus on our differentiated fuel by promoting Shell V-Power, for unbeatable keep-clean performance. The Company continued to cater to the evolving motorists needs with a balanced focus between fuels and Non-Fuel Retailing (NFR). The Company introduced 9 shops in 2022 and converted 3 shops into the Shell Select brand. The Business continued to leverage its partnerships and contract management to maximize return from its integrated and diverse offerings across the network.

Mobility business has already been embarking on the energy transition journey through introducing innovative and sustainable solutions to reduce carbon footprint in its service stations. In addition, by offering alternative energy products and services gradually in the Shell network, the company continues to showcase its commitment to continuing its energy transition journey especially when it comes to expanding E-mobility footprint. Earlier in the year, the Company launched its first electric vehicle charging point while upgrading a sites energy efficiency through the installation of solar energy, LED lights, and highly efficient appliances.

Fleet Solutions Business remained a strong contributor to the mobility business; enhancing its customer portfolio with many new deals signed during the year contributing to the steady growth of the business quarter on quarter in 2022. The business continues to focus on increasing its portfolio and enhancing customer value proposition by addressing evolving customer needs by providing enhanced fleet solutions and continuous improvement in operational excellence through better transactional controls and digital value propositions.

Commercial Fuels Business witnessed a gradual growth in volumes over 2022 leveraging new wins and mobilization of projects. The overall business landscape continues to be challenging, given the prevailing Business to Business (B2B) market environment with limited mobilization of infrastructure projects. The Company remains committed to support business continuity for its customers through efficient cashflow management, operational excellence and providing innovative mobility solutions to help them achieve operational efficiency and reduce their carbon footprint.

Marine Business continued to serve local and international marine customers at the key ports whilst remaining committed to the highest HSSE and operational excellence standards leveraging on its global expertise to ensure successful delivery of bunkering solutions to its local and international marine customers. The Company is focused on strengthening its position in Marine business and exploring new business opportunities to expand its footprint across all major ports in the Sultanate.

Lubricants Business The business has witnessed positive recovery in the overall market of lubricant demand in 2022, despite the ongoing global supply chain constraints and challenges which directly affected the overall cost of finished lubricants and its profitability. The business showed resilience and maintained strong relationships with key B2B customers and partners ensuring business continuity while growing profitability and securing strategic accounts in various segments. Through our Business to Customer (B2C) distributors, the business continued to lead the B2C market in Oman with enhanced route-to-market strategies and initiated strategic marketing promotions to leverage our leading position and grow our market share in the premium segment. The business continued to leverage its ISO 9001 certified Shell lubricants blending plant in Mina Al Fahal, promoting In-Country Value, and has retained its number one position globally as the leading supplier of automotive and industrial lubricants for the 16th consecutive year.

Aviation Business compared to the last two years, the global aviation and tourism sectors experienced increase in air travel. The Company focused on retaining key contracts at Muscat International Airport and Salalah Airport while it continues to apply efficiency and cost optimization solutions to its operations to improve its profitability and to continue serving its customers safely and reliably as commercially feasible.

PROPOSED DIVIDEND

The Board is proposing that the dividend for 2022 be paid at 57 balsa per share for distribution in March 2023. This decision came as a result of the Board's consideration of the Company's net income of the year, current and expected market conditions, the liquidity in the money market, existing and anticipated borrowings, and the capital investment programme for the year 2023. This has been put in place to secure the longer-term profitability and competitive position of the Company.

BUSINESS OUTLOOK

The positive economic indicators influenced by higher oil revenue and fiscal discipline are expected to further stabilize the economy in 2023 following a year of steady growth and a gradual recovery from the impact of the pandemic in the two years preceding 2022.

The Company has retained a robust balance sheet throughout the year 2022 to be able to continue investment in new business opportunities in 2023, where commercially feasible. The Company aims to maximize returns and lead in the energy transition and decarbonization journey together with key stakeholders.

Our people make the difference real. The company will continue investing in its people across the network of our employees, partners and stakeholders whether by deploying an inclusive learning organization to onboard, build and sustain

professional competency and operational excellence or by sustaining the diverse and inclusive organizational culture that we maintain. Our focus will continue to be on maintaining Goal Zero, keeping customers, frontline workers and each other safe and healthy. Reinforcing our core values of honesty, integrity and respect for people, and adhering to Ethics and Compliance without compromise will remain at the heart of what we do.

HEALTH, SAFETY, SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENT (HSSE)

With HSSE remaining to be the Company's top priority, the year ended with 365 days without loss of primary containment and 314 days without harm.

Throughout, the Company continued to focus on developing people's competencies and enhancing its risk management policy. Safety refresher surveys were conducted across all the businesses as pulse check to collect insights on the safety culture and awareness among employees.

The Company invested in several initiatives including emergency drills in different parts of the Sultanate conducted in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders and partners. This activity was aimed at ensuring the readiness of the frontline workers and the existing response plans in dealing with such emergencies, as well as sharing best practices and learnings with the wider community.

Furthermore, several workshops and seminars were done on HSSE matters that are critical to the day-to-day activities of employees, contractors, customers and concerned parties. Additionally, the company led several worker-welfare initiatives to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our frontline employees, including safe means of accommodation, transportation, and others.

RISK AND CONCERNS

The downstream sector remains highly dependent on consumers and projects as well as disposable income, hence, supply and demand volatility can create profitability swings as external risks and opportunities develop. Similarly, supply chain continuity and access to raw materials at competitive and sustainable levels can be influenced by external economic factors as global indicators evolve.

Liquidity in the market has seen general improvement but receivables in certain segments and delay in collection continues to impose credit pressure on the Company, which it continues to balance by effective working capital management and ensuring balance sheet resilience.

The Company's forward investment and business plan assume stability in the fixed margin rates in the dominant Mobility segment, and this is dependent on the authorities. The Company tests investments against various scenarios, including changing price structures, forecasted demand and the evolving economic environment to ensure we continue to take robust investment decisions concerning the shareholders' available funds.

INTERNAL CONTROL SYSTEMS

The Board of Directors recognises that good corporate governance results from strong internal controls. The Board affirms its overall responsibility for reviewing the adequacy and the integrity of the Company's internal control and management information systems, including systems for compliance with applicable laws. There was no material loss reported during 2022 as a result of weaknesses in internal controls. The management of the Company continues to take measures to strengthen the overall internal control environment.

BOARD CHANGES

In the latest Directors elections held at the March 2022 AGM, the shareholders elected two new Directors; Bushira Al Maskari and Eric Greenlee replacing Directors Zain Hak and Arien Ritskes, respectively. Furthermore, effective July 2022 Asma Al Ghabshi was appointed as board member replacing Mooi-Fung Fong post her resignation.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG remains committed to power progress together with more and cleaner energy solutions in line with the Sultanate's 2040 Vision and Shell's powering progress strategy, leveraging its access to global know-how and expertise. The Company shares benefits with the local society through its Corporate Social Responsibility program, with road safety, environment and community and enterprise development being its main pillars. In addition, there has been an ever increasing focus on creating in-country value through strategic and sustainable initiatives, to support increasing retained value within the country.

The Company strives to reinforce its collaboration with all stakeholders, whether government, private or even NGOs, to deliver its role as a responsible corporate citizen in Oman.

IN APPRECIATION

We, in Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG, would like to reaffirm our commitment as part of this nation to stand shoulder to shoulder with our partners and stakeholders in the Sultanate and work to power its progress together and build on its achievements. We will continue to serve Oman and the people, under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, and to support his vision for the Sultanate.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express my sincere thanks to our shareholders, the management, our employees, customers, contractors and all our other stakeholders for their loyalty, perseverance, dedication, and effort in the face of an ever growing and challenging business environment. The Board of Directors remains committed to pursuing all opportunities with a view to maintaining the Company's growth while enhancing shareholders' value. We are grateful for your constant support as we work to power its progress together.

Walid Hadi
Chairman, Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG Muscat, February 13, 2023

Audited Financial Statements for the Year ended 31 December 2022			
AUDITED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME			
	Audited Year ended 31 Dec 2022 RO'000	Audited Year ended 31 Dec 2021 RO'000	
Income			
Revenue from contracts with customers	499,912	398,429	
Cost of sales	(464,545)	(368,390)	
Gross profit	35,367	30,039	
Other income	4,146	4,035	
Selling and distribution expenses	(24,989)	(22,705)	
General and administration expenses	(5,443)	(5,325)	
Operating profit	9,081	6,044	
Finance costs	(2,366)	(1,797)	
Finance income	22	20	
Profit for the year before taxation	6,737	4,267	
Taxation	(1,031)	(656)	
Net profit and total comprehensive income for the year	5,706	3,611	
Basic earnings per share	0.057	0.036	
AUDITED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION			
	Audited 31 Dec 2022 RO'000	Audited 31 Dec 2021 RO'000	
ASSETS			
Non-current assets			
Property, plant and equipment	60,527	56,843	
Intangible assets	186	49	
Right-of-use assets	38,849	27,986	
Deferred taxation	101	-	
Total non-current assets	99,663	84,878	
Current assets			
Inventories	10,695	8,551	
Trade and other receivables	47,207	39,222	
Cash and cash equivalents	6,928	8,796	
Total current assets	64,830	56,569	
Total assets	164,493	141,447	
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
Equity			
Share capital	10,000	10,000	
Legal reserve	3,587	3,587	
Retained earnings	42,019	39,913	
Total equity	55,606	53,500	
Liabilities			
Non-current liabilities			
Non-current portion of term loan	--	3,334	
Non-current portion of lease liabilities	35,975	24,216	
Deferred taxation	--	38	
Employees' end of service benefits	187	280	
Total non-current liabilities	36,162	27,868	
Current liabilities			
Current portion of term loan	3,334	3,333	
Current portion of lease liabilities	2,773	3,063	
Bank borrowings	5,000	-	
Trade and other payables	60,430	52,890	
Taxation	1,176	667	
Provision for employee retention scheme	12	126	
Total current liabilities	72,725	60,079	
Total liabilities	108,887	87,947	
Total equity and liabilities	164,493	141,447	
Net assets per share	0.556	0.535	

* The complete financial statements are available from the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX).
* The complete accounts will be sent by email to any shareholder on request, in either Arabic or English, within 7 days of receipt of the request. The request should be sent to the Chief Financial Officer at the address shown above.
* The previous year's figures have been reclassified to conform to the presentation adopted in the current year.

be'ah participates in Sustainability Week

Oman Environmental Services Holding Company 'Be'ah' has proudly announced its support for the upcoming Oman Sustainability Week 2023 as a strategic sponsor.

This event, hosted by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center (OCEC), will take place from March 12-16 and will showcase the nation's commitment to sustainability and the environment, a press release said.

Oman Sustainability Week serves as a shining example of the Sultanate's focus on sustainable development goals and its efforts to promote a harmonious balance between economic, social, and environmental progress. The event aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and offers a platform to showcase innovative initiatives and programmes aimed at promoting sustainability.

Be'ah's support of this impor-



tant event underscores the company's commitment to supporting the sultanate's goals for sustainability and advancing the nation's overall development.

It is expected that the week will witness wide participation from local and international entities and experts and those interested in sustainability issues.

Co-located at the event, the International Sustainability, Resources, and Technology Conference (ISRTC) is organised by Be'ah and programmed by Economist Impact.

The conference, which will take place on March 13 and 14, is a crucial platform for experts and those interested in sustainability to exchange know-ledge, discuss, and present the best practices/developments to increase awareness of the concept and goals of sustainability.

The conference will feature the participation of over 50 local and international speakers and 450 representatives from various public and private organisations. It will also include a number of interactive panel discussions and hands-on workshops covering a broad spectrum of topics centered on sustainability, including advancements towards a greener future, digital advancements in green finance, implementing a circular economy, and effectively managing sustainable resources.

Eng Tariq Ali al Amri, CEO at Be'ah, said, "In line with the national agenda to achieve inclusive and sustainable development, Be'ah has embraced innovation and industry best practices to pioneer sustainable waste management procedures. It has remained at the forefront of spearheading programmes that focus on the efficient utilisation of resources, encourage the habit of recycling, and continuously drive investments in local infrastructure to keep pace with the country's evolving demand for waste management.

Samsung announces regional availability of Galaxy S23 series

Samsung Gulf Electronics has announced the availability of the new Galaxy S23 Series comprising the Galaxy S23 Ultra, Galaxy S23+, and Galaxy S23, for purchase for customers across the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.

Starting February 17, the new Galaxy S23 Series will be available across leading carriers, in-store and online retailers as well as on Samsung.com, a press release said.

The series comes equipped with new industry-leading innovations, such as the ultimate 200MP camera that captures epic moments with incredible precision, and a powerful processor that unleashes a premium gaming experience. Additionally, the new devices feature a striking design that advances Samsung's sustainability commitment with more components made using recycled materials than other Samsung phones.

Doohee Lee, president, Samsung Gulf Electronics, said, "For 13 years, the Galaxy S series has redefined the smartphone experience through its innovative technology, top-of-the-line performance, and commitment to the environment. With Galaxy S23 Series, we are continuing our legacy of innovation and exceeding expectations with industry-leading hardware and software updates, including an epic cam-



era and a powerful processor."

Abu Shamat, head of MX Division, Samsung Gulf Electronics, added, "We are extremely excited to launch the Galaxy S23 series in the region, our most advanced Galaxy yet. We are already seeing a great response to the new devices so far and from a global standpoint, forecast an aggressive double-digit growth for the new devices throughout the year. We expect more than half of sales (units) to come from Galaxy S23 Ultra. With Galaxy S23 Ultra's powerful performance, unrivaled camera features, and eco-conscious design, we hope to invite all mobile users to the next-level Galaxy experience."

Yacine Zerkdi, head of Android - Middle East, said, "Through this partnership, people will soon be able to co-watch videos and co-edit content seamlessly on Google Meet."

Team LTHE wins Jindal cricket tournament

Team LTHE (Larsen & Toubro Hydrocarbon Engg) recorded a heroic victory in the final against Al Nadaha to clinch the prestigious Jindal Panthers Corporate Cricket Tournament trophy.

Over 20 corporate teams, including two teams - Jindal Panther A and Jindal Panther - from organisers Jindal Shaded Iron & Steel, vied for the champion's title at the high-octane Tournament, which saw LTHE and Al Nadaha make it to the final round with scores of 34 and 50 respectively in the semi-final, a press release said.

In its third edition, the popular Jindal Panthers Corporate Cricket Tournament 2023, held over the weekend at the Sohar grounds in Sallan, featured league matches, Super Seven



knockout matches, and semi-finals, followed by an electrifying final match that had the audience rooting for a high-scoring spectacular finish.

A large digital screen was in

place to broadcast live matches and scorecards, alongside messages from Jindal Shaded Iron & Steel CEO, Harssha Shetty. The matches were also transmitted live on YouTube for cricket enthusiasts who could not make it to the venue.

Shetty said, "We are proud to say that our passion has been contagious enough to gather 21 teams from various companies in Al Batinah." He also underscored the Company's inclusivity policy, which was the spur behind the exclusive women's cricket match, held on the sidelines of the tournament. He said, "Women's cricket is not just a niche interest, it is a growing sport, with lots of fans and great athletes. And we hope for more participation in the future."

Eagles win SAISA Regional Girls Soccer tourney

TAISM Eagles played against ASB (American School of Bombay) Eagles in the finals of the South Asian Inter-Scholastic Association (SAISA) Regional Girls Soccer Tournament and bagged the coveted trophy last week.

The tournament, hosted by The American International School Muscat (TAISM) at its campus in Ghala between February 9-11, saw the participation of visiting teams from Nepal, India, Jordan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, a press release said.

While it's fun to compete and



aim to bring home a trophy, the SAISA organising committee has a higher-level mission in mind for all participating student athletes - As educators committed to the ideal of realising the full potential

of each student, we believe the fundamental aim of SAISA is to promote the values of collaboration, creativity, sportsmanship, and fair and ethical competition.

"While acknowledging the notion of 'winning' in sporting events and other competitions, a recognition more important is that students come together to participate in various activities in the true spirit of cooperation and competition, and develop physically, emotionally, creatively, and intellectually through the sporting, academic and artistic experiences themselves," the

committee stated.

"Our team handled adversity and even some injuries this season, but we persevered through and played our best," said Sofiya Zobairi, a 10th grade student at TAISM and member of the TAISM Eagles Girls Soccer team. "We're so happy to see our work paid off."

Dr Kevin Schuttinger, High School principal at TAISM, said, "We're very proud of our girls soccer team, and of all the positive sporting behaviour we witnessed from the students at the tournament."

Oman team tops ASEAN golf tournament

Around 50 amateur golfers of ASEAN member countries living in Muscat, besides Omani golfers, participated in the ASEAN Friendship Golf Tournament 2023 at the Ghala Golf Course.

The Oman team won the first prize in the Team Competition while the teams from Philippines and Singapore were Runners-up and Second Runners-up respectively. A Singaporean golfer bagged the Champion of the Individual Category followed by golfers from Oman and Philippines golfers as runners up, a press release said.

H E Azzan bin Qassim al Buisaidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Tourism and Heritage of Oman, who was the chief guest, presented the Champion Trophy of the Team Competition to the captain of Oman Team - H H



Sayyid Azzan Qais al Said.

The ASEAN Committee in Muscat (ACM) organised this tournament to encourage people-to-people contact between ASEAN countries and Oman to strengthen relations. ACM is the ASEAN member countries' Head

of Missions in Oman consisting of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.

of Missions in Oman consisting of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.

OSN+ launches 'No More FOMO'

OSN+, the region's leading streaming service for premium entertainment, has collaborated with show-stopping Arab celebrities, starting with Saudi Arabian actress Aseel Omran.

The new campaign, 'No More FOMO', directed by acclaimed Egyptian director Omar El Zohairy, features an original song humorously depicting the dreaded FOMO effect when you miss out on the latest content and are out of the loop, a press release said.

The song has been picked up by leading content creators on TikTok and is already gaining momentum as an original sample. This drop is the first in an exclusive promotional series with other celebrities being featured, soon to be unveiled.

The launch video shows that even celebrities are not immune



from the uncomfortable experience of feeling left out because they missed the latest show or movie that all of their friends are talking about. The digital first campaign aims to disrupt the traditional media executions that are hard to break through with younger generations.

Each unique piece will tackle a different scenario depicting those awkward moments when you're 'out of the loop' with the trending series. With OSN+, fans get an instant fix at the same time as the US, so you will never have to miss another moment.

National Finance, Sharakah support six SMEs



National Finance, Oman's leading finance company continues its partnership with Sharakah to support six local micro and small enterprises through its SME Growth Programme.

The initiative will enable selected SMEs to identify areas of

improvement in their operations and assist them in implementing effective strategies to enhance their business profitability, a press release said.

"At National Finance, we are committed to supporting the growth and development of

SMEs in Oman. Our collaboration with Sharakah in this venture demonstrates our commitment to empowering entrepreneurs and helping them establish successful businesses. We are confident that such partnerships create a positive impact on the

participating entrepreneurs and contribute to the development of the SME sector in general," said Lina al Abdulsalaam, head of Marketing and Corporate Communication.

Sharakah, the implementer of the initiative, received a strong

response to the programme, with 225 registration forms submitted within just one month of opening the application process. After a rigorous selection process, 20 projects were short-listed and interviewed, with six ultimately chosen to participate.

Sharakah will conduct a comprehensive review of the projects, covering seven critical areas of the business. Based on the findings, a detailed plan will be developed to address the identified gaps and make the necessary improvements in each.

Environmental seminar of FIA concludes

More than 30 participants from 14 ASNs, ACNs, Mobility Clubs and FIA staff, gathered in Muscat for the second edition of the FIA Environmental Seminar 'Together for a better future' last week.

Organised by the FIA and hosted by the Oman Automobile Association (OAA), the seminar provided a unique opportunity for the FIA and its Sport and Mobility members to share knowledge and experiences about the environmental challenges in the Middle East and North African countries, a press release said.

Presentations and discussions focused on the FIA Environmental strategy and the tools available to support clubs in organising more sustainable motor sport events.

FIA Club representatives took part in an informative session aimed at understanding the scientific bases behind climate change and empowering them to become proactive contributors to climate action.

Then, they worked on proposing solutions for low-carbon Motor Sport and Mobility.

Amouage reveals 3rd chapter of new Odyssey Collection

Distilling this propitious moment in time and breathing new life into its iconic legacy, the new Escape chapter of the Odyssey Collection by Amouage adds four new Eaux De Parfum to its compendium of iconic scents.

Each creation laces Royal Frankincense with a broad palette of rare ingredients in a deft display of tradition-steeped modernity. By exploring introspective themes, Lineage, Search, Guidance and Purpose speak of escapism, the strive to grow, the search for a new path and the finding of a new life – transformation at last, a press release said.

Renaud Salmon, who has been at the helm of Amouage's creative direction since 2019, said, "When exploring Oman, you can often feel like touching treasures in a very pure way. A lot of my ideas come from travelling alone, from going somewhere. The third chapter of The Odyssey Collection emulates this escapism and Oman's memorable redolence. This collection is a singular, introspective olfactory voyage that should stir successive feelings of curiosity with Lineage, courage with



Search, inner triumph with Guidance and a sense of awakening with Purpose. By focusing this collection on the barren Omani island of Masirah, I wanted to pay tribute to Amouage's roots in a contemporary language, staying true to the House's ethos, or 'wave', to bring cultures and generations together."

Lineage is a song of salty incense, of mineral warmth and summer meditations, this is a scent of travelling far from home to get closer to yourself. While

Search is a tale of trying and reaching, of life overcoming shade, it captures the virile energy of resilient minds unafraid to fight their inner darkness to become their ideal self. Guidance is an addictive and modern take on the Amouage triad of Rose, Frankincense and Ambergris. And Purpose is a vertical totem of mineral woods and stellar sparks of spice, it is the scent of feeling at peace, of finding your roots, of feeling complete.



TZC hosts inaugural Townhall 2023

The Zubair Corporation (TZC) hosted its 'Townhall 2023' event at the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort & Spa on February 15, bringing together over 300 employees and guests from the eight business sectors of the Group, including the chairman Rashad Mohammad al Zubair, and Group CEO Niels Bormans.

The Townhall event was an opportunity for employees to learn more about the corporation's current initiatives and future plans. Sector heads used the occasion to share their teams'

progress in 2022, and showcase each sectors plan towards future success, a press release said.

Niels Bormans shared his thoughts on the company's goals for 2023 in a comprehensive presentation at the event, commenting, "At The Zubair Corporation, we are committed to leading the way in innovative and sustainable business practices while also building a purpose-driven workplace that fosters teamwork and camaraderie."

"We believe that by focusing on the four pillars of investment

and portfolio management, human capital management, operational excellence, and customer satisfaction, we will continue to drive growth and success for our employees, stakeholders, and the communities in which we operate."

The chairman and CEO presented staff awards under the slogan 'Let's Go for Gold' as the highlight of the event. These awards recognised the exceptional performance of staff members from the corporation and its group companies who had

demonstrated excellence in their respective fields and contributed to the growth and success of the corporation.

"These awards are a testament to their hard work, dedication, and exceptional performance in their respective fields. It's truly inspiring to see our colleagues strive for excellence and achieve great success. Their contributions are a vital part of the continued success of The Zubair Corporation, and I look forward to seeing even more great things from them."

Vodafone Oman joins hands with OFB

Vodafone in Oman has signed an agreement to join forces with the Oman Food Bank (OFB), as it continues its mission to positively contribute to the lives of people in the sultanate.

The deal will see Vodafone back the OFB's goals to provide food supplies to low-income families across Oman, support Oman's food security efforts and raise awareness on importance of food preservation. Vodafone's contributions will impact low income families across the sultanate, continuing to build the company's growing reputation as a socially responsible organisation in line with Oman's national agenda, a press release said.



The OFB, a non-profit entity, specialises in distributing food to beneficiaries across the sultanate, and supporting partnership and awareness throughout society, led by the concept of so-

cial solidarity. The national initiative supports Oman's 2040 vision of a circular and green economy as one of the country's most important pillars of food security.

Eng Bader al Zidi, Vodafone Oman CEO, said, "We are proud to have completed this agreement with the Oman Food Bank, which for many years has been tireless in its work to support the less fortunate across the sultanate. This partnership will allow Vodafone to enhance OFB's commendable work."

Eng Ibrahim al Hosni, chairman of Oman Food Bank, noted, "Vodafone has impacted many lives since entering the Omani market in early 2022."

Ooredoo is now offering office equipment bundles at competitive prices, to give Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and Small Office-Home Offices (SOHOs) all the essentials they need to digitalise further and thrive.

The offer includes the bundling of a full spectrum of innovative telecommunications services, Information and Communications Technology software solutions, as well as hardware products, such as laptops, smart phones and screens, a press release said.

Whether an SME is looking to grow further with ultrafast connections and fixed and mobile lines or a young start-up wants

Ooredoo offers office bundles



Saoud al Riyami

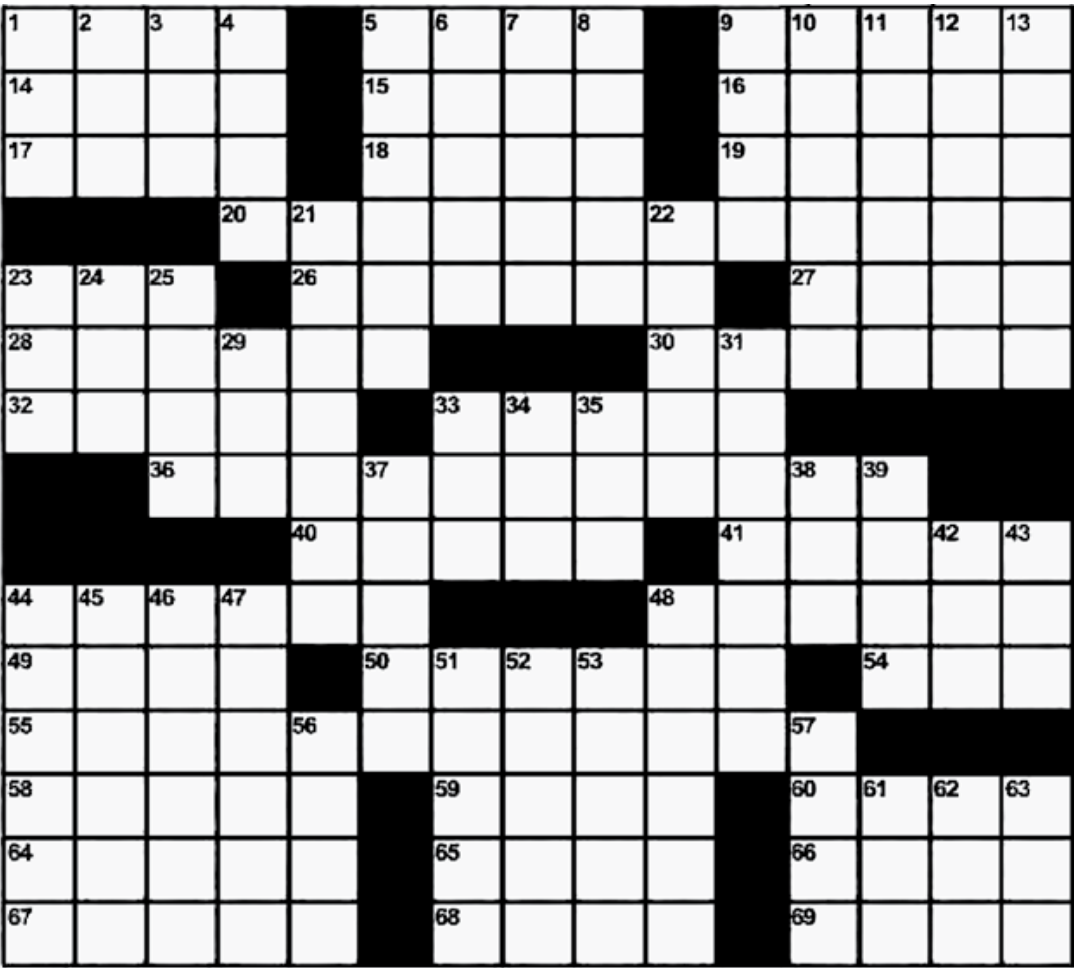
to supply its office with essential equipment, Ooredoo's limited-time offer meets the requirements of businesses across all sectors in Oman.

Saoud al Riyami, director of Business Sales at Ooredoo, said, "Digitisation brings many bene-

fits to businesses as it reduces their transaction costs, boosts market integration and innovation, and facilitates their access to resources. Hence, for these entities to thrive, leveraging a cost-effective one-stop solution to efficiently supply their offices means more time and money can be spent on their customers and business optimisation."

Contributing to Oman's digital transformation, Ooredoo has everything its corporate customers need to take their businesses to the next level. The company's extensive portfolio includes several highly innovative, cutting-edge dynamic and flexible business products, services and solutions.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Cheery sounds
5) Asian nurse 9) Pet protection org.
14) Polish prose and Portugal
15) "Contendere" preceder
16) Word-insertion mark
17) "Star Wars" sage
18) Gaming first-timer
19) "I Got_" (Croce tune)
20) What river rats do to sharpen their teeth?
23) Tummy muscles
26) On_ (under tight
27) Sister of your father
28) Praying insect
30) They can barely give a hoot
32) No place for a roller skate composer
33) "Aida" composer
36) Town for cold trolls?
40) Posts on a ship's deck
41) Dips one's toe in
44) Peninsula comprising Spain
48) Knitter's project, some-

times
49) Love potion's number
50) Chinese pork dish
54) Actor Brynner
55) Singer's annoying relative?
58) Textile fiber
59) Aroma synonym
60) Not too much
64) "Me, Myself &_" (Jim control) Carrey vehicle)
65) Brooklyn ballers
66) Like some losers
67) "Blowin' in the Wind"
68)_ en point (heraldic style)
69) "Pro" votes

DOWN

1) "The Bridge of San Luis..."
2) "Without further,..."
3) Put out of sight
4) Like bachelor parties
5) Chronicles
6) "Archie" character
7) "Hello!" or "Goodbye!"
8) "The Natural" hero Roy
9) Berry in some drinks
10) Beach wear
11) Czech capital

12) Concrete kin
13) Bikini Atoll events, briefly
21) Kenya's capital
22) "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" spinoff
23) Early hrs.
24) Winged mammal
25) Obstacle
29) Bronze component
31) Sadly pensive
33) Boxer's physician
34) Finish the course
35) "Treasure Island" monogram
37) Dolphins run here
38) Beer barrel
39) Very pale
42) St. Anthony's cross
43) Skit show, for short
44) Bergman, but not Ingmar
45) Containing two components
46) Tooth part
47) Light-sensitive membrane
48) "I could eat..."
51) Down_ knee

52) Salt Lake City neighbor
53) Rag composer Joplin
56) Sharp-sighted
57) Not a challenge

61) Tot's "little piggy"
62) Constellation near Scorpius
63) "Plaines" leader

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You could be dealing with some fragile egos today, which might end up being quite tiresome for you. But, in the end, taking extra time and effort to make these insecure people feel comfortable and important will be much easier than having to deal with their tantrums should their paranoia get the better of them. Everyone's emotions can be fragile now and then, including yours. Try to remember that when you're paying your tenth compliment of the hour.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Ironically, a big ego has usually been inflated to that supersized volume because someone is hiding an insecurity or two. When you encounter a self-centered braggart today, keep that in mind. With all their bluster, they might be able to intimidate other people, but they won't be able to intimidate you. You know what time it is! Approach them with kindness and empathy instead of challenging their behavior. You'll get a lot further by being sensitive to their insecurities.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

One of your most recent dreams may have included some confusing visions that left you scratching your head. Do you think that these visions hold the key to finding happiness or prosperity? Nope. They're just various ideas that your subconscious has been toying with. You'll gain more insight by consciously trying out new schemes in your daily life than you will by trying to translate these nighttime images into action. Focus on your waking life. The dreams are thumbnail sketches for your subconscious.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Someone in your social circle or your team at work thinks that they deserve something you have, but they're failing to remember how much work and effort you put into earning it. If all their grumbling and whining is starting to get on your nerves, today might be the day to take them to task. Their jealousy is something you have to take seriously. Unless you address it head-on, it will only grow and become a bigger obstacle between you.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You can't analyze the unseen, so if you're wringing your hands over a mysterious situation, stop. Trying to figure out what motivates other people is a waste of your time. You can ask them questions until the cows come home, but they might not be in a position to tell you anything right now. They don't really understand it themselves! It's best to distract yourself with positive people and fun things. You'll know more soon enough. Playing these guessing games will only frustrate you.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You might be keeping yourself somewhat detached from the people who care about you most right now. Are you sure you're not pushing them away? Now it's important that you connect with others, not pull away. Look into this today. Pick their brains for ideas on how you can open yourself up a bit more. It's about time that you trusted in others enough to show them who you really are.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

However you feel is how you feel, so don't try to hide it. If other people are uncomfortable with your anger, happiness, or whatever emotion you're exhibiting, that's just too bad for them. You aren't a robot, so why should you act like one? Beware of people who think that hiding how you really feel is some sort of superior way to be. Not acknowledging your feelings can become a very unhealthy habit, one that can keep you from having honest connections with others.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Shallow conversation is fine for the line at the coffee shop or a long elevator ride, but all in all, it's not your thing, especially not today. You have too much wit and charm to just skim the surface with other people. You need to take the time to go deep. Ask the penetrating questions that give people something to think about. You don't want pat answers that anyone can spout out. You want and deserve to hear where people really stand on issues.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Have you been feeling held back or restricted lately? If so, get ready to get moving! Your progress may have been slowed down by a certain person, but that person is no longer an issue. Either they're leaving the scene or losing their influence. Either way, today you just need to look ahead, pick your goal, and go for it! No one with any sense will get in your way right now. The pathway is open and you're cleared for takeoff!

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're always smart enough to be careful in business deals, but how careful have you been in romantic negotiations? Past pain could have been caused by careless generosity, so if you want to prevent yourself from getting hurt again in the future, go more slowly. A new person is an exciting prospect, but what's your hurry? They are interested and they aren't going anywhere unless you tell them to. Don't give them only green lights when yellow would be much more appropriate for now.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your vision for the future is sharper than ever, which might be causing you to feel antsy about how you're going to get to the next stop on your journey. Don't worry about lacking the energy or inspiration you need to move forward. Right now, you have enough to do whatever you want to do. As long as you bring all your conviction to whatever you're doing, you'll be fine. Bravado counts, so don't be shy about showing your confidence to others.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Don't get involved with stuff you're unsure of right now, even (or especially!) if you think it will get you approval from others. Why try so hard to be validated by people who don't get how great you are? Just by being yourself you offer more than enough to any crowd. If they can't see it, then you don't need them. Stick to who you are and do what you want to do. Don't be wishy-washy about it. Be proud of who you are and the way you are. You aren't a mindless lemming!



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. In 2010, who became the first person to win the Women's Singles title at the Australian Open tennis tournament 5 times?

A. Maria Sharapova
B. Martina Hingis
C. Serena Williams
D. Justine Henin

02. The Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous periods, about 252 to 66 million years ago, are collectively known as what era?

A. Mesozoic
B. Quaternary
C. Cenozoic
D. Mesoproterozoic

03. Apart from the name's being linked to advertising campaigns, what are gitanes?

A. Gypsies
B. Bike riders
C. Smokers
D. Influencers

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. A

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

O	V	O	T
R	Z	C	S
R	A	I	V
M	E	N	E

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

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

China rejects US claim that Beijing may arm Russia

Beijing, China - Beijing strongly denied on Monday US claims that China was considering arming Russia in its war against Ukraine, as it reiterated a call for dialogue to end the conflict.

On Sunday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Beijing was now 'considering providing lethal support' to Moscow ranging 'from ammunition to the weapons themselves'. "It is the United States and not China that is endlessly shipping weapons to the battlefield," China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Monday, when asked about the US claims.

"We urge the United States to earnestly reflect on its own actions, and do more to alleviate the situation, promote peace and dialogue, and stop shifting blame and spreading false information," Wang told a regular briefing.

Moscow's offensive in Ukraine is a sensitive issue for Beijing, which has sought to position itself as neutral while offering diplomatic backing to its strategic ally Russia.

"It is clear to the international community who is calling for dialogue and fighting for peace, and who is adding fuel to the fire and encouraging opposition," Wang added, reiterating a call for support for a Chinese proposal to end the war.

On Saturday, China said it would publish this week a proposal to find a 'political solution' to the Ukraine crisis, with Beijing's top diplomat telling a conference the country is 'on the side of dialogue'.

Wang Yi told the Munich Security Conference that China was against attacks on nuclear power plants, op-



Chinese diplomat Wang Yi (AFP)

posed the use of biochemical weapons and was willing to work with 'all parties'.

Blinken's accusations came as relations between China and the United States were further strained after Washington shot down what it said was a Chinese spy balloon earlier this month.

The United States has repeatedly warned China against providing support to Russia for its war in Ukraine, which is nearing its one-year anniversary.

Appearing on Sunday on ABC, Blinken said that US President Joe Biden had warned his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, as long ago as last March against sending weapons to Russia.

Since that time, 'China has been careful not to cross that line, including by holding off on selling lethal weapons systems for use on the battlefield,' according to a US administration source familiar with the issue.

In Munich, Blinken and Wang Yi clashed over Washington's shooting down of a Chinese balloon over its airspace.

AFP

Gunfight after Afghan Taliban shut key border with Pakistan

Relations between the two countries have been testy since the Taliban took Kabul in August 2021



A Taliban security personnel stands guard as young Afghan boys help elderly men in wheelchairs after an incident of gunfire between Afghanistan and Pakistan border forces near the Torkham border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Nangarhar province on Monday (AFP)

It is such a pity, Pakistanis and Afghans are Muslim brothers. I have all the necessary documents, but it (the key border crossing) is still closed over a small issue

PAKISTANI CITIZEN RIWAYAT

Islamabad did not respond to a request from AFP to clarify the new rules.

The clash broke out at around 7:30am Kabul time (0300 GMT) on Monday, with both sides blaming each other for initiating the violence.

"The firing was initiated by the Afghan side and our forces retaliated," Irshad Mohmand, a senior Pakistani government official at

the border, told AFP by phone.

Afghan official Harfat Muhajir, however, said Afghan forces had only 'shot in response' to Pakistani forces.

The border crossing at Torkham - 177km (110 miles) from the capital of each country - is a key trading waypoint, where Afghanistan exports truckloads of coal and receives food and other supplies from Pakistan.

Both nations are in dire economic crisis, with Afghanistan reeling from a drop-off in aid following the end of the US-backed occupation, and Pakistan crippled by a domestic downturn and foreign exchange crisis that has left it on the brink of default.

In the year-and-a-half of Taliban rule, Pakistan has witnessed a dramatic uptick in attacks on its soil, mainly in the regions bordering Afghanistan.

In January, a suicide bomber killed more than 80 police officers at a mosque in the north-western provincial capital of Peshawar.

On Friday, a suicide bomber squad stormed a police headquarters in the southern port city

of Karachi, killing five. Both attacks were linked to the Pakistani Taliban, which has deep ties with the Afghan Taliban.

"I think that the Afghan state has to deliver on terrorism," Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari told the Munich Security Conference on Saturday.

"There's a whole alphabet soup of terrorist organisations that have and still do base themselves out of Afghanistan."

Late on Sunday, Kabul's foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi said Zardari's 'remarks asserting that terrorist groups operate from Afghanistan... are untrue'.

AFP

Moldova urges EU sanctions on oligarchs aiding Russia

Brussels, Belgium - Moldova urged the EU on Monday to impose sanctions on oligarchs it accuses of helping Russia to destabilise the country, after allegations Moscow was plotting to overthrow the pro-Western government.

The former Soviet republic, wedged between Ukraine and Romania, is facing multiple crises aggravated by the Kremlin's year-old war against Kyiv.

Last week Moldova accused Russia - which has forces in the country's breakaway Transnistria

region - of conspiring to carry out a coup that would see 'saboteurs' attack state institutions.

"It is not the first time Moldova faces such situations in the last year," Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu said on Monday at a meeting with EU foreign ministers in Brussels.

"There have been several instances of such concerns, it is just this time they are more public." He added that 'the risks are there, but Moldova has a good record in fending them off'.

Popescu called on the 27-na-



Moldova's FM Nicu Popescu (AFP)

tion bloc to place 'corrupt oligarchs and politicians who, with Russia, are trying to destabilise

Moldova' on an asset freeze and visa ban blacklist.

Last year, the United States and Britain imposed sanctions on Moldovan magnates Ilan Shor and Vladimir Plahotniuc, who fled the country in 2019 in the face of corruption charges.

Moldova - along with Ukraine - last year was granted candidate status to join the EU, setting it on the first step of a years-long process.

Moscow has denied plotting to overthrow the government in Chisinau, but has for years

sought to pull post-Soviet states back into its sphere of influence. European diplomats said that the EU was considering sending cyber experts to Moldova to help the country ward off hacking attacks from Moscow.

Over the past year, the war in neighbouring Ukraine has also repeatedly caused multiple security concerns in the pro-European country as debris from Russian missiles landed on Moldovan territory after traversing its skies.

Popescu said 'a key priority for us is to make our airspace and

our society safer by accessing air surveillance equipment and air defence equipment'.

He urged Western powers to keep sending weapons and support to help Ukrainian forces fight back against Russia's invasion as that was 'also defending Moldova'.

"Help Ukraine as much as everyone can, as long as Ukraine needs," he said.

"This is the best investment in a stable Europe, stable peace and a stable and peaceful Moldova."

AFP

Japan PM pledges \$5.5bn in additional Ukraine aid

Tokyo, Japan - Japan will offer Ukraine fresh financial support worth US\$5.5bn, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Monday, days before the first anniversary of Russia's invasion. Japan, this year's Group of Seven president, has joined Western powers in imposing sanctions on Moscow since the war began on February 24, 2022.

It has already provided Ukraine with financial support worth US\$600mn along with hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of emergency humanitarian assistance, according to the prime minister's office.

But 'there is still a need to assist people whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the war, and to restore destroyed infrastructure', Kishida said in a speech at a think tank symposium in Tokyo.

"We have decided to provide additional financial support of US\$5.5bn."

The Japanese premier also announced he will host a video conference of the G7 leaders with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday, the invasion's one-year anniversary.

AFP

N Korea fires ballistic missiles in warning over US, S Korea drills

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea fired two ballistic missiles on Monday, its second weapons test in 48 hours, which Pyongyang said was a drill for a rocket launcher capable of a 'tactical nuclear attack' that could take out entire enemy air bases.

Pyongyang had already tested one of its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on Saturday and warned more was to come, with leader Kim Jong Un's powerful sister calling the Pacific the North's 'firing range'. Seoul and Washington, who are moving to bolster security cooperation in the region to address Pyongyang's growing threats, staged joint air drills after the ICBM launch - further enraging the North, which views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion.

State media outlet KCNA said

Monday's missile drill involving 'super-large multiple rocket launchers, the tactical nuclear attack means', showed the North's army could deter and counter any US-South Korean exercises, adding the weapons could 'reduce to ashes the enemy's operational airfield'.

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, said Pyongyang was closely monitoring Washington and Seoul's moves to deploy more US strategic assets to the region, vowing 'corresponding counteraction' if needed.

"The frequency of using the Pacific as our firing range depends upon the US forces' action character," she said in a statement published by KCNA.

Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in decades, after the North last year declared itself an 'irre-



Pedestrians walk past a screen in Tokyo on Monday, displaying North Korea's missile launch footage being broadcast by Korean Central Television (AFP)

Israelis rally against judicial reform bill

Jerusalem - Israelis protested on Monday against the government's judicial reform bill which they say threatens democracy, as lawmakers ready for a key vote on the controversial overhaul.

Demonstrators from across Israel descended on Jerusalem to rally near parliament ahead of the first reading of legislation to change the way judges are picked. "The state is in danger," said Dvir Bar, a 45-year-old demonstrator from central Israel. "It's an attempted coup, to transform Israel into a dictatorship," he said in Jerusalem, as hundreds gathered ahead of the parliamentary session.

As demonstrators travelled to Jerusalem, some 4,000 parents, students and teachers also rallied in northern Tel Aviv, according to an AFP correspondent.

The sweeping judicial reform programme is a cornerstone of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's administration, an alliance with ultra-Orthodox and extreme-right parties which took office in late December.

The premier views the overhaul as key to restoring the balance between the branches of government, as he believes judges have too much power over elected officials.

But opponents argue the government is making a power grab and tens of thousands of protesters have gathered in Tel Aviv for seven consecutive weeks to protest the legislation.

In Jerusalem, protester Kovi Skier took aim at the government's plan to allow parliament to overrule any Supreme Court decision with a simple majority.

"If there's no judicial review, the government can make whatever policies it wants without any limitations," said the 33-year-old from the central city of Givat

position of the committee to select judges.

A bill to prevent judges from ruling against the so-called Basic Laws, Israel's quasi-constitution, is also on the parliamentary agenda. Police said officers arrested eight demonstrators in the Tel Aviv area for breaching public order and disobeying instructions.

Netanyahu slammed protesters who delayed a member of the parliamentary justice committee, Tally Gotlib, from leaving after they gathered outside her home

If there's no judicial review, the government can make whatever policies it wants without any limitations. It could make policies against women, Arabs, the religious. Everyone will be affected

KOVI SKIER

Shmuel. "It could make policies against women, policies against Arabs, policies against the religious, it doesn't make a difference who. Everyone will be affected," he added, carrying his daughter clutching an Israeli flag.

Lawmakers are set to hold their first vote later on Monday on measures to change the com-

in central Israel.

"The demonstrators who talk about democracy are the ones who bring about the end of democracy when they prevent the public representatives from exercising the basic right in democracy - to vote," Netanyahu wrote on Twitter on Monday.

AFP



Israeli protesters lift national flags and placards as they rally in Tel Aviv on Monday, against controversial legal reforms (AFP)

US reaffirms pledge to deliver F-16 jets to Turkey

Ankara, Turkey - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday reaffirmed Washington's commitment to delivering F-16 jets to Turkey despite Turkish insistence that their approval should not depend on Ankara lifting objections to Sweden joining NATO.

Turkey wants modernised versions of F-16 fighter jets for its ageing air force, but US Congress must approve any sale.

"The Biden administration strongly supports the package to both upgrade the existing F-16s and to provide new ones," Blinken told a press conference in Ankara.

But Blinken added he could not provide a 'formal timeline' for approval and delivery.

It was Blinken's first visit to Turkey as secretary of state in a trip that was planned before a 7.8-magnitude earthquake on February 4, which has now killed nearly 45,000 people in Turkey and Syria.

The top US diplomat is due to hold talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan later on Monday in Ankara.

The United States, whose relations with Turkey have been strained in recent years, has been looking for ways to persuade Erdogan to ratify NATO membership applications by Finland and Sweden.

Finland and Sweden dropped decades of military non-alignment and applied to join the US-led defence alliance last year in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

But Turkey has yet to ratify their applications and Ankara has opposed Sweden's refusal to extradite dozens of suspects that Turkey links to outlawed Kurdish militants and a failed 2016 coup.

On Monday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu dismissed any attempt to apply conditions to the F-16 jets ap-



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and Turkish FM Mevlut Cavusoglu shake hands after a press conference in Ankara on Monday (AFP)

proval. "It would not be right to make Sweden and Finland's NATO membership a condition for the F-16s. They are two different issues," he said. "Our hands should not be tied."

Blinken said the United States 'strongly' supported Finland and Sweden's admission into NATO 'as quickly as possible'.

'Finland and Sweden have already taken concrete steps' to address Turkey's concerns, he said.

Turkey has signalled it is ready to accept Finland into NATO.

AFP

Toll from Tajikistan avalanches rises to 19

Dushanbe, Tajikistan - The death toll from avalanches that in recent days have hit Tajikistan, a small mountainous country in Central Asia, has risen to 19, authorities said on Monday.

"From February 15 to February 19, 200 avalanches, seven landslides and six rockfalls were recorded," emergency services said in a statement.

"19 of our citizens lost their lives in avalanches."

Tajikistan, the poorest of ex-Soviet nations in Central Asia, is vulnerable to natural catastrophes. Almost all of the victims lived in Upper Badakhshan (also called Gorno Badakhshan), an autonomous region bordering Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan that's surrounded by the Pamir Mountains.

The isolated region represents around half of Tajik territory, but is home to only two per cent of the nation's 9.5mn population. President Emomali Rahmon, in power for three decades, has received condolence messages from leaders of ex-Soviet countries and Russia's Vladimir Putin.

AFP

Iran denies enrichment of uranium above 60%

Vienna, Austria - Iran on Monday denied reports that it has enriched uranium up to 84 per cent, just below the 90 per cent needed to produce an atomic bomb.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said on Sunday evening that it was in discussions with Tehran after Bloomberg News reported that the watchdog's inspectors in Iran last week found uranium enriched to 84 per cent purity.

The report comes with negotiations stalled to revive a landmark deal over Iran's nuclear programme.

Iran was last known to have enriched uranium to up to 60 per cent. Uranium enriched to around 90 per cent purity is considered nuclear weapons-grade.

The spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, Behruz Kamalvandi, on Monday described the report as 'slander' and a 'distortion of the facts', according to state news agency IRNA.

"The presence of a particle or particles of uranium above 60 per cent in the enrichment process does not mean enrichment above 60 per cent," he added.

A diplomat confirmed to AFP the 84 per cent reported by Bloomberg, saying 'the per cent-

age is correct'.

The IAEA is 'giving Iran the opportunity to explain because it's apparently possible that there can be so-called 'spikes' of higher levels of enrichment', the diplomat added. French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna said her country was in touch with the IAEA to 'have more precise information'.

France is part of the Iran 2015 nuclear deal together with China, Germany, Russia and the UK.

"It goes without saying that if this press information were confirmed, proven, this would constitute a new and extremely worrying element," she told reporters in Brussels.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani said on Monday that his country is 'committed' to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and its safeguards agreement with the IAEA. He warned against the politicisation of the role of the UN nuclear watchdog, saying it 'distorts its position'.

"The agency should act within the framework of specialised tasks," he added.

AFP



Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani (AFP)

AU reaffirms 'zero tolerance' to undemocratic change

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - The African Union insisted on Sunday it had 'zero tolerance' for undemocratic changes of power and vowed to push through a continent-wide free trade deal as it wrapped up a two-day summit.

Leaders of the 55-nation bloc met in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa to discuss a slew of challenges facing the continent, including coups, conflict and climate change.

On the final day of the summit on Sunday, the AU said it was maintaining its suspension of four countries - Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Sudan - which have been ruled by military lead-

ers following coups.

"The assembly reaffirmed zero tolerance against unconstitutional change (of government)," said its Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye.

"The Commission is ready to support these member states to return to constitutional order, the idea is that democracy must take root and must be promoted and protected," he told a news conference. "It is necessary to re-emphasise that the AU remains intolerant to any undemocratic means to political power."

At the end of the summit, the bloc's new chairman, Comoros

President Azali Assoumani, said the leaders had agreed to accelerate the implementation of a faltering trade deal launched in 2020.

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is billed as the biggest in the world in terms of population, gathering 54 out of 55 countries on a continent with 1.4bn people, with Eritrea the only holdout.

"I shall leave no stone unturned to ensure that this becomes a reality," Assoumani said.

African nations currently trade only about 15 per cent of their goods and services with each other. The AfCFTA aims to



AU Commission chief Moussa Faki Mahamat speaks during the closing ceremony of AU Assembly in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on Sunday (AFP)

boost that by 60 per cent by 2034 by eliminating almost all tariffs.

But implementation has fallen well short of that goal, running into hurdles including disagreements over tariff reductions and border closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

AU Commission chief Moussa Faki Mahamat said the deal was 'strategic' for the continent but warned that the infrastructure to allow for its success was still lacking, highlighting that 600mn Africans did not have access to electricity.

On Saturday, UN chief Antonio Guterres said that among its many challenges, Africa was facing a 'dysfunctional and unfair global financial system' that denied many countries the debt relief and concessional financing they need and charged them 'extortionate' interest rates.

On the sidelines of the AU meeting, the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) bloc also said it had maintained sanctions on the three Sahel countries.

"The Authority of Heads of State and Governments decided to maintain the existing sanctions on all three countries," the bloc said in a statement.

AFP

INDIA

Kharge slams ED raids on Congress leaders

ED conducted fresh searches in Chhattisgarh in connection with the ‘mining and coal levy scam’

New Delhi, India - Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge on Monday hit out at the BJP government at the Centre over the ongoing raids at the residential and office addresses of various Congress leaders of Chhattisgarh, saying it was mis-using the central agency against the ruling party in the state.

Taking to Twitter, Kharge posted: “Raid on our Congress leaders of Chhattisgarh by misuse of ED (Enforcement Directorate) by Modi government before Congress General Convention in Raipur, shows the cowardice of BJP.” The Congress president further alleged that 95 per cent of the raids conducted by ED in the last nine years were on Opposition leaders, mostly from the Congress.

“We are not going to be cowed down by these cowardly threats,” Kharge tweeted.

In another tweet, the veteran Congress MP said: “If Modi-ji is so honest, then raid the mega-scams of your ‘best friend’ (Gautam Adani). Due to the immense success of the Bharat Jodo Yatra, the uneasiness of the BJP is visible.”



Congress national president and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge (ANI)

“We will firmly face this attempt to crush democracy,” Kharge said. Earlier in the day, the ED conducted fresh searches at nearly a dozen loca-

tions in Chhattisgarh in connection with the alleged mining and coal levy scam.

Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel’s deputy secretary

Saumya Chaurasia Vishnoi, coal trader and alleged ‘main kingpin of the scam’ Suryakant Tiwari, his uncle Laxmikant Tiwari and another coal businessman Sunil

Agrawal have been arrested in connection with the case till now.

Among the places searched on Monday were residential

Raid on Congress leaders of Chhattisgarh by misuse of ED by Modi government before Congress convention in Raipur, shows the cowardice of BJP

MALLIKARJUN KHARGE

and office addresses of Congress leaders Ram Gopal Agarwal, Girish Devangan, RP Singh, Vinod Tiwari and Sunny Agrawal, said sources.

Last month, the ED had also raided multiple locations in Chhattisgarh, including that of an IAS officer, and other locations in connection with the ongoing money laundering probe into the alleged scam.

The federal investigation agency launched a probe in October last year after it raided another IAS officer of the state, Sameer Vishnoi, and some businessmen.

Sameer Vishnoi, IAS Officer of 2009 Batch, and his wife were found to be in possession of Rs 47 lakh in unaccounted cash and 4 kg gold jewellery.

The investigation relates to a massive scam in which illegal levy of Rs 25 was being extorted for every tonne of coal transported in Chhattisgarh by a cartel involving senior bureaucrats, businessmen, politicians and middlemen, the agency alleged.

The ED had earlier claimed in a statement that Chaurasia, Vishnoi and some coal traders allegedly linked to them ‘used’ their relatives to create ‘benami’ assets after it attached their properties worth more than Rs 150 crore in December, last year. The agency alleged further that a ‘grand conspiracy’ was hatched in the resource-rich state to perpetrate a coal levy ‘scam’ as part of which Rs 540 crore was ‘extorted’ over the last two years.

The money laundering case stems from an Income Tax department complaint registered following raids by the taxman in June 2022.

ANI

Upendra Kushwaha quits JD(U), launches new party

Patna, India - In a huge setback for Bihar Chief Nitish Kumar ahead of the 2024 general elections, disgruntled Janata Dal (United) leader Upendra Kushwaha on Monday resigned from all party positions and launched a new political party ‘Rashtriya Lok Janata Dal’.

Kushwaha, who has been at loggerheads with Nitish Kumar, announced the name of his party and said that he has been made its national president, ending the tussle between the two which has been going on for months.

“We’ve decided to form a new party - Rashtriya Lok Janata Dal. This has been decided unanimously. I’ve been made its national president. The party will take forward the legacy of Karpoori Thakur. We’ll work towards rejecting the agreement made with RJD,” he said.

Kushwaha said that when



Janata Dal (United)’s former Parliamentary Board Chairman Upendra Kushwaha (ANI)

Nitish Kumar became the chief minister after years of RJD’s rule, he did well, but said ‘he lost track and the path he opted at the end was bad for him and the party’.

“A new political innings is beginning today. Barring a few, everyone in JD(U) was expressing concern...A meeting was held with elected colleagues

and decision was taken,” he said.

Detailing the talks with Nitish Kumar while forging an alliance with the RJD for the second time that took place last year, Kushwaha said that he had asked the party chief to keep the leadership into his own hands to prevent the old situation (during the Lalu Yadav rule) from returning.

“I had accepted the talks of forging a new alliance (with the RJD), but had asked Nitish Kumar to keep the leadership of the alliance with himself. I was assured of the same. Days after forging the alliance, Nitish Kumar said that he wants to give the responsibility of Bihar to the RJD leader. He announced the name of an RJD leader as the next chief minister of Bihar, because of which we were worried about the future of Bihar,” he said.

ANI

Heavily investing in infra to generate jobs in Uttarakhand, says PM Modi

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said his government is heavily investing in infrastructure in Uttarakhand to make life easier for people living in far-flung areas, besides generating a range of job opportunities.

Prime Minister Modi made the remark during the virtual inauguration of the ‘Rozgar Mela’ for Uttarakhand on Monday. “Be it workers for construction, engineering, or raw material businesses and small traders, job opportunities are growing. With a rise in demand in the transport sector, youth (in Uttarakhand) are getting fresh employment opportunities,” PM Modi said.

On the migration of people from Uttarakhand to urban centres, he said improved digital and road connectivity in the hill-state will provide them with job opportunities, including in the



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the Uttarakhand Rozgar Mela via video message on Monday (ANI)

Be it workers for construction, engineering, or raw material businesses and small traders, job opportunities are growing

NARENDRA MODI

domestic tourism sector, in their own locality.

“We have to change the old

thinking which said ‘pahar ka pani aur pahar ki jawani’ doesn’t serve the locals residing in the

hills. We must change it,” he said, adding there have been continuous efforts by the government to send back youth to their villages while providing them with better employment avenues.

Prime Minister Modi, on October 22, last year, launched the first phase of the ‘Rozgar Mela’, where appointment letters were handed over to more than 75,000 new recruits.

It marked the beginning of the campaign to provide 10 lakh government jobs. Since then, PM Modi has addressed similar job fairs in several states, including Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, and Maharashtra.

The recruitments are done by central ministries and departments themselves, recruitment agencies like UPSC, SSC, and the Railway Recruitment Board.

ANI

Lula visits disaster zone after Brazil floods kill 36

Sao Paulo, Brazil - President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva flew in on Monday to tour the resort region turned disaster zone where at least 36 people were killed and dozens are still missing after floods and landslides, just as Brazil celebrated carnival.

Lula was due to give a news conference in the city of Sao Sebastiao, a popular beach destination around 200km (120 miles) southeast of Sao Paulo.

The Sao Paulo state government said the death toll stood at 36: a girl killed on the vacation getaway island of Ilhabela, and 35 people killed in Sao Sebastiao, on the mainland.

“Around 40 people have still not been located,” Sao Paulo rescue department official Michelle Cesar told CNN Brasil. The department said 14

injured people had been rescued. Nearly 1,000 people were evacuated, while 747 lost their homes, authorities said.

Rescue workers were rushing to find any survivors buried under the mud and rubble before it was too late.

The disaster struck just as Brazil celebrated carnival weekend, which draws huge numbers of tourists to Sao Sebastiao. Authorities said record rains had dumped 600 mm (nearly 24 inches) of water on Sao Sebastiao in 24 hours, more than double the usual amount for the entire month of February.

“What happened was a natural phenomenon we hadn’t seen in many years,” Sao Paulo civil defense department spokesman Roberto Farina told CNN Brasil.

AFP

UAE, Israel unveil first joint unmanned vessel

Abu Dhabi, UAE - The United Arab Emirates and Israel on Monday revealed their first jointly created unmanned vessel, illustrating their growing military ties as maritime threats rise in the Gulf region.

The craft, which has advanced sensors and imaging systems and can be used for surveillance, reconnaissance and detecting mines, was unveiled off the coast of Abu Dhabi during the Naval Defence and Maritime Security Exhibition (NAVDEX).

The unmanned surface vessel or USV was created by Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and Emirati defence consortium EDGE.

The busy Gulf shipping lanes have suffered years of missile and drone attacks blamed on neighbour Iran.

“We are for the first time demonstrating a mutual project that shows the capabilities and strengths of both companies’ in securing coastlines and coun-



Controllers man a terminal at the command station of the Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) in an unmanned maritime demonstration during the Naval Defence and Maritime Security Exhibition in Abu Dhabi on Monday (AFP)

tering mine threats, said Oren Guter, who leads IAI’s naval programme.

Guter, a former captain in the Israeli navy, said the vessels would counter ‘threats here in the

area’ but that the aim was also to deploy them abroad.

IAI was looking to bolster co-operation with the UAE in air defence and hopes to help the wealthy Gulf state improve its

naval capabilities, he said.

The UAE and Israel have steadily deepened their military partnership, including defence procurement, since they normalised relations in 2020 as

part of the US-brokered Abraham Accords.

In January 2022, Israel’s defence electronics company Elbit Systems said its subsidiary in the UAE was awarded an approximately US\$53mn contract to supply systems to the UAE air force.

Emirati and Israeli defence firms are also working to develop an autonomous counter-drone system.

Countering maritime threats from Iran is one area of focus for the UAE-Israel partnership, said Torbjorn Soltvedt of the risk intelligence firm Verisk Maplecroft.

“Security is a natural area of cooperation between Israel and the UAE,” Soltvedt told AFP.

“Countering the growing threat to shipping in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman will be a priority as both Israeli and Emirati ships have been targeted in Iran-backed drone and missile attacks,” he said.

AFP

DOUBLE BARREL

Osimhen and ‘Kvaradona’ making dark horses Napoli dream of Champions League glory

Milan, Italy - Victor Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia are leading Napoli’s Champions League charge, the Italians’ crown jewels in wonderful form ahead of Tuesday’s trip to Eintracht Frankfurt.

A club in turmoil at the end of last season whose fans were in open revolt, Napoli have stunned their own supporters and the rest of Europe by becoming possibly the continent’s most exciting team and Italy’s champions-elect by mid-February.

Napoli have never made it past the last 16 in the Champions League but with none of Europe’s powerhouses at their peak a window has been left for Luciano Spalletti’s side to have a go at the continent’s top competition.

The optimism surrounding Napoli is due in large part to Serie A’s leading scorer Osimhen and summer signing Kvaratskhelia, a devastating partnership which is

central to their chances at home and abroad.

Between them Nigeria striker Osimhen and ‘Kvaradona’ have scored half of Napoli’s 56 league goals, the Georgian wing wizard also setting up nine and providing the kind of individual brilliance which already has the world’s top club’s circling.

Osimhen is running at almost a goal a game in Italy’s top flight, nine in his eight matches since the turn of the year taking his league tally to 18.

The 24-year-old is looking to add to his one goal in this year’s Champions League, which came in a 4-2 win over Ajax a month after injuring himself in an eye-popping four-goal thumping of Liverpool. And he is convinced that there is plenty more to come from Kvaratskhelia, who has 12 goals and the same number of assists in all competitions.



Napoli’s Georgian forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (L) celebrates with Victor Osimhen after scoring against Sassuolo in their Italian Serie A match on Friday (AFP)

He (Khvicha Kvaratskhelia) is just getting started, you guys have seen nothing yet. I believe he has the quality to make us dream this season, he has big confidence and we are here to help support him.

VICTOR OSIMHEN



“He is just getting started, you guys have seen nothing yet,” Osimhen said. “I believe he has the quality to make us dream this season, he has big confidence and we are here to help support him.”

Few pegged Napoli as favourites to top a group which

contained last year’s finalists Liverpool, as the supporter protests accompanied their pre-season despite last year’s doomed title run. What has happened since has stunned Italian football and made the rest of the continent sit and take notice: Serie A might not be the gallery of stars it once was

but to be 15 points clear after just 23 matches is an incredible feat.

Napoli have dropped just seven points in Italy’s top flight all season, the team of Diego Maradona seemingly touched by the Hand of God and almost certain to win their first league title in over three decades.



Liverpool players celebrate a goal against Newcastle United in the English Premier League on Saturday (AFP)

Klopp hopes Liverpool have timing right as they bid for Madrid revenge

Liverpool, United Kingdom - Jurgen Klopp hopes Liverpool have turned the corner just in time for Real Madrid’s visit to Anfield to play the first leg of their Champions League last-16 clash - a repeat of last season’s final.

Madrid were crowned European champions for the 14th time in Paris after a 1-0 win in a match overshadowed by organisational failings on the part of UEFA and the French authorities that put

fans’ safety at risk. Liverpool, who narrowly missed out on an unprecedented quadruple last season, have suffered a hangover during the current campaign, out of both domestic cups and 19 points behind Premier League leaders Arsenal.

But back-to-back wins over Everton and Newcastle have lifted the mood around Anfield and given Klopp’s men a shot at qualifying for the Champions

League next season via a top-four finish in the English top flight.

“It’s the Champions League, it’s one of the biggest games in the world. It will be a top football game and I’m really happy we can play it now,” Klopp said at his pre-match press conference on Monday. “If it had been four weeks ago maybe it would’ve been different, but life is all about timing and maybe we found our feet right in time for this game.

“Now we have these two results and hopefully we can build on it, but we need to play two super games to get through.”

Madrid have been Liverpool’s conquerors in the Champions League three times in the previous five seasons. The European champions won the 2018 final in Kyiv 3-1 and by the same score on aggregate in a quarter-final tie between the sides in 2020/2021.

AFP

Messi snatches dramatic win for PSG after Neymar stretched off

Paris, France - Lionel Messi scored a 95th-minute free-kick to give Paris Saint-Germain a 4-3 win over Lille in an extraordinary Ligue 1 game on Sunday in which Kylian Mbappe scored twice but Neymar was taken off on a stretcher with an ankle injury.

Messi’s last-gasp winner came after PSG had squandered a two-goal lead and fallen 3-2 behind, with Mbappe grabbing a late equaliser before the Argentine’s stunning strike.

The result ends a run of three straight defeats for PSG and ensures they end the weekend as they started it, five points clear of second-placed Marseille, who won 3-2 at Toulouse and host



Paris Saint-Germain’s Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring against Lille in their French Ligue 1 match on Sunday

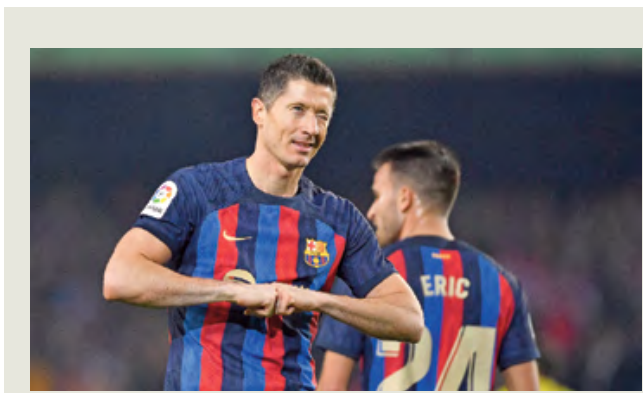
the Parisians next.

“We came through it. It wasn’t a great performance,” Mbappe told broadcaster Amazon Prime.

“We made lots of mistakes and lost concentration too often and against a quality side you pay dearly for that, but we showed that even when we are not at our best and the context is not exactly favourable we are a different team with different players and we can always find a way.”

Of immediate concern to PSG is the injury to Neymar, who looked to be in tears as he was helped onto a stretcher early in the second half after turning his right ankle.

AFP



Barcelona’s Robert Lewandowski celebrates after scoring against Cadiz in their Spanish League match on Sunday (AFP)

Barca restore Liga lead, Griezmann earns win fo Atletico Madrid

Barcelona, Spain - Robert Lewandowski and Sergi Roberto’s goals helped Barcelona beat Cadiz 2-0 and restore their eight-point lead at the top of La Liga on Sunday.

Elsewhere Antoine Griezmann’s superb strike helped Atletico Madrid earn a 1-0 win over Athletic Bilbao to tighten their grip on fourth place. Champions Real Madrid’s win at Osasuna on Saturday pulled them closer to Xavi Hernandez’s Barca, who had one eye on Thursday’s Europa League play-off second leg against Manchester United at Old Trafford.

However an inspired Ferran Torres helped Sergi Roberto to break the deadlock and

Lewandowski added a second to leave Cadiz, 17th, two points above the relegation zone.

The visitors had two Roger Marti goals disallowed and made Barcelona uncomfortable at times at Camp Nou but their victory rarely seemed in doubt.

Xavi began with Sergi Roberto in midfield, replacing Pedri, who suffered a thigh injury in the Europa League 2-2 first leg draw with Manchester United last Thursday.

The coach passionately defended the Catalan after the game, saying he was a player often used as a scapegoat.

“I’ve heard the most unjust criticism (aimed at him) in my life,” Xavi told reporters.

Spurs call for action after ‘reprehensible’ racist abuse of Son

London, United Kingdom - Tottenham Hotspur called for social media companies and authorities to “take action” after online racist abuse was directed at Son Heung-min following his goal against West Ham on Sunday.

South Korea captain Son emerged from the bench in the second half to net Spurs’ second goal in the 2-0 win in the London derby at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

“We have been made aware of the utterly reprehensible online racist abuse directed at Son

Heung-min during today’s match, which has been reported by the club,” Tottenham said on the club’s official Twitter feed on Sunday night.

“We stand with Sonny and once again call on the social media companies and authorities to take action.”

The Football Association echoed the club’s call for action.

“We strongly condemn the racist abuse aimed at Son Heung-min this evening,” an FA spokesperson replied to Tottenham’s tweet.



Son Heung-Min celebrates after scoring against West Ham United

“This has no place in our game and we fully support the authorities and social media companies to take the strongest possible action to tackle it.”

In June 2022, a group of 12 men who had been arrested for racially abusing Son on Twitter were given community service punishments and wrote apologies to the Tottenham forward.

Tottenham club officials had complained of “abhorrent racist abuse” on social media after the 3-1 home defeat to Manchester United on April 11, 2021.

“Another match day and more abhorrent racial abuse suffered by one of our players,” said a Spurs statement at the time.

“This has again been reported to the platforms and we shall now undertake a full review alongside the Premier League to determine the most effective action moving forward.”

In August 2022, Chelsea banned a season ticket holder indefinitely for aiming racist abuse at Son during a 2-2 Premier League draw at Stamford Bridge.

AFP



Ravichandran Ashwin took six wickets in the second Test against Australia

Ashwin, Jadeja hailed after destroying Australia

New Delhi, India - The “deadly” spin duo of Ravindra Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin were hailed on Monday by Indian media and pundits as they revelled in Australia’s second Test drubbing.

Ashwin and Jadeja destroyed Australia’s batting to set up a six-wicket victory in Delhi on Sunday and give India an unassailable 2-0 lead in the four-Test series.

It puts the home side on course for their fourth straight series win over the world’s top-ranked side.

Resuming day three on 61-1, Australia slumped to 113 all out before lunch with Jadeja (7-42)



Ravindra Jadeja took 10 wickets including seven in the second innings

and Ashwin (3-59) sharing all 10 wickets, leaving India a 115-run victory target which they romped past in less than 27 overs.

“Ravindra Jadeja is brilliant. India are unstoppable. But how bad are Australia?” the *Hindustan Times* newspaper asked.

“The image of the famed Australian fighting spirit stood shattered” after the team’s second consecutive defeat within three days, the newspaper added.

“This isn’t an Australian team that fights. This is a team that rolls over and lets the opposition

breeze past,” it said.

Six of the 10 Australian batsmen, including Steve Smith and David Warner’s concussion substitute Matt Renshaw, fell after attempting cross-batted sweep or reverse sweep shots on a tricky turning pitch with variable

It is “high time they are bracketed among the finest bowling tag-teams in history, like Waqar Younis and Wasim Akram, James Anderson and Stuart Broad, Dennis Lillee and Jeff Thomson,” the daily said.

Cricket commentator Harsha

Ravindra Jadeja is brilliant. India are unstoppable. But how bad are Australia. The image of the famed Australian fighting spirit stood shattered

HINDUSTAN TIMES

bounce.

India skipper Rohit Sharma said the sweep had been “not a very good option” for the visitors.

“Stepping out to the spinners was probably the safer option,” he said after the match.

The *Indian Express* newspaper called Jadeja and Ashwin “Yin and Yang, AC-DC, a deadly pair that cannot be unhyphenated” and “the world’s most deceptive spin act”.

Bhogle described Australia as “a house of cards” after their second batting collapse in successive matches.

They have “so much to worry about and not as many options,” Bhogle added.

Sachin Tendulkar tweeted that Jadeja “literally ‘TURNED’ the match in our favour”.

The third Test starts on March 1 at Indore in central India. AFP

Mandhana guides India into Women’s T20 World Cup semi-finals

Gqeberha, South Africa - Smriti Mandhana hit a career-best 87 as India beat Ireland in a rain-affected match in Gqeberha on Monday to book a semi-final meeting with Australia in the Women’s T20 World Cup semi-finals.

Replying to India’s imposing 155 for six, Ireland 54 for two when rain ended play, handing India a rain-adjusted five-run win.

A strong, swirling wind made conditions difficult and Mandhana was dropped four times in the outfield during a 56-ball innings which included nine fours and three sixes.

Shafali Verma made 24 and helped Mandhana put on 62 for the first wicket but both batters struggled to time the ball, al-

though the left-handed Mandhana hit with authority after reaching her second successive half-century off 40 balls.

Indian captain Harmanpreet Kaur, playing in her 150th T20 international, became the fourth player to reach 3000 runs in the format but also lacked fluency before being dismissed for 13 off 20 balls.

While other bowlers suffered because of dropped changes, Ireland captain Laura Delany benefitted from three good catches in the deep to take three for 33.

India finished the group stage with three wins from four matches and will face Australia in the semi-finals in Cape Town on Thursday. AFP



Smriti Mandhana scored a career-best 87 against Ireland on Monday



Pat Cummins

Australia captain Cummins flies home, Hazlewood out of India tour

Sydney, Australia - Australia captain Pat Cummins left the tour of India on Monday to return home because of a family illness, but will return in time for next week’s third Test.

“Pat Cummins has flown home for personal reasons due to a serious family illness,” said a Cricket Australia statement.

“He will return to India later this week to rejoin preparations for the third Test in Indore. We ask media to respect his privacy.” India hold an unassailable 2-0 lead in the four-match series after Australia lost the second

Test in Delhi by six wickets on Sunday.

Cricket Australia announced Monday that pace bowler Josh Hazlewood had been ruled out of the rest of the tour with a persistent Achilles tendon injury and would return home.

A spokesman denied Australian media reports that injured opening batsman David Warner would immediately return home after fracturing his elbow and being concussed in the first innings at Delhi.

“Just to be clear, David Warner is not leaving the tour at

this stage,” the spokesman said.

“Any squad changes will be announced once medical staff and selectors finalise them.”

Australia coach Andrew McDonald had better news Monday about Cameron Green and Mitchell Starc.

McDonald declared all-rounder Green 100 percent fit for the third Test and said that Starc was also in line to play.

Both have been recovering from serious finger injuries and Green was close to being available for the Delhi Test.

AFP



Steven Smith walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal

Former captains slam Australia’s batting after collapse

Sydney, Australia - Former Australia cricket captains Allan Border and Michael Clarke on Monday denounced the team’s batting performance against India, calling the second innings collapse “panicky” and ill-executed.

Spin bowler Ravindra Jadeja had figures of 7-42 as he tore through Australia’s batting in the second Test to enable India to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the four-match series.

Australia repeatedly employed cross-bat sweep shots on a turning Dehli wicket and paid the price as they tumbled to 113 all out in their second innings after resuming on the third day at 61-1.

“I’m disappointed, I’m shellshocked and angry about the way we went about our work,” Border told Fox News.

“It was a panicky, frenetic sort of batting,” said Border, who scored more than 11,000 Test runs and was renowned for his tenacious batting.

Australia captain Pat Cummins said the post-match team review would look at

why his players kept employing the sweep, accelerating their collapse. Cummins was among Jadeja’s victims as four Australian wickets fell for no runs with the score on 95.

“They were all getting out playing sweep shots, reverse sweeps and playing just about every ball,” said Border, 67.

I’m disappointed, I’m shellshocked and angry about the way we went about our work

ALLAN BORDER

“No one got in there and tried to stem the flow with just some good defensive cricket,” he said. Clarke echoed Border’s criticism. “They’re not the right conditions to sweep when you start your innings,” Clarke told Sky Sports radio. “And they’re never going to be the right conditions to reverse sweep against the spin at the start of your innings.”

Problems mount for New Zealand as Jamieson ruled out for months

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - Injured fast bowler Kyle Jamieson was on Monday ruled out of cricket for a lengthy spell in another blow for New Zealand following their 267-run first Test drubbing by England.

Coach Gary Stead confirmed that Jamieson had been diagnosed with a back stress fracture and will undergo surgery this week, with a minimum recovery time of four months.

The 28-year-old had been poised to return from a long lay-off for the Test at Mount Maunganui, but could only watch as England consigned the home side to an eighth successive Test without a win.

“It’s been a challenging and difficult time for Kyle and a big loss for us,” Stead said.

Jamieson, whose absence has coincided with the side’s poor run, had been “fantastic” when part of the New Zealand team,



Kyle Jamieson

Stead said. “We will know more in about three to four months about what that end prognosis looks like for him,” he added.

Jamieson’s pace and bounce was missed by New Zealand, whose inexperienced attack struggled to contain England’s aggressive batting in the day-night Test at the Bay Oval.

Stead confirmed pace bowler Matt Henry will join the squad for the second Test starting in Wellington on Friday.



Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair (C) celebrates with Germany's Luca Stolz (L) and Austrian Martin Konrad

UNSTOPPABLE AT YAS MARINA

Al Faisal al Zubair, Luca Stolz and Martin Konrad secure stunning race wins

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair, Germany's Luca Stolz and Austrian Martin Konrad claimed sensational back-to-back GT Class victories in the third and fourth races of the 2023 Asian Le Mans Series at the Yas Marina circuit in Abu Dhabi at the weekend.

At the wheel of the Al Manar Racing by Haupt Racing Team Mercedes AMG GT3 running under the Omani national flag in the GT class, the trio won the first race on Saturday evening by 17.875 seconds and followed that with a repeat win against a world class field on Sunday by even bigger margin of 27.70 seconds.

This was a superb result for the Sultanate of Oman and a major boost to the Al-Manar Racing by Haupt Racing Team and Al Zubair himself as he continues his racing programme throughout the 2023 season.



Al Faisal al Zubair in action at the Yas Marina circuit in Abu Dhabi

The Walkenhorst Motorsport BMW M4, crewed by Chandler Hull, Nicky Catsburg and Thomas Merrill, had won both races in Dubai last weekend and second position in the second of the Abu Dhabi races enabled them to claim the GT Class title.

A delighted Al Zubair said: "The weekend couldn't have gone any better with a double win at Asian Le Mans with such

a strong grid is definitely something to be very proud of.

"We were a little unfortunate to miss out on the championship after what happened in the second race in Dubai last weekend. Nonetheless, we did an amazing job to secure second in the championship and a double win in Abu Dhabi.

"We couldn't have asked for much more. We came and did

our best here. We won two races. The car was mega and Martin and Luca performed amazingly. I am very happy with the all-round performance. Yesterday, at the end we were managing the race and today we were pushing to open the gap.

"We passed the car to Luca for the final stint in a great position. The strategy worked well. The full course yellows helped us as well.

"Besides that, the performance from the bronze, silver and gold drivers was excellent. It's my first championship with the ACO, which manage the World Endurance Championship, and it's good to be on their radar and to show them that we are a team that is strong.

"Al Manar Racing is gaining a lot of traction and getting some results. The Omani national anthem and the flag flying on the top of the podium was icing on the cake."

Fagor FCC bag A Division title

Muscat, Oman: Fagor FCC defeated Glam Homes Properties by 72 runs in their final league match to emerge as the champions of the Oman Cricket League A Division powered by Khimji Ramdas LLC.

Fagor won five of their seven games to finish at the top of the standings.

Opting to bat first, Fagor made 250/8 in 50 overs after fine contributions from Shazaf Ali (60 of

59; 6x4,3x6) and Vinukum CG (55 of 52; 6x4,1x6). Nalina P (2/44) and Floury MG (2/44) were among the wickets for Glam Homes. In response, Glam Homes kept losing wickets at regular intervals with only Dileepa Srilal (58 of 75; 4x4,1x6) making any substantial contribution. Glam Homes were bundled out for a mere 178 in 37.5 overs.

Fagor manager Nowfal Raymarakkar said, "We love getting

past nail-biting games.

"It was a do-or-die match for us and I am delighted the way our captain - Parameshwaran Shankar and the boys expressed themselves," he said.

"It was an exemplary season for us winning five out of seven games. I thank the Oman Cricket for providing us their extended support and enable us to showcase our cricketing frontier ahead."



Fagor FCC players look a happy bunch after their triumph

Rahm wins Genesis Invitational to return to World No 1

Los Angeles, United States - Jon Rahm used two late birdies to power past Max Homa for a victory in the Genesis Invitational on Sunday that moved the Spaniard back to number one in the world.

Spain's Rahm grabbed his third US PGA Tour title of 2023 after wins at the Tournament of Champions and the American Express in La Quinta, California.

It was his fifth win in his last nine worldwide starts, a run that included his third Spanish Open triumph in October and victory in the DP World Tour Championship in November.

Rahm was thrilled to capture a win at Riviera Country Club, the classic course west of downtown Los Angeles that has produced such champions as Ben Hogan but where, Rahm noted, Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods have never won.

Woods, who hosted this week's event, was in the spotlight as he returned to competition for the first time since missing the cut at the British Open.

The 15-time major champion,



Jon Rahm of Spain celebrates with his wife, Kelley, and their two sons, Eneko and Kepa, after winning The Genesis Invitational on Sunday (AFP)

still limited by the severe right leg injuries he suffered in a February 2021 car accident, carded a final-round 73 to finish on one-under 283, tied for 45th.

"It's progress, but I didn't win," said Woods, who reiterated that he's targeting the four major championships and perhaps "a

couple" of other events this season - the most his surgically repaired leg will allow.

"It certainly was a little bit more difficult than I probably let on," added Woods, who goes through an elaborate ice-bath recovery protocol between each round to allow him to continue.



Novak Djokovic

Djokovic equals Graf's record for weeks spent as world number one

Paris, France - Tennis legend Novak Djokovic is a week away from another milestone after equalling Steffi Graf's all-time record for most weeks spent at number one of 377.

The 35-year-old Serbian remains top of the latest ATP rankings released on Monday bringing him level with the amount of weeks that Graf spent as women's world number one.

Djokovic returned to number one spot for a seventh time after his victory in the Australian Open

at the end of January which was a record equalling 22nd Grand Slam singles title.

Two former world number ones enjoyed success at the weekend -- Daniil Medvedev claiming the Rotterdam title and Carlos Alcaraz making a winning return to the circuit in Argentina.

Medvedev's three set victory - his 16th career title - over Italian Jannik Sinner sees him return to the top 10 - he rises three spots to eighth.

AFP



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It is a Thursday evening, and the young audience crammed into a concert hall in South Sudan's capital city is howling with laughter as a comedian lands his closing punchline.

"South Sudan got what?" shouts the host, Isaac Anthony Lumori, at the full house for a weekly comedy night that's become one of Juba's most popular entertainment fixtures.

"Talent!" roars the crowd, mostly in their late teens and 20s munching popcorn and ice cream, dressed in their best for a fun night out.

Kilkilu Ana Comedy Show set out to achieve the seemingly impossible in South Sudan: getting people to laugh as civil war tore the newly-independent nation apart. But comedy, and other performing arts, found fertile ground in the traumatised young country, even as space for free expression and dissent have shrunk elsewhere.

Stand-up acts, poetry readings and music shows have no trouble drawing crowds eager for distraction and solace - or a rare chance to poke fun at those in power.

"I use these jokes to make them smile, to heal them from the trauma that they went through," Kuech Deng Atem, a former child soldier turned comedian, told AFP.

"I also use it as a medicine for myself," said the 28-year-old, who is known on stage as Vwokil Jeesh Commando.

Smile again

Crowds start arriving at Kilkilu Ana well before the first act, paying US\$1.40 for entry. Lumori, an event promoter better known as



THE BEST MEDICINE

South Sudanese comedian David Lodiog (3rd L) imitates Pope Francis during his performance, at the Kilkilu Ana Comedy Show in Juba

POWER OF COMEDY

SOUTH SUDAN'S COMEDIANS
TAP THE POWER OF LAUGHTER
TO HELP THE POPULACE
FORGET THEIR WOES AND THE
SCARS OF CIVIL WAR

MC Lumoex, says they can sell 2,000 tickets on a good night.

"Every Thursday we try to come out," said Amiok Kuer, a 26-year-old who attended with three friends, and occasionally sings between skits. "People really need to have some time to relax."



A society that doesn't ask questions is a society that isn't going to go anywhere. It's important for us to find ways through our tragic times

AKAU JAMBO

When it kicked off in May 2014, Lumori worried the night would flop.

South Sudan had no experience with stand-up comedy and at the time, there seemed little to laugh about.

Just a few months earlier, the country had exploded into horrific bloodshed that pitted neighbour against neighbour and drove millions of people over the border. Lumori - who fled to Uganda - returned to Juba and found a city scarred and broken.

"So many people lost their loved ones," 43-year-old Lumori said. "We thought may be we could restore love, could restore laughter. People should smile again."

Growing scene

Some of the country's best-known comedians have cut their teeth on the Kilkilu Ana stage, and the scene has matured in recent years.

"Every Thursday you come here, these people are hungry for new jokes. You just can't come with the jokes you did last week,"

said Hakim James, a 22-year-comedian known as Sultan Kimu. "It isn't easy. South Sudanese have started to know what comedy is."

Today Kilkilu Ana is hardly the only show in town and Juba is even hosting an international comedy festival in April for the second year running.

"South Sudanese, in general, are funny," said Emmanuel Jal, the country's most successful musician and well-known internationally. "If you could find how they integrate their jokes into events, you'd be amazed."

Comedy has taken off as room for free speech has constricted, said Nelson Kwaje, who founded a creative space in Juba in late 2020.

The country's media and civil society groups are tightly controlled, and taking out a camera in Juba without permission attracts immediate trouble.

Some subjects are no laughing matter. In January, six journalists were arrested after a video surfaced showing the country's President Salva Kiir apparently urinating on himself.

Power of laughter

Comedians have been able to push boundaries about war, tribal divisions, corruption and poor governance - all hot-button issues in the heavily-policed state.

In a skit this month, Atem joked about South Sudan's schools being broke and teachers underpaid at a high-profile event where the country's education minister was guest of honour.

"I think some time back, that would not have been feasible. But now it is," Kwaje, whose venue Scenius Hub hosted the event, said.

"I do have concerns. But in South Sudan, the lines in the sand are not very clear about what is allowed and what is not"

Akau Jambo, South Sudan's highest-profile comedian, said, "A society that doesn't ask questions is a society that isn't going to go anywhere," he said, from Australia, where he is touring at comedy festivals. "It's important for us to find ways through our tragic times, and that's the role artists can play... That is the power of comedy."

AFP



South Sudanese comedian Jora, performs at the Kilkilu Ana Comedy Show in Juba



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BIRTHDAY WISHES



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US-Australian actress Cate Blanchett poses with the award for 'Best leading actress' for her role in *Tar*

BAFTA AWARDS

'ALL QUIET' AND 'BANSHEES' HOG THE LIMELIGHT AT THE 76TH BRITISH ACADEMY OF FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS AWARDS



US actor Austin Butler poses with the award for 'Best leading actor' for his role in *Elvis*

WAR AND CONFLICT TRIUMPH

A gut-wrenching war movie from Germany and pitch-black Irish comedy were the big winners as British cinema handed out its annual BAFTA awards on Sunday, with less than a month to go to the Oscars.

With 14 nods, German director Edward Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* started the night as the joint most-nominated foreign-language film in the 76 year history of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA).

The Netflix drama triumphed with seven awards, including best film and best director for Berger, as well as original score and cinematography, in the buildup to the Academy Awards on March 12.

Berger credited his daughter Matilda for turning his 'doubts into trust', after she told him he had to make a movie of Erich Maria Remarque's powerful 1929 novel, which she was reading in school.

Producer Malte Grunert said the British plaudits for a German-language film were 'just incredible', and it has also amassed nine Oscar nominations.

With a nod to modern-day conflicts including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he said that the film and novel showed that 'war is anything but an adventure'.

The German movie had tied with Ang Lee's martial arts drama *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, co-starring Michelle Yeoh, which also earned 14 BAFTA nominations in 2001.

Yeoh was nominated for best actress this year as a worn-down laundromat owner who transforms into a high-kicking heroine, in the wildly inventive *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

Yeoh's kung-fu science-fiction film received 10 BAFTA nominations, but only won one, for editing. She lost out to Cate Blanchett for her portrayal of a troubled classical music conductor in *Tar*.

"This is extraordinary. I didn't prepare anything (to say) because it's been such an extraordinary year for women," the Australian actress said, convinced that the award would go to one of her fellow nominees.

Making sadness fun

Also on 10 nominations, but faring far better in London, was the Irish tragic-comedy *The Banshees of Inisherin*, co-starring Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson.

(L-R) British movie producer Pete Czernin, British movie producer Graham Broadbent, Irish actress Kerry Condon and British-Irish screenwriter and movie director Martin McDonagh pose with their awards for *The Banshees of Inisherin*



This is extraordinary. I didn't prepare anything (to say) because it's been such an extraordinary year for women

MICHELLE YEOH



Britain's Prince William, Prince of Wales and Britain's Catherine, Princess of Wales speak to guests as they take their seats ahead of the BAFTA British Academy Film Awards at the Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, in London, on February 19

Its four wins included best supporting actor for Barry Keoghan and best supporting actress for Kerry Condon - who at first was not given the prize after a miscommunication on stage.

Banshees director Martin McDonagh, one of the rare UK nominees for this year's top gongs, did win 'Best British film' despite the heavily Irish profile of *Banshees*, and best original screenplay.

"Making a sad film shouldn't be so much fun," he said.

Beating out the favourite Farrell, US actor Austin Butler won the leading actor prize for his all-out portrayal of the king of rock and roll in *Elvis*.

"This means the world to me," Butler told the ceremony, still using the Presley drawl that he learned for Baz Luhrmann's movie.

Kremlin critic 'banned'

The awards suffered controversy two years ago when BAFTA gave a lifetime achievement award to British actor and producer Noel Clarke, only for a series of sexual misconduct allegations to emerge against him.

This time, Bulgarian investigative journalist and Kremlin critic Christo Grozev said he has was 'banned' from attending the awards, where a film about dissident Alexei Navalny won best documentary.

Grozev, who is credited with helping to reveal a plot to kill Navalny, appears in the documentary. He tweeted 'Wow' after the prize was announced.

"He is such an important part of this film, so it's very sad for us that he is not here," producer Odessa Rae told reporters at the awards.

London's Metropolitan police said only that "some journalists face the hostile intentions of foreign states whilst in the UK," while BAFTA said the safety of its guests and staff was a priority.

Blue ribbons

BAFTA also faced criticism for overlooking women. Only Gina Prince-Bythewood, was nominated for best director, for *The Woman King* - one more than the Oscars managed.

Berger, Farrell, Blanchett and Jamie Lee Curtis were among many attendees who wore blue ribbons on their suits and gowns in support of refugees. The gesture came after many people were displaced by earthquakes in Turkey/Syria, ahead of the one-year anniversary of the Ukraine war. AFP

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