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Social protection reforms ground-breaking: ILO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

International Labour Organization (ILO) has hailed the 'ground-breaking' reforms envisaged in the draft social protection law, which the Council of Ministers recently approved for referral to the Council of Oman.

ILO said in a detailed statement that the law reflects an ambitious set of reforms, which will lead to the modernisation and re-design of the social protection system in Oman.

"This will include the establishment of a unified pension system for workers across all economic sectors, the enhancement of social insurance benefits during working life, and the establishment of life-cycle guarantees for the most vulnerable segments of society. ILO has closely supported the preparation of these ground-breaking reforms over several years," it stated.

Ruba Jaradat, Regional Director for ILO in the Arab States,



Oman is showing that ambitious reform is possible, and must be rooted in international labour standards, careful analysis and extensive social dialogue

RUBA JARADAT

congratulated its partners and constituents in Oman for achieving the important milestone. "The development of inclusive, comprehensive, equitable and sustainable social protection systems is critical for countries in the GCC to harness and facilitate ongoing social and economic transforma-

tions. A new social protection paradigm must be at the centre of a social contract that delivers decent work and social justice for all. Oman is showing that ambitious reform is possible, and must be rooted in international labour standards, careful analysis and extensive social dialogue."

Equitable social insurance system

The ambitious reforms will lead to the integration of 11 separate pension schemes into one single national system, ILO informed. "The new proposed pension system balances the different objectives of enhancing intergenerational equity, increasing financial sustainability, improving adequacy of benefits and extending coverage, especially among the most vulnerable workers.

"The reform also provides for the extension of short-term contributory benefits in case of employment injury, maternity, paternity, unemployment and sickness, and puts particular emphasis on ensuring the participation of workers in all forms of employment in the contributory system, including with an important focus on the extension of social security rights to migrant workers in Oman."

"This has been one of the most complex and exciting projects I

have been engaged in during my career," said André Picard, chief of the Actuarial Services Unit of ILO in Geneva. "The design of social security systems needs to constantly adapt to evolving demographic, economic and societal changes. The design solutions identified together with our Omani counterparts are both innovative as well as firmly oriented by the core principles expressed in ILO social security standards."

Fully integrated social protection system

In strong alignment with the spirit of the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No 202), the reforms also establish universal life-cycle benefits for older persons, persons with disabilities and children. These have been designed to be fully complementary with contributory social insurance benefits and will operate under a unified social protection system and administration.



Sayyid Theyazin to preside over forum to review govt policies

Muscat - H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, will preside over the 'Together we Progress' forum on Sunday.

Organised by the Secretariat General of the Council of Ministers, the forum will review the government's policies and priorities in different sectors and discuss these with representatives of various segments and groups of society.

To be held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, the forum is being organised for the first time and will cover three main areas - Vision 2040 and mechanisms to follow up on its implementation, measures adopted by the government for

the National Programme for Fiscal Balance and Financial Sustainability, and mechanisms for dealing with issues related to the labour market and employment through the National Employment Programme.

The forum will witness a session with representatives of the three areas, during which questions of attendees will be answered.

The Secretariat General of the Council of Ministers has informed that it sent invitations via SMS and e-mail to participants based on a sorting methodology that took into account census data of the distribution of Omanis in the governorates.

Online marketing rules to be effective from March 24

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) will begin implementing the regulations on marketing and promotion on websites and social media starting March 24. An administrative fine of RO1,000 will be imposed on violators.

H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce,

Industry and Investment Promotion, issued Ministerial Decision No 619/2022 in December 2022 to regulate business activities involving marketing and promotion via websites and social media.

The decision states that promoters of products and services via social media should obtain a licence for the same from MoCIIP.

The decision excludes individuals engaged in non-profit activ-



ities, like charity and volunteering services, as well as merchants promoting his/her own products or services.

The ministry stated that the implementation of regulations aim to monitor the marketing and promotion of all products, goods and services through online and social media. "This is to protect merchants and consumers, provide the necessary safeguards for e-commerce transactions and preserve the

rights of dealers.'

Azza bint Ibrahim al Kindi, Director of MoCIIP's Commercial Affairs and E-Commerce Department, said, "Implementation of the regulations aims to oversee the marketing and promotion of any good or service, with or without charge, displayed and published in writing, drawing, image, symbol, sound or by any other means on any website or social media that allows user interaction."

15 development projects planned in Dhahirah in 2023-24

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Governorate of Dhahirah has planned 15 projects in 2023-24 to achieve the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, stimulate the economy and create recreational facilities.

An official of the governorate said, "The plans include construction of walkways in the niyabat of Hamra al Drooa and Al Nahda in the wilayat of Ibri, and an integrated station on the Empty Quarter Road."

According to the official, Dhahirah is continuing work to implement digital transformation projects, including an electronic portal, electronic inventory services, simplification of procedures, and geographic information systems.

"A commercial area will be developed in the wilayat of Dhank, a municipal market and roundabouts in Ibri, and a youth village in Celebrations Square also in Ibri."

Projects lined up in Ibri include construction of Ibri Public Park, developing the area surrounding Ibri Fort, and implementation of Phase 1 of the public street in Ibri - from Al Qurain roundabout to the Dhahirah Governorate Police Command, the official added. Plans are also being finalised to hold tourist and cultural festivals in all wilayats of the governorate.



Dhahirah aims to achieve the objectives of the Governorate Development Programme, which has received the attention of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

NAJEEB ALI AHMAD
AL RAWAS

Elaborating on the road projects, he said, "Approximately 100km of internal roads in vari-

ous wilayats will be paved and Phase 2 of a project to replace street lighting with LED bulbs will be implemented."

A dedicated motor sports area for drifting in Ibri is also on the anvil.

According to Governor Najeeb Ali Ahmad al Rawas, Dhahirah aims to achieve the objectives of the Governorate Development Programme, which has received the attention of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

His Majesty the Sultan raised the Governorate Development Programme allocation from RO10mn to RO20mn for each governorate for the current Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) starting from 2022.

► NEWS BRIEF

WAR CRIMES COURT
ISSUES PUTIN ARREST
WARRANT

The Hague, Netherlands - The International Criminal Court on Friday announced an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin on the war crime accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children. Moscow dismissed the orders as "void." Russia is not a party to the ICC so it was unclear if or how Putin could ever end up in the dock.

War-battered Ukraine welcomed the ICC announcement, with President Volodymyr Zelensky hailing the "historic decision."

More than 16,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia since the February 24, 2022 invasion, according to Kyiv, with many allegedly placed in institutions and foster homes.



Turkey, Hungary put Finland on course to join NATO soon

892 tonnes of lobster exported in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has exported 892 tonnes of lobster during the lobster fishing season last year, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) stated.

Lobsters are mostly caught in the governorates of Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah. The lobster fishing season this year began in the first week of March and will end on May 30.

MAFWR statistics show that a total of 1,101 tonnes of lobster - worth RO6.4mn - were caught in Oman in 2022, of which 209 tonnes were domestically consumed and 892 tonnes exported.



Four species of lobsters were documented in Omani waters, two of which are commonly found - the scalloped spiny lobster (Panulirus homarus) is found in abundance mostly in the Arabian Sea and exploited commercially, while the smaller painted spiny lobster (Panulirus versicolor) is found mainly in the Sea of Oman off the coasts of Muscat

and Musandam governorates. The Palinustus waguensis belongs to the genus Palinustus, which is represented by five species - P truncatus A Milne Edwards, restricted to the western Atlantic; P mossambicus Barnard, found in the eastern coast of Africa; P waguensis Kubo and P unicornutus Berry, which are widely distributed in the Indo West Pacific; and P holthuisi which is found in Taiwan and Japan.

The ministry has alerted that fishermen must follow the lobster fishing season and abide by the fishing ban during the period of fertilisation and breeding from May until the end of February each year.

Musandam fixing tracking devices on fishing vessels

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In order to support fishermen and enhance controls on fishing, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has started installing tracking devices on large artisanal fishing vessels in Musandam.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Arif al Kamzari, head of the Statistics and Information Department at the Directorate General of Agriculture and Fisheries in Musandam, said, "The directorate launched a campaign to instal 65 automatic tracking devices in artisanal fishing vessels on March 5. Twenty-eight devices have been installed so far."

The project will continue until all artisanal boats are fitted with tracking devices and its aim is to develop an electronic system to monitor all fishing boats and ships in the governorate.

According to Kamzari, the



project will modernise the current tracking system by establishing electronic links with satellites and earth stations.

"This will provide a high level of accuracy of global specifications facilitating Musandam's commercial fishing fleet - consisting of 93 units - to operate smoothly."

Talking about the new moni-

toring system, he said, "It is characterised by a high level of innovation and speed in providing the required information about the fishing vessels which are linked with satellites and connected via Internet of Things networks helping increase the speed of response in emergency situations."

The system also provides data on fish production, assists in

marketing fish, distinguishes between legal and illegal fishing units, and maintains ideal standards for the safety and security of fishing units, Kamzari informed.

"Satellites send the required information about the boats and ships to operations rooms to analyse the data and information and submit these to the concerned parties to carry out procedures that must be conducted in a timely manner."

He added that there were 2,295 artisanal fishing boats and 93 commercial artisanal fishing vessels in Musandam at the end of 2022.

In April 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources signed an agreement with the Middle East Scientific Equipment Corporation to develop an electronic system for tracking and monitoring the sultanate's fishing fleet consisting of 25,201 units.

MoH to vaccinate hajj pilgrims from mid-April

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) will start vaccinating hajj pilgrims from mid-April, according to a ministry statement.

'The ministry would like to in-

form the citizens and residents - who have been accepted to perform the Hajj this year - about vaccines to be given in health institutions from the second week of April,' MoH said.

According to the requirements of the competent author-

ities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the necessary vaccinations are: The Quadric-vaccination against Meningococcal Meningitis (ACYW135), seasonal flu vaccine and COVID-19 vaccine (Bivalent vaccine).

The ministry urged upon all

citizens and residents who want to perform Hajj to take the vaccines at the earliest.

These vaccines are considered prerequisite for entering Saudi Arabia as a measure to prevent any spread of infection and safeguard public health.

Board of Directors' Report for the year ended 31 December 2022

Dear Shareholders,
On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to present your Bank's full year financial results for 2022.

Performance Summary

I am delighted to share with you the positive results achieved by the Bank during 2022. Our performance shows a 45.9% increase in net profit for the year ended 31 December 2022 to RO26.7 M. This compares with RO18.3 M for 2021, the increase being driven primarily by a 10.2% growth in net operating income and lower operating expenses.

Net interest income was up 9.4% to RO57.0 M for the year compared with RO52.1 M in 2021 mainly due to higher interest income from the favourable interest rate environment, partly offset by higher interest expense on deposits. Net fee income increased by 13.8% to RO10.7 M for the year ended 31 December 2022 compared with RO9.4 M in 2021 mainly due to higher fees from cards.

Net trading income increased by 4.9% to RO6.4 M, an increase of RO0.3 M compared to 2021, due to higher FX volumes.

A net release of RO7.0 M has been reported to the Bank's Expected Credit Loss (ECL) and other credit impairment charges compared with a net release of RO7.5 M in 2021. The Bank released RO6.4 M of Wholesale ECL and RO0.6 M of Retail ECL. The ECL release was largely driven by an improvement in the macroeconomic variables (GDP growth and oil price) which are the key inputs for our IFRS 9 model.

Operating expenses fell by 5.5% to RO50.1 M, primarily due to lower IT related recharges and lower staff cost owing to a lower number of full time employees.

Loans and advances to customers decreased by 7.4% to RO1,247.4 M compared with RO1,347.2 M as at 31 December 2021.

Customer deposits decreased by 7.1% to RO1,765.3 M compared with RO1,901.1 M as at 31 December 2021. Our liquidity remains strong, as shown by an Advances to Deposit ratio (ADR) of 70.7% at the end of 2022.

HBON's Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) stood at 24.3% for the year ended 31 December 2022 compared with 22.7% as at 31 December 2021.

The Board of Directors proposes a total cash dividend of RO16.0 M, with a dividend pay-out ratio of 59.9%.

Delivering the best customer experience

In Wealth and Personal Banking, we launched key initiatives focused on customer acquisition throughout the year, including a new to bank customer acquisition campaign offering all Premier and Advance new to bank clients an upfront cash back reward. We also launched a campaign offering a chance to win 1 million rewards points for cardholders based on their usage of their credit cards.

As part of our Employee Banking Solutions program, we held a number of virtual meetings and open days with our top corporate employers in order to grow business from our top 120 employers. During the year, we deployed technology that enables the identification of customers through voice biometrics. This allows customers to access our banking services through our contact centre by phone using their voice as their unique identifier. Our digital penetration increased to around 55% (6% higher YoY).

In the Wholesale business, we continued to support our clients on their transition journeys with sustainable financing and investment to help their businesses develop sustainably. During the year we held sessions for Government related entities on Sustainable Finance as this topic increasingly becomes a priority for the Sultanate and our clients.

We also extended our latest payments solution, Global Disbursements, to Oman Air, which will allow it to make international payments in various currencies from its centralised treasury location in Oman.

The annual HSBC Economist Roadshow came to Oman in October with an optimistic forecast for the region's economic outlook in 2023. More than 150 clients and business leaders in Oman attended the presentations made by the HSBC economist team. Throughout 2022, we were proud to receive several awards from Euromoney. We were voted by our corporate clients as the Best Bank for Trade Finance services in 2022 and also won Best Investment Bank for the third consecutive year and the Best Bank in the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) category. The Bank was also voted as "Market Leader" by corporates in the Sultanate of Oman for the 11th consecutive year in the annual Euromoney Cash Management Survey 2022.

Investing in our people and community

We continued to make progress in supporting the country's Omanization agenda, achieving a 94% Omanization rate by 31 December 2022. During 2022 we have appointed more Omani nationals into senior positions in the Bank as part of our ongoing commitment to develop our local talent.

We continued to invest in our staff training programmes. Our learning activities focused on helping our people to understand their aspirations and build the skills needed to achieve their goals. Another area of focus was the wellbeing and mental health of our people. We delivered a number of learning sessions and activities to support our employees to make positive choices about their personal and professional priorities.

As part of the Summer internship program, 30 interns joined the bank during the summer in different areas of our business.

Under Corporate Sustainability, we rolled out a number of initiatives throughout the year in cooperation with local and international NGOs. We signed an agreement with the Environment Society of Oman to support its efforts towards implementing alternative solutions to harmful marine practices that threaten the survival of whales. The agreement included a capacity building programme that focuses on developing the next generation of marine researchers.

We also partnered with the UK based organization "Debate Mate" in a programme that seeks to empower youth with key employability and financial skills.

Potential Merger with Sohar International Bank

As disclosed by the Bank in Muscat Stock Exchange on 5th February 2023, HSBC Bank Oman has received approval from the Central Bank of Oman for its proposed merger with Sohar International Bank SAOG.

There will be no immediate change for customers as a result of this announcement. Both banks will remain independent and continue to operate a business as usual service until the merger has completed.

The merger is expected to complete in the second half of 2023, if approved by other relevant regulatory bodies as well as by the respective shareholders of the two entities at their Extraordinary General Meetings.

If the merger goes ahead, all of the assets and liabilities of HBON would be transferred to Sohar International Bank SAOG at carrying amounts and HBON would be dissolved.

Conclusion

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to thank all of our customers for their trust in us, our staff and management for what they have achieved so far, as well as the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority for their continued support and guidance.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles
Chairman

Statement of comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December

	2022 RO'000	2021 RO'000
Interest income	77,924	67,192
Interest expense	(20,879)	(15,134)
Net interest income	57,045	52,058
Fee income	14,275	12,934
Fee expense	(3,561)	(3,516)
Net fee income	10,714	9,418
Net trading income	6,426	6,144
Changes in fair value of financial investments measured at Fair Value Through Profit and Loss (FVTPL)	-	49
Dividend income	-	3
Other operating income - net	439	39
Net operating income before change in expected credit losses and other credit impairment charges	74,624	67,711
Change in expected credit losses and other credit impairment charges	6,988	7,500
Net operating income	81,612	75,211
Employee compensation and benefits	(21,986)	(22,640)
General and administrative expenses	(22,818)	(25,196)
Depreciation and impairment of property, equipment and right-of-use assets	(3,762)	(2,146)
Amortisation and impairment of intangible assets	(1,527)	(3,058)
Total operating expenses	(50,093)	(53,040)
Profit before tax	31,519	22,171
Tax expense	(4,810)	(3,839)
Profit for the year	26,709	18,332
Other comprehensive income		
Items that will be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss when specific conditions are met:		
Financial investments at Fair Value Through Other Comprehensive Income (FVOCI)		
- Fair value loss	(870)	(206)
- Expected credit losses recognised in income statement	(530)	(134)
- Income tax	130	31
	(1,270)	(309)
Items that will not be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss		
Remeasurement of defined benefit liability	(32)	(22)
Other comprehensive loss for the year - net of tax	(1,302)	(331)
Total comprehensive income for the year	25,407	18,001
Earnings per share – basic and diluted	RO0.013	RO0.009

Statement of financial position as at 31 December

	2022 RO'000	2021 RO'000
Assets		
Cash and balances with central bank	123,003	282,721
Due from banks	283,756	213,700
Loans and advances to customers - net	1,247,387	1,347,188
Financial investments	538,213	448,962
Other assets	26,304	34,078
Intangible assets	965	-
Property and equipment	17,669	20,342
Right-of-use-assets	2,396	-
Deferred tax assets	1,935	2,256
Total assets	2,241,628	2,349,247
Liabilities and equity		
Liabilities		
Due to banks	46,762	48,444
Deposits from customers	1,765,275	1,901,094
Current tax liabilities	6,936	5,339
Other liabilities	61,000	48,883
Lease liabilities	2,338	-
Total liabilities	1,882,311	2,003,760
Equity		
Share capital	200,031	200,031
Legal reserve	50,448	47,777
FVOCI reserve	110	1,380
Retained earnings	108,728	96,299
Total equity	359,317	345,487
Total liabilities and equity	2,241,628	2,349,247

The above annual financial results for the year ended 31 December 2022 are subject to the approval of the shareholders of the bank.



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Opening up a world of opportunity

Bids invited for Awqad waterfront in Salalah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dhofar Municipality has invited bids for the Awqad waterfront project in Salalah in efforts to stimulate tourism.

“To support the national economy and benefit from the country’s historical structures, the municipality has floated a tender for the development of Awqad waterfront,” a municipality official.

He informed that the project will include the construction of a 2.5km road, separate tracks for bicycles and pedestrians, and a car park.

“The project will also include recreational facilities for families to enjoy green spaces along the waterfront,” the municipality official added.

According him, the project aims to stimulate domestic



(Supplied image)

tourism and create recreational places and a natural outlet for residents of the governorate.

Recently, Phase 1 of the Al Hafa Waterfront Development, a tourism and leisure landmark in Salalah was completed. This phase includes a promenade and waterfront restaurants (several international brands) and limited operations of a traditional market.

ASMED launches electronic information system

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED), in cooperation with Royal Oman Police (ROP), launched an electronic information system on Thursday.

On the occasion, Halima bint Rashid al Zaria, Chairperson of ASMED, said, “The system is being implemented for the first time in the sultanate to empower entrepreneurs, owners of SMEs and investors. It provides information on companies and establishments, their location and activities, population information and economic activities.”

According to Halima, the e-information system will identify projects with “promising opportunities in various governorates and residential communities” and is equipped to provide a host of information on public and private sector institutions and establishments.

She informed that the system



(Supplied photo)

The system is being implemented for the first time in the sultanate to empower entrepreneurs, owners of SMEs and investors

HALIMA AL ZARIA

will be available for use in two weeks and that its link will be made available on social media

platforms and other media channels.

SMEs have stood out in the last few years as the key driver behind economic development in the sultanate with the sector contributing about 25 per cent or RO8bn to the GDP, according to ASMED.

The total number of SMEs registered in the country until September 2022 was 210,877, while the number of SMEs registered with the authority until December 2022 was 104,141.

EA launches campaign in Dhofar to collect 60,000 mangrove seeds

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To increase green cover across the sultanate, the Environment Authority (EA) launched a campaign to collect 60,000 mangrove seeds in Dhofar last week.

An EA official said, “The authority, represented by the Directorate General of Environment in Dhofar, is carrying out a campaign to collect mangrove seeds in order to bolster stocks in its nurseries.”

The official added that the campaign aims to provide the



(Supplied photos)

authority’s nurseries seeds of a diverse range of indigenous plants with the objective of increasing the green cover in the governorate.

Concerted efforts to preserve

environmental systems in accordance with internationally approved standards and measures will have a significant positive impact in creating a sound environmental balance, the EA official said, also emphasising the importance of community participation and solidarity in preserving these ecosystems.

In January 2020, EA in cooperation with Petroleum Development Oman, launched an initiative to plant 10mn wild tree saplings in ten years.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Muscat	27	20
Abu Dhabi	30	18
Doha	30	19
Kuwait City	25	14
Manama	27	19
Riyadh	30	13

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	4.57am
Sunrise	6.13am
Duhr	12.20pm
Asr	3.45pm
Maghrib	6.22pm
Isha	7.32pm

SEND YOUR
COMMENTS TO

**muscatdaily@
apexmedia.co.om**

Oman bans import of poultry from Turkey

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has banned the import of poultry from Turkey.

A statement issued by the ministry on Thursday said, ‘It is forbidden to import live birds and their products and derivatives from Turkey.’

The ban will continue until further notice with the exception of products that are thermally treated in accordance with the Health Law for Terrestrial Animals issued by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE).

The decision is based on the Veterinary Quarantine Law issued by Royal Decree No 45/2004, the executive regulations of the Veterinary Quarantine Regulation issued by Ministerial Decision No 107/2008, and reports issued by OIE.

Department of Neurology

Dr. Hemant Joshi
MD General Medicine, DM, MBBS
Specialist Neurologist
Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Sohar

Available On
Saturday - Thursday
9 AM to 1 PM & 5 PM to 9 PM

Aster
AL RAFFAH HOSPITAL
SOHAR

For Appointments
96096060 26940800

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY
Advertisement No. 13 /2023

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following bidding :

Serial	Bidding No.	Bidding description	Document fee	Deadline for obtaining bidding docs.	Deadline for inquiry submission	Deadline for Submission
1	AB/03/2023	Manage & Operate Consumer Exhibition	50/- OMR	30/03/2023	30/03/2023	03/04/2023

Registered companies with Muscat Municipality which are Specialized in above bid are invited to participate as per the following procedures:

- Company registration with Muscat Municipality have to be valid as per note number one below, to be able to get the bid document.
- Pay the specified document fee for the requested bid via bank deposit to Muscat Municipality's Bank account as follows:

Bank Muscat	0423010702710024
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- A copy of the transaction's receipt MUST be send to the following e-mail (MM.LPC@mm.gov.om), provided with the company data (name and bid number, delegate name, office phone number, mobile number, email address approved by the company and commercial registration number of the company).
- The tender document will be provided to the company via email.
- 2:00 PM** on the above mentioned dates, is the last timing for obtaining Bidding Documents. Any bid's document request received after the specified time will not be considered, even if the fee of the document is paid.

Submitted offers must be accompanied with a bond mentioned in the tender document valid for a period not less than (90) days issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. Bidding that do not meet the required bond **will not be accepted.**

Documents must be enclosed in a plain closed envelope (without any company information) and to be submitted in the box located at the first floor of Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsait (at Department of Quantity Surveying & Contracts).

NOTES:

- Companies which are not registered in Muscat Municipality or their registration has been expired shall register through the municipality's website (www.mm.gov.om). For technical support, please contact Muscat Municipality through this email (crm@mm.gov.om).
- If the bidders have any inquiries regarding the scope of the work, they have to sent their inquiries through the following e-mail (MM.LPC@mm.gov.om)
- 10:00 AM** on the above submission mentioned dates, is the last timing for receiving bids. Offers submitted after the above mentioned date & time shall not be accepted for any reason.
- Muscat Municipality has the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

Website: www.mm.gov.om

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Sembcorp-led JV wins 500MW Manah II solar power project

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Singapore-based Sembcorp Industries announced that it has – through an 80 per cent-owned joint venture (JV) to be set up by its wholly-owned subsidiary Sembcorp Utilities with Jinko Power Technology Company – received an award by Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP) to build, own and operate the Manah II Solar Independent Power Project (IPP) in Manah.

The 500MW Manah II solar plant is expected to be operational by 2025 and will be backed by a 20-year power purchase agreement with OPWP, Sembcorp said in a statement.

Earlier this month, the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) granted its approval to OPWP to award Manah I and Manah II solar power projects to the international investors. The two projects, with power generation capacity of 500MW for each, will be located in the Wilayat of Manah in Dakhiliyah governorate. Total cost of the two projects is expected to be more than RO300mn.

Sembcorp said that Manah II solar plant will augment its well-established presence and track



The Manah II Solar IPP will mark Sembcorp's first renewables project in the Middle East

ANDY KOSS

record in Oman's power and water desalination sector. The Salalah Independent Water and Power Plant, one of the most energy-efficient power and water plants in the Dhofar region, is 40 per cent owned by Sembcorp.

Andy Koss, CEO of UK and Middle East, Sembcorp Indus-

tries, said, "The Manah II Solar IPP will mark Sembcorp's first renewables project in the Middle East. This project will leverage our strong network and presence for over ten years in the country built through Salalah Independent Water and Power Plant. We are delighted to be awarded this project and look forward to working with Jinko Power to support the global energy transition."

Sembcorp said Manah II solar project is expected to be financed through a mix of internal cash resources and external bank borrowings. 'It is not expected to have a material impact on the earnings per share, net asset value per share and lever-

age of Sembcorp for the financial year ending December 31, 2023.'

In a separate statement on its website, China-based Jinko Power confirmed that the 500MW Manah II solar project was awarded through a competitive bidding conducted by OPWP in September 2022 where Jinko Power participated along with its consortium partner Sembcorp Utilities.

The Manah II solar project shall be owned 20 per cent by Jinko Power and 80 per cent by Sembcorp Utilities, the company noted.

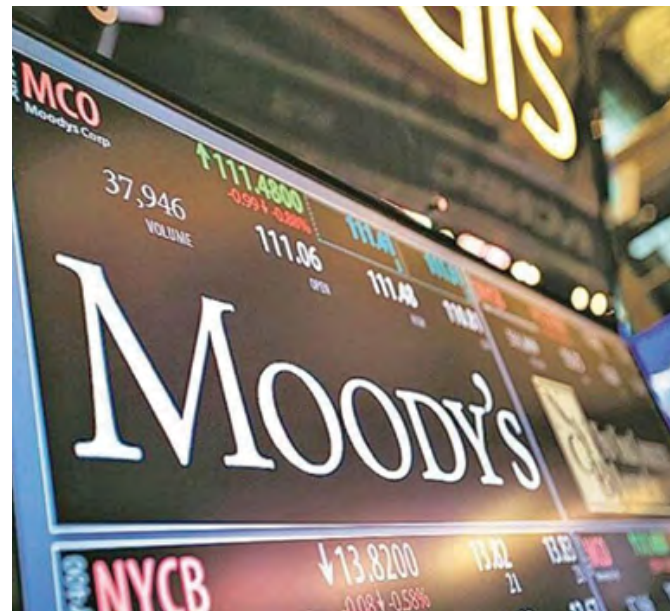
Charles Bai, president of Jinko Power International Business, said, "We are honoured and delighted with the award of this

landmark project together with our partner Sembcorp. We value the trust put in us by OPWP and other stakeholders in Oman. This project marks our first entry into the Oman renewables market and is hopefully one of the many more to come in the country."

Mothana Qteishat, managing director and head of bidding at Jinko Power International added, "This bid reaffirms once again Jinko's ability to succeed in highly competitive tenders and deliver value to stakeholders through Jinko's deep expertise across the full value chain of solar project development. We are delighted at having been awarded this bid and in line with our track record, are confident that this project will be delivered within budget and on time"

Oman's government adopted a fuel diversification policy few years ago, which requires that renewable energy projects contribute at least 10 per cent of electricity generation output by 2025.

OPWP is focusing to expand its power generation capacities through solar and wind independent power projects (IPPs). One of the objectives of Oman's National Energy Strategy is to derive at least 30 per cent of electricity from renewable energy projects by 2030.



Islamic finance growth to outpace conventional peers in 2023: Moody's

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Demand for Shariah-compliant financing will continue to rise in 2023, supported by strong economic growth amid robust oil prices and ambitious development agendas in the GCC and other core markets, Moody's Investors Service said in a recent report.

"We expect Islamic banking in key markets to keep growing faster than conventional peers supported by robust economic activity in Southeast Asia and the GCC region," Moody's said.

The rating agency said Islamic finance growth in 2023 will be driven by trends including high commodity prices, governments' economic diversification agendas, growing demand for Shariah-compliant products and sovereigns' promotion of the Islamic finance industry. It added that Saudi Arabia and Malaysia will retain their leadership but potential for growth elsewhere remains high.

For takaful insurance, Moody's expects takaful premiums will keep growing moderately in the next two-three years, helped by economic activity and rising demand for medical insurance as more GCC, African and Southeast Asian countries implement compulsory health cover.

In highly competitive markets such as the GCC, Moody's said takaful operators that currently lack scale to accelerate technol-

ogy investment are likely to seek merger and acquisition (M&A) deals to build critical mass.

Moody's expects global sukuk issuance will level off at US\$170-\$175bn in 2023, supported by financing needs from Malaysian and Indonesian sovereigns, resilient activity on the banking and corporate side, and realisation of delayed issuances.

This follows a 10 per cent fall in sukuk issuance in 2022 to US\$178bn amid lower funding needs in the GCC region and Southeast Asia amid higher commodity prices and economic growth.

Moreover, rising investor demand for Shariah-compliant products will continue to support flows into Islamic funds, Moody's said.

"We expect appetite for Islamic fund assets to remain strong. According to our latest survey of GCC asset managers, and in line with our view, chief investment officers expect rising demand for Shariah-compliant assets. Demand is largely underpinned by the large Muslim population, the expansion of Islamic investment product offerings, and rising demand of socially conscious investing."

Moody's also believes that the robust investment performance, on a relative basis, will continue to be a key factor underpinning positive net flows into Islamic funds. It added that Islamic fund indices continue to outperform their conventional counterparts on a five-year basis.

Indo Gulf & Middle East Chamber of Commerce to open Muscat branch to facilitate businesses

Muscat - Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) on Thursday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Indo Gulf & Middle East Chamber of Commerce (INMECC) for opening a branch of INMECC in Muscat governorate.

The MoU was signed by Faisal Abdullah al Rawas, chairman of OCCI and Dr N M Sharafudeen, chairman of INMECC, at the OCCI headquarters in Muscat.

During the signing ceremony, Rawas said that both chambers can play a vital role and "facilitate successful implementation of the objectives of the agreement among various sectors of our economies where the people of



both countries will be the ultimate beneficiaries".

The economic and commercial relations between India and Oman are robust and resilient, he added. Bilateral trade during FY 2021-2022

US\$9.988bn. Investment flows, both ways, have been robust, as reflected in numerous joint ventures, established both in India and Oman.

He appreciated the Government of India for inviting Oman

to the G20 summit and said, "The Government of Oman takes this as a great honour.

"The sultanate's unique character can be attributed to its stable economy, its people, location and infrastructure which boast

some great reasons why you should invest and relocate to Oman."

Sharafudeen presented the mission and vision of INMECC and specified that there are over 6,000 India-Oman joint ventures in Oman with estimated investment of over US\$7.5bn. "Indian companies have emerged as leading investors in Oman, particularly at Sohar and Salalah Free Zones. New Indian investments are also coming in Duqm Special Economic Zone. Both India and Oman accord high priority to strengthening economic and commercial relations between the two countries."

Chery is About to Enter Oman, Another Market in the Middle East

After successively entering the markets of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Iraq, Chery has once again embraced a new market in the Middle East - Oman. Oman, which guards the "world's chokehold" - the Strait of Hormuz, will serve as an important part of Chery's continuous implementation of the "Gulf Strategy" to accelerate the globalization process. Since the establishment in 1997, Chery Automobile Co., Ltd. has formed four major industries: Chery Group, Chery Automobile, Chery International and Chery Product, as well as 7 core business sectors, including automobile, auto parts, modern services, finance, intelligent network, shipping and real estate, thus covering a diversified development direction of the whole industrial chain of Chery. As the core industry of Chery Group, the automobile industry has laid out two major sections of passenger vehicle and commercial vehicle, which has formed a comprehensive brand competition pat-

tern from "entry level" to "luxury level" so far. As the first Chinese automobile brand to embark on the journey of globalization, Chery has set up 5 R&D centers and organized a technical R&D team of more than 7000 talents who came from over 10 different countries, including those executives served for renowned auto enterprises such as Jaguar Land Rover, GM, Ford and Hyundai. Thanks to years of technological accumulation, with 14,000+ authorized patents, Chery has become the first company in China which master core technologies of automobiles through independent research and development. Based on technological innovation, the PRO series products of Chery sell well in more than 80 countries and regions around the world, facilitating Chery's global vehicle ownership to exceed 11 million sets. In particular, TIGGO 7 PRO and TIGGO 8 PRO have won repeatedly the award of "Model of the Year" and become the product benchmark for the SUV mar-

ket segment. As a result, Chery has ranked first among Chinese brands in terms of the export sales volume of passenger vehicles for 20 consecutive years, with cumulative overseas sales volume exceeding 2.35 million sets, and it set a new record in the overseas sales volume of 450,000 sets in 2022. Oman is located at the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen, and guarding the Strait of Hormuz. With its abundant oil resources and unique geographical location, Oman has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. Like other countries in the Middle East, the good economic environment offers the support of purchasing power for automobile consumption. Following its entry into Oman, Chery will bring high-quality travel experience to local users, and the PRO series products are expected to take the lead in injecting new vitality into the local automotive market.

OPEC keeps oil demand growth forecast unchanged for 2023

Vienna, Austria - The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has kept its forecast of global oil demand growth unchanged for 2023.

According to OPEC's most recent monthly oil market report released on Wednesday, oil demand will increase by 2.32mn barrels per day (bpd) in 2023 to reach 101.9mn bpd.

Growth in the OECD is projected at 230,000 bpd to reach 46.23mn bpd, while growth in non-OECD countries is expected to climb 2.09mn bpd to 55.67mn bpd.

"Global oil demand growth is adjusted lower in the first and second quarters of 2023 to account for an anticipated decline in the OECD region, due to an expected slowdown in economic activity in OECD Americas and OECD Europe," the report said.

On the other hand, the oil demand in non-OECD countries is revised higher due to improvements in economic activity in China after the zero-COVID-19 policy was discontinued, as well



as expected improvements in Russian oil demand.

However, OPEC warned that 'this forecast is subject to many uncertainties, including the trend and pace of global economic activity and ongoing geopolitical developments.'

According to OPEC, global oil supply in February increased by around 600,000 bpd month over month, averaging 101.9mn bpd. This marks a 2.8mn bpd increase over the previous year.

OPEC's crude oil production

averaged 28.92mn bpd in February, a month-on-month increase of 117,000 bpd. During this period, crude oil production in OPEC increased the most in Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, while production in Angola and Iraq declined.

The share of OPEC crude oil out of total global production decreased by 0.1 percentage points to 28.4 per cent in February compared to the previous month.

Anadolu Agency

Crunch weekend for crisis-hit Credit Suisse

Zurich, Switzerland - Troubled Credit Suisse has one more day to reassure before the markets open Monday with the spectre of a new turbulent week in global finance looming.

The Zurich-based lender was holding crisis talks this weekend and urgent meetings with Swiss banking and regulatory authorities.

On Friday, the *Financial Times* reported that Switzerland's largest bank, UBS, is in talks to buy all or part of Credit Suisse, with the blessing of the Swiss regulatory authorities.

The Swiss National Bank (SNB) "wants the lenders to agree on a simple and straightforward solution before markets open on Monday", the source said, while acknowledging there was "no guarantee" of a deal.

When contacted by AFP, both SNB and Credit Suisse declined to comment, while UBS and Swiss financial watchdog FINMA did not respond immediately.

After a turbulent week on the stock market which forced the SNB to step in with a \$53.7 billion lifeline, Credit Suisse was worth just over \$8.7 billion on Friday evening.

But an acquisition of this size is dauntingly complex.

While the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority and the SNB have said that Credit Suisse "meets the capital and liquidity requirements imposed on systemically important banks", mistrust remains.

Serious breaches

Credit Suisse has been scandal-plagued for the past two years with its own management admitting "material weaknesses" in their "internal control over financial reporting".



FINMA accused the bank of having "seriously breached its supervisory obligations" in its relationship with the disgraced financier Lex Greensill and his companies.

In 2022, the bank suffered a net loss of \$7.9 billion, against the backdrop of massive withdrawals of money from its customers. It still expects a "substantial" pre-tax loss this year.

"This is a bank that never seems to get its house in order," IG analyst Chris Beauchamp commented in a market note this week.

Yet more drastic restructuring, closing its investment banking arm or even a takeover by a rival were being mooted by analysts studying Switzerland's second-biggest bank, one of 30 deemed of global importance to the international banking system.

Amid fears of contagion after the collapse of two banks in the United States, on Wednesday Credit Suisse's biggest shareholder said it would "absolutely not" up its stake in the bank for regulatory reasons.

The central bank lifeline raises questions about whether an orderly bankruptcy could happen, in which regulators would take over Credit Suisse and take charge of dismantling it.

Credit Suisse's CET1 ratio, which compares a bank's capital to its risk-weighted assets, stood at 14.1 percent at the end of 2022 -- slightly less than HSBC but more than that of BNP Paribas, which are among the largest banks in Europe.

It now has a huge amount of liquidity on its hands thanks to the SNB's intervention.

Merger with UBS

Analysts at financial services giant JPMorgan, insisting that "status quo is no longer an option", considered the scenario of a takeover by another bank, with UBS, Switzerland's biggest, "the most likely".

The idea of Switzerland's biggest banks joining forces regularly resurfaces, but is generally dismissed due to competition issues and risks to the Swiss financial system's stability, given the

size of the bank that would be created by such a merger.

"The question arises because there are many candidates which might be interested," said David Benamou, chief investment officer of Paris-based Axiom Alternative Investments.

"However, the Credit Suisse management, even if forced to do so by the authorities, would only choose (this option) if they have no other solution," he said.

The bank is starting to roll out its restructuring plan laid out in October, while UBS has spent several years addressing its own issues.

Following the bank collapses in the United States, Credit Suisse's credit default swaps shot up.

With the SNB's help, Credit Suisse gained "precious time" to do a more radical revamp, Morningstar analyst Johann Scholtz said.

He believes the current restructuring is "too complex" and "does not go far enough" to reassure funders, clients and shareholders.

AFP

Banking system 'remains sound', says US government

Washington, US - The US banking system "remains sound" despite market anxiety over the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told members of Congress on Thursday, according to prepared remarks.

The consecutive bank failures are the sector's biggest casualties since the 2008 financial crisis, prompting US authorities to quickly step in to protect depositors. Amid contagion fears, the US Federal Reserve also announced it would make extra funding available to banks to help them meet the needs of depositors, including withdrawals.

Yellen, in remarks released ahead of her Senate Finance Committee appearance on Thursday, described the govern-



Janet Yellen

ment's actions as "decisive and forceful," while demonstrating authorities' commitment to ensuring that deposits remain safe.

"I can reassure the members of the Committee that our banking system remains sound, and that Americans can feel confident that their deposits will be there when they need them," she said ahead of the hearing, which will cover President Joe Biden's

latest budget proposals.

SVB - the country's 16th biggest bank by assets and a key lender to startups across the United States since the 1980s - collapsed after a sudden run on deposits, prompting regulators to seize control on Friday.

On Sunday, the Treasury, Fed, and Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation set out plans to ensure SVB's customers would be able to access their deposits, while the Fed introduced a new lending tool for banks in an effort to prevent a repeat of SVB's quick demise.

While Biden sought to reassure Americans over the country's financial system at the start of this week, there had been immediate signs of pressure at other US lenders.

AFP

Sri Lanka's economy shrank by record 7.8% last year

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's crisis-hit economy shrank a record 7.8 per cent last year as long blackouts and critical fuel shortages put a chokehold on local commerce, official data showed.

An unprecedented economic crisis sparked huge protests in the island nation, culminating last July when a mob stormed the home of then president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, forcing him to flee the country and resign.

Since then a new government has worked to repair Sri Lanka's battered public finances and secure a sorely needed International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout.

Last year's contraction - the biggest in the country's 75 years of independence - compared



Members of the banks trade union stage a protest to propose tax reforms for country's economic crisis in Colombo on Tuesday (AFP)

with 3.5 per cent growth in 2021 and a 4.6 per cent contraction in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic hit.

It was "caused by the deepening of the economic crisis... frequent power disruptions, shortages in fuel, raw materials, (and) foreign currency", Sri

Lanka's census and statistics department said in a statement.

The data showed some improvement in Sri Lanka's fiscal position with inflation moderating to about 50 per cent in February, down from a record high of 69.8 per cent in September.

AFP

Code for recommending tweets to be public: Musk

San Francisco, United States - Twitter owner Elon Musk on Friday put out word that he will make public the long-secret algorithm for recommending tweets.

The code used for recommending the posts suggested to users will become "open source" at the end of March, Musk said in a tweet of his own.

"People will discover many silly things, but we'll patch issues as soon as they're found!" Musk tweeted.

"Providing code transparency will be incredibly embarrassing at first, but it should lead to rapid improvement in recommendation quality."

Musk contended that the recommendation algorithm used at Twitter is overly complicated and not fully understood inside the company.

"We're developing a simplified approach to serve more compelling tweets, but it's still a work in progress," Musk said.

Making the code open source would mean developers, including aspiring rivals, would be able to put their own spins on the algorithm, according to a foundation for the software ecosystem.

Since Musk's takeover of Twitter in October, the platform has suffered outages, layoffs and seen advertisers flee over the lack of content moderation.

But so far no major alternative to Twitter has emerged, leaving users little choice than to continue to communicate via the platform.

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ORDINARY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AGENDA

The Board of Directors of **National Pharmaceutical Industry Co (SAOC)** is pleased to invite the Company's shareholders to attend the company's Ordinary Annual General Meetings, to be held at **3.00 pm. on Thursday , 30 /03/ 2023**, via the electronic platform to hold general meetings which can accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om) If the required quorum is not satisfied another an Ordinary Annual General Meetings would be held on **Tuesday 04/04/2023 , at 3:00.pm** via the same electronic platform to discuss the following Agenda:

- To consider and approve the Board of Director's Report for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider the Auditors' Report and to approve the Financial Statements (Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss Account) in respect of the Company for the financial year ended 31 December 2022.
- To consider and approve the proposed final cash dividend to Shareholders, as per the date of the meeting, in the rate of 6% of the company's capital of per share .006 for each share) for the financial year ended on 31/12/ 2022.21.
- To approve the sitting fees & remuneration of the Board meetings paid to the Board of Director's members for previous financial year ended 31/12/ 2022, and to determine the sitting fees & remuneration for the next fiscal year ending on 31/12/ 2023 (as per Attachment).
- To consider and approve the transactions entered into by the company with related parties during the fiscal year ended on 31/12/2022 (as per Attachment)
- To consider and approve the transactions the company will enter into with related parties during the financial year ending on 31/12/2023 (as per Attachment)
- To elect a new Board of Directors for the Company from amongst Shareholders or non-shareholders. Any person who wishes to be nominated to the Board of Directors of the Company is required to fill in a Director's Nomination Form. Such a form can be obtained from the Company. The completed Form should be delivered to the Company at least five (5) days prior to the date of the Annual Ordinary General Meeting of the Company (no later than the end of the business hours on Thursday, March,23 2023). The candidate must satisfy the company's board membership requirements.
- The appointment of the Auditors for the Company for the financial year ending 31/12/2023 and approve their fees.

According to the Company's Articles of Association and the controls of holding General Meetings using electronic platform , we would like to draw your attention to the following

- Juristic persons only, have the right to appoint a natural person as a proxy to attend the General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCDC.
- Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the General Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the General Meeting. If the shareholder's shares are increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled, and the shareholder will have to vote again on the day of the General Meeting.

For further information please contact Mr.Vinod Hari Pillai on phone No 24449070

Send your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om

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Ordinary General Meeting Agenda

The Board of Directors of Flexible Industrial Packaging Company SAOC is pleased to invite all Shareholders to attend the company's Ordinary General Meeting, which will be held on Wednesday 05/04/2023 at 10:00am, in the head quarter of Mohammed Al Barwani Company in Al azaiba. If the quorum not satisfied a second Annual Ordinary General Meeting will be held on Tuesday 11/04/2023 , in the same place and at the same time to discuss the following Agenda:

- To approve the resignation of all the members of the Board of Directors in accordance with the provisions of Article (200) of the Commercial Companies Law No. 18/2019.(**as per the attachment**)
- To elect a new Board of Directors for the Company from amongst Shareholders or non-shareholders. Any person who wishes to be nominated to the Board of Directors of the Company is required to fill in a Director's Nomination Form. Such a form can be obtained from the Company. The complete Form should be delivered to the Company at least two (2) working days prior to the date of the Ordinary General meeting (no later than the end of the business hours on 02/04/2023). The candidate must satisfy the company's board membership requirements.

Shareholder would have access to reports, documents and statements relating to the agenda items of the Ordinary General Meeting during the official business hours at the Company's head office, according to the Company's Articles of Association, each shareholder is entitled to authorize in writing any other person to attend the meeting and to vote on his/her behalf on the decisions of the general meeting

The shareholders are requested to arrive a half an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

For further information please contact Mr. Ahmed Sulaiman Al Amri on telephone No. 24446121

Chairman

Auditor,

Legal Adviser,

Dutch Breed mare Taloubet Zeus retires

Legendary jumper Taloubet Zeus has hung up her saddle accomplishing many feats.

After a career spanned over 11 incredible years, Taloubet Zeus retired at the FEI Muscat competition on March 11 in a ceremony that was both emotional and touching.

Coach Hamood, who had been by her side for every win and every defeat, removed the saddle from her back for the last time, bringing to close a chapter in Taloubet's life that will never be forgotten.

Taloubet was no ordinary horse. She was a true champion - the best in the world between 2016 and 2023.

Over the course of her illustrious career, she won more the 450 competitions, both national and internationally. She even won cars for her incredible performance, a testament to the amazing bond she shared with coach Hamood and the Olympic equestrian training centre team.

Coach Hamood knew that Taloubet Zeus deserved to retire at the top of her game. In the twilight of her career, she was still performing at an incredible level,



but he felt it was time to say goodbye.

As he removed the saddle from her back, the crowd paid tribute to this remarkable horse and the memories she had created.

Taloubet zeus legacy will live on long after retirement. Her daughter Noor Oman - a five-year old mare - won the ministry of youth and sport affairs shield trophy on same night of her mother's retirement, offering a fitting tribute to Taloubet's amazing heart and bravery.

Taloubet always put Coach Hamood on the winning podium, and he knew that she was the best. She had the heart and the strength to win, and her courage was an inspiration to everyone who knew her.

Taloubet Zeus - a Dutch breed - was more than just a horse to Coach Hamood.

She was his partner, and his friend. She had an incredible heart, and her retirement marks the end of jumping, but her legacy will live on, and she will always be remembered as one of the greatest jumpers of her time in Oman.



Bahar announces winners of 40th anniversary raffle draw

Bahar, National Detergent Company's flagship brand, which marked its glorious 40th anniversary with a promotional campaign titled 'Celebrating 40 years of Trust - Everyone is a Winner', has announced names of the 16 lucky winners of its first raffle draw during the draw conducted in Ramez hypermarket, Seeb.

The draw was held recently at its head office to pick four winners each for iPad, iPhone 14, Samsung Galaxy Fold and 25 grams gold coins.

As per the final list, Dawood Suleiman, Nazar, Juma Rashid and Nasna are the winners of 25 grams gold coins each; AlHassan Ali al Busaidi, Abdulla Suleiman, Najeeb and Ayoob are the winners of iPhone 14; Shabna, Niyas, Sumith and Nadia are the winners of Samsung Galaxy Fold and Hamed al Busaidi, Nassen, Mariam and Fouziya Salem are the winners of iPads.

The promotional campaign, which will run until March 31, is designed to ensure that everyone is, literally, a winner with a 'scratch and win' coupon that guarantees a host of exciting prizes - ranging from one gram gold coins and pans from Tefal to flasks from Zojirushi brand, in addition to a host of others - to every customer that buys Bahar products.

Designed to celebrate 40 years with 40 mega winners, the campaign will follow up the first

raffle draw with a second one following the conclusion of the campaign period.

Congratulating the winners of the first draw, Anish Kumar, Head of Sales & Marketing said, "We are overwhelmed by the response our campaign generated in the market and the positive feedback we received from the customers. It is heartening to see our customers appreciate the opportunity to win prizes by simply scratching the campaign coupons.

"This has been a gratifying experience for Bahar too, as it provided us a platform to express our gratitude to our customers from all walks of life. The very promise behind the campaign

was to enhance our customers' buying experience and, literally say 'thank you' for patronising our products over the last forty years."

As the best regional supplier of branded home and personal care products in the Middle East, NDC believes in giving best value for money to customers.

Bahar, a household name in the sultanate, brings this legacy to customers through its ever-growing range of products.

A 100 per cent Omani brand, it has a clear understanding of the local markets and continues to expand its products and services to cater to consumers who have stayed loyal to the brand over the years.

Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in Oman, took part in the third edition of the International Bioethics Conference held recently at the Sultan Qaboos University.

Held under the auspices of H E Sheikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of State Council, the event was attended by several high-profile attendees including a number of their highnesses, excellencies, representatives from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the World Health Organization (WHO), leading scientists in the field, besides representatives from a number of ministries, government institutions and academic institutions in Oman.

During the event, H E Khalili presented an award of partnership to Saleh Mohammed al Maaini, Deputy General Manager - Capital Regions, Bank Muscat.

The conference focused on the experiences of different countries in dealing with ethical issues during and after the

Bank Muscat takes part in third International Bioethics Conference

COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, it discussed the importance of having ethical guidelines, allocation and distribution of scarce resources for the best interests of the community, the legal dilemmas of handling pandemic crises including the rights of the individual and the community in accepting or rejecting vaccination, and the application of technology, artificial intelligence and data-privacy related issues.

The conference also discussed ethical obligations from a public health perspective and



handling the post-pandemic return to normalcy.

Speaking on the occasion, Saleh Mohammed al Maaini, Deputy General Manager - Capital Regions, expressed his gratitude at being able to take part in the conference which discussed the repercussions and ethics of COVID-19 related measures.

He pointed out how it touched various aspects of our lives as well as the ongoing initiative to develop legislative and regulatory policies in this regard at both the national and international levels.

Apparel Group brings Ayurvedic skincare

In a major move for the skincare industry in the GCC region, the leading fashion and lifestyle retail conglomerate, Apparel Group, has announced its strategic partnership with Forest Essentials, the prestigious Indian Luxury Ayurvedic brand.

This partnership marks the brand's debut in the GCC region and is set to be a game-changer in the region's skincare market.

Apparel Group's extensive retail network, which includes over 2025 stores across 14 countries, will play a pivotal role in the distribution and marketing of Forest Essentials' authentic and traditional skincare products.

With this partnership, Forest Essentials will be able to leverage the Apparel Group's unparalleled

retail presence in the GCC region to gain a strong foothold and establish itself as a leader in the luxury Ayurvedic skincare segment.

Apparel Group CEO Neeraj Teckchandani said, "As a leading fashion retailer in the GCC and beyond, Apparel Group is committed to partnering with the world's most desirable brands to provide an unmatched shopping experience to our customers. We are confident that our partnership with Forest Essentials will enhance their presence in the GCC region, providing a new level of access to their Luxurious Ayurvedic products."

The grand opening of Forest Essentials' first standalone store in the GCC at Dubai Hills in April is set to be a landmark event.

Bank Nizwa receives four prestigious IFN awards

Bank Nizwa, Oman's most trusted and prominent Islamic bank, has been named the 'Best Islamic Bank' in the Sultanate by the Islamic Finance News (IFN) Awards 2022, held in Dubai, acknowledging its development and excellence in servicing its clients.

Bank Nizwa was also named the 'Best Retail Bank' and the 'Most Innovative Bank' in Oman. Furthermore, Towell Infrastructure Projects Co's (TIPCO) Syndicated Wakalah, valued at RO14mn, was awarded the title of 'IFN Deal of the Year' in Oman, with Bank Nizwa being a major investor.

"We are truly honoured to have received four prominent accolades in the country at such a prestigious event for the global Islamic financial sector. These



highly sought-after titles are an exemplification of Bank Nizwa's position as a dominant player in Oman's Islamic financial sector," said Khalid al Kayed, Chief Executive Officer of Bank Nizwa.

Setting the blueprint for change, he pointed out that the bank's growing multi-industry portfolio of "sharia'a-compliant

products and services offered to corporate and private banking customers is an indication of the bank's competency to devise solutions that meet the ever-rising demand for Islamic products".

"I can proudly say that we have the talent and calibre to be deemed as the trusted financial partner for our customers. We

will continue with the dedication to improve our customers' experiences, streamline our processes and explore new avenues that add value to our customers and shareholders as well as demonstrate realistic growth and profitability," he added.

Bank Nizwa's unwavering dedication to embedding innova-

tive solutions, leveraging technological advancement and being at the front of promoting digitalisation in the banking sector influenced IFN to award the bank with the venerated award.

Showcasing exceptional performance across all its departments, Bank Nizwa has achieved a noteworthy financial performance by registering a 20 per cent growth in net profit.

The bank's total assets also increased by six per cent, reaching RO1.486bn in December 2022 from RO1.405bn in December 2021. The gross financing portfolio improved by ten per cent to RO1.242bn, whilst the total customer deposit portfolio rose by seven per cent to RO1.189bn.

The bank's operating income witnessed a growth of 18 per cent.

With new 'brand identity' Al Ansari pledges to scale greater heights



Al Ansari unveiled a new 'Brand Identity' at a function held at The Chedi, Muscat in the presence of business leaders of Oman.

The Al Ansari group was established in 1975 in response to the growing needs of the infrastructure in the Sultanate of Oman.

Today, Al Ansari operates in four main areas, namely, Building Products, Services & Solutions; Integrated Hospitality & Smart Solutions; Utility Infrastructure Solutions and Energy & Sustainability Solutions.

Al Ansari's new brand avatar is a revitalised version of the company's original values and a tribute to the country where it has expanded and flourished. In

the new logo, the colour Red takes deeper meaning and represents the red majestic mountain ranges of Oman. Mountains teach us perseverance, positive attitude and hard work.

The colour Blue also takes a centrestage and represents both the sky and the sea of Oman and is associated with, imagination, inspiration, and sensitivity - with sky being the limit.

Blue also represents faith, trust, loyalty and sincerity - the values Al Ansari live by.

Two simplified shapes are derived from the two 'As' in their previous logo. The two 'As' indicate - an A-grade company, for clients and employees equally.

"Under the leadership of His

Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Al Ansari was able to participate in the growth of our beautiful country that I call my first and only home," said Kiran Asher, Founder & Group Managing Director.

"Our suppliers are our partners, many of them being there with us for 40 plus years, have played a vital role in the success of our organisation. We partner with over 150 phenomenal suppliers who share our values and standards. This includes quality, commitment, innovation and an element of corporate social responsibility," he added.

Al Ansari is headed by a team of young and dynamic leaders and operates successfully in

Oman. It has expanded into various countries such as the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, India, Sri Lanka.

The group has executed projects in several more countries with their headquarters in Muscat, Oman, with a vision to be an inspiration for fostering human values and enhancing business performance.

"As we look back in gratitude for the opportunities provided by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, we look forward with optimism to the future plans placed for the growth of Oman by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik," said Executive Director Jesal Asher Rajda.

Giving back to the society re-

mains an important pillar for Al Ansari which they do via providing an education and experience platform for Omanis, promoting sustainable practices and supporting SMEs.

"Without customers we would have no Al Ansari," Kiran Asher reiterated. "That's why we have a strong commitment to managing customer values."

"Al Ansari has identified a set of core customer values that guide our interactions with customers - these include - exceeding client expectations, being transparent and honest, building trust, providing innovative solutions and never walking away from our promise of delivering quality," he added.



ahlibank hosts Al Nukhba customers event in head office

ahlibank hosted an event for Al Nukhba customers in its new state-of-the-art headquarters at Wattaya, who have been a part of its impressive growth in the local and regional banking sector.

Al Nukhba banking account offers its customers a range of exclusive benefits and services. Of the many privileges offered to Al Nukhba account holders are dedicated service centres, Internet and mobile banking services, 24-hour call center support, and a relationship manager available at all times to cater to the customers' needs.

The new ahlibank building reinforces these privileges through its state of the art construction with beautiful interiors and designated lounge facilities, aimed at serving customers and catering for their various financial needs.

The building received applause from Al Nukhba cus-

tomers for being grandiose and impressive as it is a prime example of the bank's commitment to improving the experiences of its customers.

"With the new building we will serve our Al Nukhba customers with more efficiency," said Muneeb Ahmed al Balushi, AGM - head of Retail Distribution, ahlibank, while speaking at the event.

"We are proud of our many endeavours that have led us to this point and we thank our Al Nukhba customers who have stood by us as we continue to provide better services and products to cater to their financial needs," Balushi further added.

"Their presence today assures their trust in our capabilities and affirms our efforts to achieve the country's overall strategic and sustainable growth objectives," he acknowledged.

KR Group supports MoCSY's 'Innovative Leader Programme'

Continuing its mission to inspire young change-makers to learn, collaborate, innovate, and co-create solutions, Khimji Ramdas (KR) Group facilitated the training and infrastructure support of 21 promising Omani youngsters who have completed the 'Innovative Leader Programme' under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth's (MoCSY).

During the two-week programme held at the Khimji Ramdas Training facility, the talented participants were mentored by professionals and experts, that included sessions by Khimji Ramdas' senior management team.

The primary objective was to transform their interests pertaining to the fourth industrial revolution, the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Big Data, and 3D Printing into future professions and skills.

Participants underwent a five-step approach to transform their creative and innovative project ideas into products and services that will meet the needs of local and international markets. Sev-



eral crucial science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM) areas were introduced to them during the course of the programme.

Highlighting the benefits of empowering the next generation through initiatives of this kind, Khimji Ramdas Group director Kanan Khimji averred, "Omani youth are incredibly innovative and talented. Given that they are the sultanate's largest growing demographic, KR Group understands the importance of channelising the collective power of such initiatives, as it will spur

progress under the statutes set by Vision 2040.

"Our support to the MoCSY's 'Innovative Leader Programme' is in line with the same purpose," the KR Group director said, adding, "KR Group will continue to engage, educate, and empower the youth and help them to turn their ideas into action."

"Our 'Innovative Leader Programme' is dedicated to cultivating young leaders with universally valuable competencies," said Naeema Rashid al Masoudi, president of the 'Innovative Leader Programme'.

Oxy Oman sponsors CDAA Conference

Oxy Oman recently served as the main sponsor of the first Oman Civil Defence and Ambulance Conference and Exhibition, which highlighted its best practices and strategies in Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) with the private and public sectors.

The two-day event was organised by the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA), and celebrated World Civil Defence Day.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit. Hassan al Ajmi, vice president of HSE at Oxy Oman attended the event, along with other senior representatives of the company.

The event hosted a conference and exhibition with local and international companies, government representatives, and investors exploring businesses and opportunities in the HSE sector. Oxy Oman representatives showcased HSE technologies and best practices within the company for workplace safety, its emergency response programme and training.



"We're proud to serve as the main sponsor for Oman's first Civil Defence and Ambulance Conference and Exhibition, as safety is integral to Oxy's company culture, and we are committed to providing safe, healthy and secure workplaces throughout our operations," said Steven Lauver, president and general manager of Oxy Oman.

"We are keen to support the goal of Zero Harm across Oman through our participation in this inaugural conference."

This sponsorship falls under Oxy Oman's umbrella of strategic partnerships and continuous collaboration with key stakeholders and is part of Oxy Oman's endeavour and long-term commitment to support programmes that enhance economic growth and sustainable development and that yield positive impacts in the neighbouring communities.

Oxy Oman is a wholly owned subsidiary of Occidental (Oxy), an international energy company with assets primarily in the US,

the Middle East and North Africa. Oxy has been producing hydrocarbons in Oman for nearly 40 years, where it has steadily increased production and reserves and is honoured to partner with the Government of Oman. Today, Oxy is the largest independent oil producer operating in the country, covering more than 24,000sqkm. Oxy's major operations are located in northern Oman, primarily in Safah and Wadi Latham Fields, Khamilah Field and Mukhaizna Field.

OCCI, ICAI join hands to launch CFO leadership programme in Muscat

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) Muscat Chapter (Under the sponsorship of the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS), in collaboration with Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has launched a unique programme to empower potential Omanis in public and private sector organisations in Muscat on March 15.

The key objective of CFO (Chief Financial Officer) leadership programme is to train and develop strategic leadership capabilities among potential Omanis, and attract citizens to leadership positions in accounting profession in large numbers.

The OCCI-ICAI initiative is expected to promote overall busi-

ness and investment environment and the quality of accounting profession among Omanis.

OCCI chairman Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, OCCI Board Member Dr Abdullah Masoud al Harthy, ICAI president Aniket Sunil Talati, Ranjeet Kumar Agarwal, ICAI Muscat Chapter chairperson Sajeev Surendran, and vice chairperson Jim Joseph Itty exchanged documents in the presence of various dignitaries from the public and private sectors at the Sheraton Oman Hotel here to mark the launch of the CFO Programme.

"It is a unique opportunity for the citizens to come forward and acquire strategic skills and actual knowledge, and undertake the challenging but reputable



role of CFOs in public and private sectors. All credit goes to OCCI for the excellent cooperation and support extended to ICAI in our endeavours to launch the much-awaited CFO pro-

gramme. We, at ICAI, are fully committed to delivering excellence to potential Omanis," said ICAI Muscat Chapter chairman Sajeev Surendran.

ICAI Muscat, he said, will con-

tinue to enhance its presence by organising informative and productive seminars and conferences to boost investment environment and business opportunities in Oman for Indian in-

vestors.

The event celebrated the prestigious Best Chapter Overseas Award conferred on the Muscat Chapter, by honouring CBFS for its valuable guidance

and immeasurable support.

Aniket Talati presented the prestigious Best Overseas Chapter Award to CBFS Dean Dr Zahran bin Salim al Salti.

OCCI board member Abdul Latheef (managing director of Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals) also graced the occasion.

During the event, the much-awaited Beneficial Programme for ICAI members was also launched.

Established in 2008, under the sponsorship of CBFS, the focus of ICAI Muscat Chapter has been overall development of accounting profession in Oman. ICAI, which has presence in 78 international cities, is the second largest professional body of accounting in the world.

Turkey, Hungary put Finland on course to join NATO soon

Ankara, Turkey - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ended months of diplomatically charged delays on Friday and asked parliament to quickly back Finland's bid to join NATO.

A simultaneous decision by fellow holdout Hungary to schedule a Finnish ratification vote for March 27 means the US-led defence alliance will likely grow to 31 nations within a few months.

NATO's expansion into a country with a 1,340km (830-mile) border with Russia will roughly double the length of the bloc's current frontier with its Cold War-era foe.

Finland had initially aimed to join together with fellow NATO aspirant Sweden - a Nordic power facing a litany of disputes with Turkey that ultimately sunk its chance to join the bloc before an alliance summit in July.

Helsinki and Stockholm ended decades of military non-alignment and decided to join the world's most powerful defence alliance in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Their applications were accepted at a June NATO summit that signalled the Western world's desire to stand up to Russia in the face of Europe's gravest conflict since World War II.

But the bids still needed to be ratified by all 30 of the alliance members' parliaments - a process that got hung up once it reached Turkey and Hungary.

Friday's breakthrough followed months of tense negotia-



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) and Finnish President Sauli Niinisto deliver a joint press conference held after their meeting at the Presidential Complex in Ankara, on Friday (AFP)

We decided to start the protocol of Finland's accession to NATO in our parliament

RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN

tions between Ankara and the Nordic neighbours that threatened to collapse several times.

Erdogan told Finnish President Sauli Niinisto that Helsinki had shown a strong commitment to addressing Ankara's security concerns.

"We decided to start the pro-

ocol of Finland's accession to NATO in our parliament," Erdogan told reporters after the talks.

Erdogan added that he 'hoped' that parliament will approve the application before Turkey's crucial general election in May.

The Turkish parliament is expected to end its current session in mid-April.

'Not complete without Sweden'

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed Turkey's decision while stressing the importance of Sweden also joining 'as soon as possible'.

"The most important thing is

that both Finland and Sweden become full members of NATO quickly, not whether they join at exactly the same time," Stoltenberg said.

The White House echoed the NATO chief's position. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said the United States urged Hungary to conclude its ratification process both for Sweden and Finland 'without delay'.

And France's foreign ministry called Turkey's announcement about Finland 'an important signal' while reiterating support for Sweden's bid as well.

Erdogan had accused the Nordic neighbours of breaking the terms of a separate deal they

reached in June 2022 under which Turkey agreed to approve the bids. Turkey has sought the extradition of dozens of Kurdish and other suspects it accuses of ties to outlawed militants and a failed 2016 coup attempt.

Erdogan's demands became more urgent as he neared a May election in which he will need a strong turnout from nationalist supporters to extend his two-decade rule.

The Turkish leader voiced particular displeasure with Sweden - a country with a larger Kurdish diaspora and a longer history of disputes with Ankara.

Finland and Sweden had initially resisted the idea of breaking up their bids.

But Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson - who made NATO membership a priority after assuming office in October - acknowledged on Tuesday that the likelihood of Finland joining the bloc on its own had 'increased'. The Finnish president called Erdogan's decision Friday 'very important for the whole of Finland'.

But he added: "Finland's application is not complete without Sweden."

Sweden expressed disappointment at being excluded from this round of NATO expansion. "This is a development that we did not want, but that we were prepared for," Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom told reporters in Stockholm.

AFP

S Korea moves to 'normalise' military pact with Japan

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea will fully implement a key military intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, a defence ministry official told AFP on Saturday, as the two countries move to thaw long-frozen relations and renew diplomacy to counter Pyongyang.

At a fence-mending summit on Thursday, the neighbours agreed to turn the page on a bitter dispute over Japan's use of war-time forced labour.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has been keen to end the spat and present a united front against the nuclear-armed North, had flown to Japan to meet Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, the first such summit in 12 years.

According to a pool report, Yoon told Kishida he wanted a 'complete normalisation' of a 2016 military agreement called the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which enables the two US allies to share military secrets, particularly over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capacity.

Following the summit, South Korea's foreign ministry was asked 'to proceed with the needed measures to normalise the agreement,' said a



Yoon Suk Yeol (AFP)

defence ministry official, who declined to be named.

The foreign ministry is expected to send a formal letter to its Japanese counterpart soon, the official added.

Seoul had threatened to scrap GSOMIA in 2019 as relations with Tokyo soured over trade disputes and a historical row stemming from Japan's 35-year colonial rule over the peninsula.

In response, an alarmed United States said that calling off the pact would only benefit North Korea and China.

Hours before it was set to expire, South Korea agreed to extend GSOMIA 'conditionally', but warned it could be 'terminated' at any moment.

Confronted with Pyongyang's growing aggression and flurry of missile tests, the neighbours have increasingly sought to bury the hatchet.

AFP

Indigenous Peruvians seize oil station, demand cleanup

Lima, Peru - Indigenous Peruvians have occupied an oil pumping station deep in the Amazon and prevented 41 workers from leaving the installation, state-owned oil firm Petroperu said on Friday.

The Indigenous activists are demanding that Petroperu clean up areas damaged by an oil spill decades ago.

"Petroperu has been developing all possible actions to achieve the release of the 41 people who remain deprived of their rights at the Morona Station of the Northern Peruvian Oil Pipeline," the company said in a statement.

It said activists from the Fernando Rosas community had

arrived at the site on Wednesday. By occupying the site, the activists have denied workers the 'right to free transit' and have also forced them to stay outdoors, including overnight, the statement added.

The Morona Station sits in a jungle area of Loreto department, about 620 miles (1,000 km) northeast of capital Lima.

The Indigenous activists said in a letter sent to authorities, which AFP saw, that an oil spill around the pumping station 25 years ago caused damage that was never reversed. They said they would block pumping until mitigation work begins.

AFP

The Wire star Lance Reddick dead at 60: Publicist

Los Angeles, US - Actor Lance Reddick who played steely Baltimore police lieutenant Cedric Daniels in hit TV show *The Wire* has died, his publicist said on Friday. He was 60.

Reddick, who also appeared in the *John Wick* series of films opposite Keanu Reeves, was found dead at his home in the Studio City area of Los Angeles, trade title TMZ reported.

"Acclaimed actor Lance Reddick passed away suddenly this morning from natural causes," publicist Mia Hansen told AFP.

"Lance will be greatly missed."

Reddick rose to prominence in 2000 on the HBO prison drama *Oz* in which he played an undercover detective battling the drugs trade, but who soon gets drawn into addiction. But it was for his role on *The Wire* that he



US actor Lance Reddick (AFP)

became best known.

The HBO show, which ran for five seasons, followed a narcotics division pitting their wits against the city's powerful drug gangs.

With its complex writing and gritty casting, *The Wire* is often cited as one of the best ever TV

shows. It made household names of several of its stars, including Dominic West, Idris Elba, Wendell Pierce, Michael B. Jordan and the late Michael Kenneth Williams, who delivered

Lance Reddick rose to prominence in 2000 on the HBO prison drama Oz in which he played an undercover detective battling the drugs trade, but who soon gets drawn into addiction

one of the most singular performances in recent screen history as Omar Little.

After *The Wire*, Reddick was cast in *John Wick* as Charon, a concierge at a New York hotel who worked alongside Reeves' hitman. Reeves and *John Wick* di-

rector Chad Stahelski told Variety they were mourning the loss of the cast member.

"We are deeply saddened and heartbroken at the loss of our beloved friend and colleague," a

statement said. "He was the consummate professional and a joy to work with." Fellow *The Wire* star Pierce paid tribute on Twitter to 'a man of great strength and grace. The epitome of class'.

Reddick's death was a 'sudden unexpected sharp painful

grief for our artistic family. An unimaginable suffering for his personal family and loved ones. Godspeed my friend. You made your mark here. RIP'. Horror writer Stephen King tweeted that he had been halfway through re-watching *The Wire*.

"Wonderful actor; wonderful man. This is sad news," he wrote.

Performer Ben Stiller praised a 'beautiful and compelling actor', recalling how Reddick had worked with his mother, Anne Meara, in a play.

"He was exquisite in that and all he did," he tweeted.

HBO's corporate account wrote Reddick was 'held in the highest regard by all who knew and worked with him and we are proud to be part of his legacy. He will be missed dearly'.

AFP

Cyclone Freddy affects 500,000 people in Malawi: UN

Blantyre, Malawi - Cyclone Freddy, which dissipated this week after a record-breaking rampage, has caused more than 460 deaths in southern Africa and affected more than half a million people in Malawi, the UN said on Friday.

The storm dumped six months' worth of rainfall in six days in southern Malawi, leaving a trail of destruction and severely damaged infrastructure as well as flooding farmland.

"Over 500,000 people have been affected," the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a report, adding that more than 183,100 people had been displaced.

Some 360 people have died in Malawi, according to the latest toll released late on Friday, in a country of nearly 20mn people.

"We expect that the picture of

damage and death will worsen as more areas become accessible over time," President Lazarus Chakwera, who is on a three-day visit to the affected areas, said.

The OCHA said that 'the record-breaking weather system hit Malawi at the end of the rainy season when rivers and water bodies were already at high levels'. UN World Food Programme (WFP) country director Paul Turnbull said on Friday it was clear that the country 'will need significant support'.

Many areas were rendered inaccessible, 'restricting movement of assessment and humanitarian teams and life-saving supplies', he said.

"We are ramping up as quickly as we can under the circumstances," he added in a statement, vowing to assist around 130,000 people affected by the 'tragic' situation.



Men carry dead bodies from where they have been recovered to where an ambulance would transfer them to Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital morgue, at Manje informal settlement in Blantyre, Malawi, on Friday (AFP)

So far, the government puts the number of displaced at more than 183,000, Chakwera has said, appealing for global aid to tackle the humanitarian needs.

More than 300 emergency

shelters have been set up for survivors, while the army and police continue searching for bodies.

The storm struck as Malawi was in the grip of its deadliest cholera outbreak, according to

the World Health Organization.

There is 'a risk that the ongoing cholera outbreak could worsen, with children being the most vulnerable to this crisis', UNICEF spokeswoman Fungma

Fudong told AFP. UNICEF noted that Cyclone Freddy has left more than 280,000 children in Malawi in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

'No house, no food'

Mervis Soko, a 29-year-old mother of three from Phalombe, one of the hardest-hit districts located 120km (75 miles) east of the commercial hub Blantyre, said the storm had plunged her family deeper into poverty.

"We are destitute, we have nothing. We are just people. All the crops have been washed away," she told AFP.

Loveness Makhala and her husband picked up iron sheets and bricks from the rubble of what used to be their house.

Just a month away from annual harvesting, she bemoans the loss of 'everything' - potatoes and maize - all gone".

"I can't imagine how we will get through the year with no house and no food," said the mother of four. Neighbouring Zambia has stepped in to deliver relief kits and food, including hundreds of tents, blankets, mosquito nets, maize and beans, its Defence Minister Ambrose Lufuma said in a statement.

The cyclone first struck southern Africa in late February, hitting Madagascar and Mozambique, leaving Malawi unscathed.

The storm then moved back out over the Indian Ocean, where it drew more power from the warm waters before making a rare course reversal to slam into the mainland a second time.

In total, the storm has claimed 463 lives in three southern African countries, with 360 killed in Malawi, 86 in Mozambique and 17 in Madagascar.

AFP

Serbia, Kosovo leaders kick off EU-led talks to normalise ties

Ohrid, Republic Of North Macedonia - Kosovo and Serbia leaders kicked off the latest round of EU-led talks on Saturday, as the long-time rivals come under increasing pressure to strike a deal to normalise ties.

The meeting in North Macedonia comes after the two sides failed to reach an agreement in Brussels last month, where the peace plan was unveiled even as Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic remained at loggerheads over a path forward.

The 11-point document laid out a deal stating that neither side would resort to violence to resolve a dispute, nor seek to prevent the other from joining the European Union or other international bodies - a key demand from Kosovo.

As events began on Saturday, Vucic posted a picture on social media of his meeting with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and special EU envoy for the talks Miroslav Lajcak.

The two sides are sitting down with the European representatives first before meeting face-to-face later on Saturday.

"I am optimistic, I am attentive. I will do the best for the Republic of Kosovo," said Kurti on



EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell (left) and EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajcak arrive for meetings, as part of Kosovo-Serbia talks, in Ohrid on Saturday (AFP)

arriving for the talks in Ohrid.

Serbia has long refused to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence made in 2008, with perennial bouts of unrest erupting between Belgrade and its former break-away province.

Optimistic

Following the talks in Brussels, Vucic vowed never to recognise

Pristina or provide a pathway that would allow them to join the United Nations or the NATO alliance. Before the summit, Vucic remained defiant.

"I don't plan on signing anything," Vucic told reporters on Thursday, saying the meeting 'will not be historic or ground-breaking'.

The latest round of negotiations followed months of shuttle

diplomacy, nearly 25 years after the war between ethnic Albanian insurgents and Serb forces sparked a NATO bombing campaign that ended the conflict.

Earlier in the week, Kosovo's Kurti said he was optimistic about hammering out a deal but put the onus of signing the agreement with Vucic.

"Whether it will succeed or not, you know very well that it

does not depend only on me," Kurti told reporters.

Analysts said inking the agreement itself would not signal an ultimate breakthrough.

"I expect both parties to agree on the implementation plan. I can't say it's big because the big thing will happen only after the plan is implemented," said Dusan Milenkovic from the think tank Center for Social Dialogue

and Regional Initiatives.

'A betrayal'

Kurti's administration hopes that a deal would allow for Kosovo's entry into international institutions, a long-sought goal for the government in Pristina.

Serbia's Vucic has said his government is under intense pressure to come to an understanding, while signalling to his domestic rivals that he will not give ground.

Kosovo remains an obsession among large swaths of the Serbian population, who regard the territory as their rightful homeland that has come under attack by outsiders for centuries.

In the Serbian capital Belgrade on Friday, thousands rallied against striking a deal with Kosovo.

"This ultimatum ... it's not an agreement, it's a betrayal," Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski, head of the ultranationalist group the Oath Keepers told the crowd.

Kosovo is home to approximately 120,000 Serbs, many of whom remain loyal to Belgrade - especially in northern areas near the border with Serbia where there are frequent bouts of turmoil, protests and violence.

AFP

Tunisia's interior minister resigns

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisian interior minister Taoufik Charfeddine, a close aide of President Kais Saied, announced on Friday he had resigned to spend more time with his three children following the death of his wife last year.

Charfeddine, 54, who had held his post since October 2021, told reporters he wished to thank the president for 'his understanding and for allowing me to be relieved of my duties'.

"The time has come for me to dedicate myself to this responsibility she left me," he said.

Replacing Charfeddine as interior minister is Kamal Feki, governor of Tunis since 2021 and also part of Saied's inner circle.

A former lawyer, Charfeddine was a key figure in the election campaign that propelled the previously little-known Saied to the presidency in 2019. After Saied froze parliament and sacked the then-government in a dramatic July 2021 move against the sole democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring uprisings, Charfeddine became a close adviser.

As the president pushed through sweeping changes to the political system, Charfeddine was one of the most outspoken defenders of Saied's power grab.

AFP

Iranians face dilemma as Ramadan, New Year coincide

Tehran, Iran - Tehran is emptying ahead of the Persian New Year, as is the case annually, but this time around Iranians are being forced to adapt as the festival coincides with Ramadan.

Over 300mn people in a dozen countries - including Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey - will wish each other 'Nowruz mobarak' or Happy New Year on Tuesday, when Iranians mark the entry into the year 1402 on the Persian calendar.

Celebrated for some 3,000 years, the new year festival of Nowruz begins on the first day of spring and celebrates the re-birth of nature, ushering in almost two weeks of silence on the normally bustling streets of Tehran as people abandon the city for the countryside.

"For 15 days, we try to forget the difficulties of everyday life by having a good time, eating carefully prepared meals and offering gifts to family and friends," said Laleh, a student leaving Tehran for her home city of Tabriz in the northwest.

This year however Muslims who celebrate Nowruz, including almost all of Iran's 85mn population, will have to reconcile these traditions with the obligations of Ramadan, the holy Muslim month of fasting.

During Ramadan, which is due to begin on March 22 or 23, Muslims are invited to refrain from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk.

That poses a dilemma for the closing festivities of Nowruz, 12 days after the turn of the new year marked by Sizdeh Bedar, or 'the day of nature', during which Iranians go for picnics in greenery.

Last year, Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri warned those who fail to fast in

public will liable to be punished. Even eating in your car, which 'is not considered a private space', is punishable, he added.

Religious expert Mohsen Alviri advises those planning to have picnics to go without food until breaking their fast. "In Shiite jurisprudence, if the faithful travel a certain distance from their city of residence, they are considered travellers and may not fast," he said. Although it is considered

Nowruz is a national holiday that existed before Islam. But it does not contradict Muslim teachings

MOHSEN ALVIRI

a pagan festival, Nowruz was never really challenged in Iran after 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"There is no doubt that Nowruz is a national holiday that existed before Islam. But it does not contradict any of the Muslim teachings," said Mohsen Alviri, a Shiite cleric and religious historian in Tehran.

"Nowruz pays attention to the preservation of nature and emphasises eliminating resentment between people, respecting elders, visiting relatives... these are values that are strongly recommended by Islam," he added.

While waiting for Nowruz, however, some Iranians say they are not in a festive mood after a difficult year marked by high inflation and tensions on the street.

AFP

800,000 N Koreans enlist to fight 'US imperialists'

Seoul, South Korea - More than 800,000 young North Koreans have volunteered to join the army to fight 'US imperialists', state media said on Saturday, days after Pyongyang test-fired its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile.

After a record-breaking year of weapons tests and growing nuclear threats from Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington have ramped up security cooperation, and this week kicked off their largest joint military drills in five years.

North Korea views all such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take 'overwhelming' action in response.

The official Korean Central News Agency described the on-



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un witnessing the launch of a Hwasong-17 ICBM from Pyongyang International Airport on Thursday (AFP)

going drills as an American attempt 'to provoke a nuclear war' and said that in response, hundreds of thousands of people had enlisted.

The young volunteers are determined to 'mercilessly wipe

out the war maniacs' so they joined the army to 'defend the country', KCNA said.

"More than 800 000 youth league officials and students across the country volunteered to join and rejoin the Korean

People's Army" on Friday alone, it added.

Images released by Pyongyang's official Rodong Sinmun showed young North Koreans waiting in long lines to sign their names at what looks like a construction site.

The latest report comes after Pyongyang test-fired its largest and most powerful missile, a Hwasong-17, on Thursday - its second ICBM test this year.

State media has described the launch as a response to the ongoing, 'frantic' US-South Korea joint military drills.

On Saturday, KCNA said the ongoing drills were 'inching close to the unpardonable red line'.

Last year, North Korea declared itself an 'irreversible' nu-

clear power, and leader Kim Jong Un recently called for an 'exponential' increase in weapons production, including tactical nukes.

Kim earlier this month also ordered the North Korean military to intensify drills to prepare for a 'real war'.

Pyongyang is using the drills to justify their nuclear weapons program domestically as 'crucial and necessary', Yang Moon-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP.

This involves 'spreading the idea that the South Korea-US military drills ultimately aim to destroy the current North Korean regime and even occupy its capital Pyongyang', Yang added. AFP

Nigeria elections open in shadow of contested vote

Lagos, Nigeria - Nigerians were voting in local elections on Saturday, just weeks after the ruling party won a presidential poll that the two main opposition parties alleged was marred by fraud.

Africa's most populous nation is electing hundreds of state assembly lawmakers and over two dozens governors, with a particularly competitive contest in the nation's economic nerve centre, Lagos.

Governors are powerful positions in Nigeria, with some controlling state budgets that are larger than those of several African nations.

Polling units were to be open from 8:30am (0730 GMT) and close by 2:30pm (1330 GMT) though delays are frequent and voters in line before closing time should be still be able to vote.

After last month's presidential poll, which was largely peaceful but marked by long delays and technical failures, some voters and opposition parties claimed the mishaps allowed for ballot manipulation.

The electoral commission has rejected claims of rigging but the experience could impact Saturday's vote.



A voter casts her ballot at polling station during local elections, in Lagos, on Saturday (AFP)

On Lagos's wealthy Ikoyi island, polling units were set up early on Saturday, giving some residents hope for a hitch-free day.

"We hope this election will be one of the better elections," said Sukiman Abubakar, a 52-year-old estate surveyor.

On the mainland, heavy security was deployed with armoured vehicles seen by an AFP reporter at Iyana-Ipaaja and Abulegba, areas prone to violence.

'Politicians have failed us'

As electoral material arrived at Ijaiye, in the Agbado area, around 50 voters were already forming a queue hours early.

One of them was Fausat Balogun, a 46-year-old trader who was eager to cast a ballot.

"I have been here since 6am (0500 GMT) to vote for the candidates of my choice. We need fresh blood in Lagos. The old politicians have failed us,"

he said.

While the megacity of some 20mn people is considered the fiefdom of president-elect Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), outsider Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) caused a stir by winning most votes on February 25.

But whether Obi's popularity and the emergence of a third strong party in Nigeria will translate at the governorship and local assembly levels, espe-

cially in Lagos where its former governor Tinubu is influential, remains to be seen.

The Lagos race pits incumbent Babajide Sanwo-Olu (APC) against Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour (LP) and the main opposition's candidate Olajide Adediran of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)

Other hotly contested races are expected in southern Rivers and northern Kano, while north-east Adamawa could see the election of Nigeria's first woman governor.

A decisive factor in Saturday's vote will be turnout - with many disappointed in how last month's election was conducted, some voters could decide to stay at home.

With President Muhammadu Buhari stepping down in May after two terms, Nigerians had hoped a fair vote would usher in a leader capable of tackling growing insecurity and deepening poverty.

Both the LP and the PDP are contesting the February 25 election in a legal battle that could extend over several months.

AFP

INDIA

India-Bangladesh energy pipeline launched

PMs of India and Bangladesh inaugurated the cross-border energy pipeline, via video conferencing

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina on Saturday inaugurated the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, a cross-border energy pipeline, via video conferencing. While addressing the event, Modi said: "I am confident that this pipeline will further speed up the development of Bangladesh and be an excellent example of the increasing connectivity between both countries."

This is the first cross-border energy pipeline between India and Bangladesh, built at an estimated cost of Rs 377 crore, of which the Bangladesh portion of the pipeline was built at a cost of approximately Rs 285 crore, which has been borne by India under grant assistance, read Prime Minister's Office press release. "In the last few years, under the able leadership of PM Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress. Every Indian is proud of that and we're delighted that we've been able to contribute to this devel-



India PM Narendra Modi and Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina during the virtual inauguration of India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, on Saturday (ANI)



opment journey of Bangladesh," said Modi at the inauguration of the friendship pipeline. Modi further said that the India-Bangladesh friendship pipeline was initiated in September 2018, adding, "with the help of this pipeline Northern West Bengal districts will be provided 1mn metric tonnes of high-speed diesel." "This will reduce the cost and will also reduce the carbon footprint of the supply."

Speaking on the progress of connectivity between the two nations, he said: "I remember many years back Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had talked about her vision of restoring the pre-1965 rail connectivity. And since then the two countries together have made a lot of progress." The prime minister also highlighted the fact this rail connectivity between the two nations helped in sending COVID vaccines to Bangladesh. "As a re-

sult of this, during the COVID epidemic, we were able to send oxygen etc. to Bangladesh through the rail network. I heartily congratulate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her far-sighted vision," said Modi. It is pertinent to note that the inauguration of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline is taking place a day after the birth anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. "What an auspicious

coincidence that today's inauguration is taking place a day after the birth anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman! Bangabandhu's 'Shonar Bangla' vision included the harmonious development and prosperity of the entire region. This joint project is a perfect example of their vision," said Modi. The Pipeline has the capacity to transport 1mn metric tonne per annum of High-Speed

Diesel (HSD). It will supply HSD initially to seven districts in northern Bangladesh. The operation of India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline will put in place a sustainable, reliable, cost-effective and environment-friendly mode of transporting HSD from India to Bangladesh and will further enhance cooperation in energy security between the two countries, added the release. The friendship pipeline will

carry diesel from Assam-based Numaligarh Refinery Limited's (NRL) marketing terminal at Siliguri in West Bengal to the Parbatipur depot of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC). The project is jointly implemented by the Numaligarh Refinery Limited of India and Meghna Petroleum Limited of Bangladesh. India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline would help provide a stable supply of diesel in all 16 northern districts under Rangpur and Rajshahi in Bangladesh. It will ensure fast-paced delivery of fuel at a minimum cost. Currently, imported diesel are supplied to these regions via wagons and trawlers from the Chattogram and Mongla ports. It costs around US\$8 for each barrel of fuel to be transported from the port city. The pipeline would reduce the cost to around US\$5 per barrel. It will also reduce the transportation time to just one hour as opposed to the current situation of taking several days to transport diesel via wagons and trawlers. ANI

Punjab: Major crackdown against 'Waris Punjab De'

New Delhi, India - Intelligence agencies are keeping a close watch on the Punjab Police operation to arrest Khalistani sympathiser Amritpal Singh and his aides. A senior official said that state had sought several companies of paramilitary forces and these have been provided to maintain law and order situation. "We are keeping a close watch on the situation unfolding in Punjab. Intelligence Bureau (IB), Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and other agencies are on their toes and regularly updating regarding the situation in Punjab," he said. Another officer informed that additional companies of paramilitary which were sought by the state government have been deployed at various checkpoints and other locations in Punjab to deal with any law-and-order situation. "We are keeping a close



This file photo shows 'Waris Punjab De' chief Amritpal Singh speaking to media in Ajnala near Amritsar on February 23 (ANI)

watch on developments and reporting it to seniors in Delhi. Agencies are keeping a watch on social media posts. We have come across several objectionable posts and memes that might have been shared by ISI operatives from Pakistan," he said. The agencies have got reports of Amritpal Singh's connection with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence.

A source informed that when Amritpal Singh, who now heads 'Waris Punjab De', was in Dubai, he was in close touch with Jaswant Singh Rode, brother of militant and chief of Pakistan-based International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) Lakhbir Singh Rode. Amritpal Singh's treasurer Basant Singh Daulatpura was getting funds from Pakistan. ANI

Garbage Fire: Kochi Corporation fined Rs 100cr

New Delhi, India - The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has awarded Rs 100 crores in environmental compensation against Kochi Municipal Corporation for alleged continuing neglect of its duties resulting in a fire at a waste dump site in Kochi, Kerala. The Tribunal stated that Kochi city was choked on account of a fire at the waste dump site on March 2, which led to a crisis situation. A warning was issued to the residents to stay indoors and hospitals asked to prepare emergency admission of patients with respiratory distress to deal with severe air pollution and its worrying public health fallout. "Considering the studies and long continuing neglect of its duties by the Kochi Corporation, we award environmental compensation under section 15 of the NGT Act against Kochi Corporation of Rs. 100 crores which may be deposited with the Chief Secretary, Kerala within one month for necessary remediation measures, including dealing with the public health issues of the victims," said the bench headed by NGT's Chairperson Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel. The Tribunal noted Kerala state's reply which said 'the dump site is spread over 100 acres and a processing plant have a capacity for waste processing of 300 tonnes per day' "The contract to process the waste has been given to a contractor but only 33 per cent of the work has been completed. Several major and minor fires earlier have broken out at the



A massive fire broke out at the Brahmapuram waste plant in Kochi on March 2 (ANI)

site. The present incident occurred on March 2, at 5:30pm. The fire and Rescue Department took measures to control the fire. Naval Helicopters were deployed to airdrop water over the fire heaps. The fire was brought under control by March 5," said the Kerala state reply. The plant has been closed on March 13. Multi-Sectoral Empowered Committee has been constituted by the Disaster Management Department. The Tribunal said that it is self-evident that good governance in the matter of waste

management is being neglected for a long time to the detriment of the environment and public health and no one has taken moral responsibility for such gross failure of rule of law and damage to public health. "It is difficult to understand what is the value of citizens' right to life and safety with such an attitude of total neglect by authorities in Government. This calls for soul-searching and also high-level inquiry to determine culpability in the larger public interest," said the NGT. ANI

Pakistan: Arrest warrant against Khan dropped

Islamabad, Pakistan - A Pakistani judge dropped an arrest warrant against former prime minister Imran Khan on Saturday, his lawyers said, after the ex-cricketing star, who had skipped several hearings, travelled to court. The 70-year-old has been tangled in a slew of court cases since he was ousted in a no-confidence motion last year and has been pressuring the fragile coalition government which replaced him to hold early elections. Earlier this week Khan's supporters fought pitched battles with police sent to arrest him in the eastern city of Lahore after he failed to appear in court over graft charges, citing security concerns. "The court has cancelled the arrest warrant after marking Imran Khan's attendance.

The hearing has been adjourned till March 30," one of Khan's lawyers, Gohar Khan, told AFP. After days of legal wrangling, Khan travelled more than 300km from Lahore to the Islamabad court complex, but was unable to get out of the car. Around 4,000 supporters mobbed the complex, pelting stones and throwing bricks at police officers who fired back with tear gas. The court however accepted Khan's attendance, his lawyers said. The case has been brought by the Election Commission of Pakistan which has accused Khan of not declaring gifts received during his time as premier, or the profit made from selling them. AFP

Donald Trump says expecting 'arrest' on Tuesday

New York, US - Former US President Donald Trump said he expects to be 'arrested' on Tuesday over hush money allegedly paid to a porn star before the 2016 election, calling on his supporters to protest. Citing a 'leak' from the Manhattan district attorney's office, Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform on Saturday morning: "Leading Republican candidate & former President of the United States of America will be arrested on Tuesday of next week. Protest, take our nation back!" The investigation centers on US\$130,000 paid weeks before the 2016 polls to stop Stormy Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, from going public about an 'affair' she had with Trump years earlier. Prosecutors are weighing whether to charge Trump in the case, and speculation is rife that an indictment is likely. If the Manhattan district attorney were to indict Trump, the 76-



This file photo shows Donald Trump arriving to speak during the CPAC Conference in National Harbor, Maryland on March 4 (AFP)

year-old would become the first former president to be charged with a crime. That would also upend his bid to win the Republican nomination for the 2024 presidential election. Trump's lawyer told CNBC on Friday evening that his client would surrender to face criminal charges if he was indicted by a Manhattan grand jury. Trump has denied having an

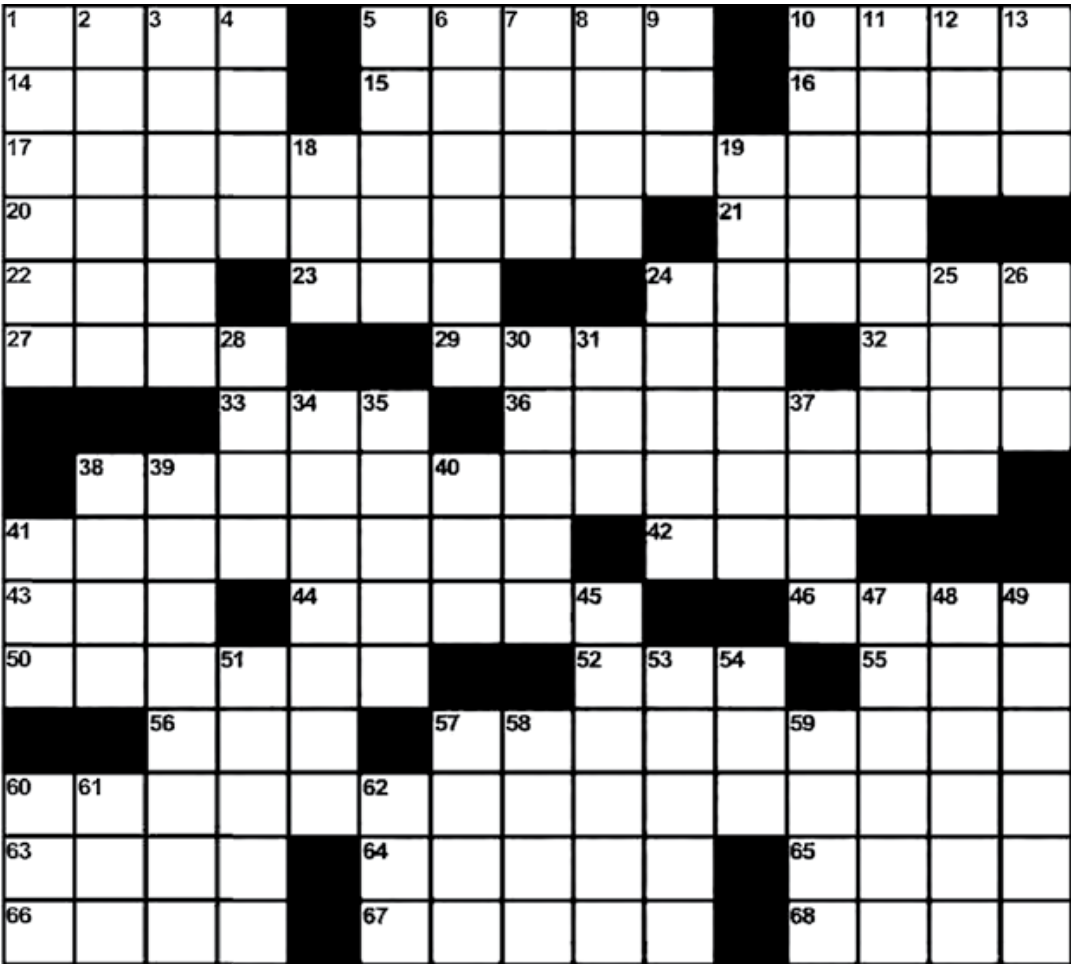
affair with Daniels and has dismissed the investigation as politically motivated. In his post, written in capital letters, Trump referred to 'illegal leaks from a corrupt & highly political Manhattan district attorney's office' and said the investigation was 'based on an old & fully debunked (by numerous other prosecutors!) fairytale'. Daniels met with prosecutors

The investigation centres on US\$130,000 paid weeks before the 2016 polls to stop Stormy Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, from going public about an 'affair' she had with Trump

on Wednesday and 'agreed to make herself available as a witness, or for further inquiry if needed', according to her lawyer Charles Brewster. Earlier this month, Trump was given the opportunity to testify by District Attorney Alvin Bragg's team but is expected to decline, to avoid potentially incriminating himself. Experts say the invitation is a sign that he will almost certainly

be charged. On Monday, Trump's former lawyer-turned-foe Michael Cohen testified before a grand jury in New York. The payment to Daniels was made by Cohen, who said he was later reimbursed. The payment, if not properly accounted for, could result in a misdemeanour charge related to falsifying of business records. That might be raised to a felony if the false accounting was intended to cover up a second crime, such as a campaign finance violation, *The New York Times* has reported. Trump is facing several criminal probes at state and federal level over possible wrongdoing before, during and after his first term in office that threaten his new run at the White House. In Georgia, a prosecutor is investigating Trump and his allies' efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss in the southern state. AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD

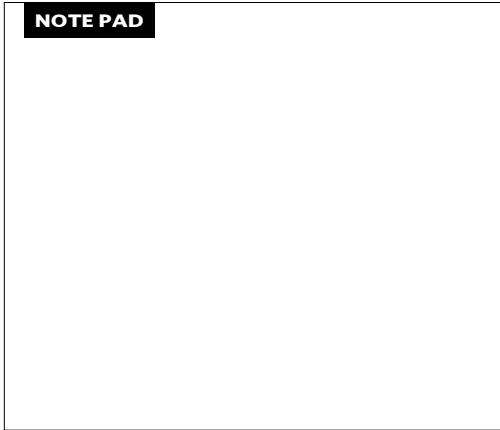


ACROSS
1) Framing 2x4
5) Middle ear bone
10) Birthday topics
14) Jason's ship
15) Makeup option
16) Hatcher of TV
17) Almost have in-laws
20) Official government pardons
21) Golfer's aspiration
22) Old TV "Squad"
23) "Just a..." ("Wait!")
24) In an optimistic way
27) It's south of Turkey
29) Housing projects?
32) Gaming cube
33) Dream Team team
36) Farthest toward the sunset
38) Instruction to an actor, sometimes
41) Animal that preys on others
42) Highest non-face card
43) Draft contents
44) Like interstate high-ways
46) Mouth off at
50) One who makes a point
52) Work unit

55) Fond du lac, Wisconsin
56) ...in xylophone
57) Like good obedience school candidates
60) Avoid the public
63) Frank with a famous diary
64) Slender watercraft
65) Rope entanglement
66) Pricey opera house seating section
67) Way the wind blows
68) Male heirs
DOWN
1) Italian deli item
2) Low number on the Richter scale
3) Lake George is there
4) Bird of peace
5) Ready to spit nails
6) Observe
7) Like baby monkeys
8) They are uttered with shudders
9) Gloater's shout
10) Legendary reference book?
11) Trash
12) Closer's stat
13) Walter Scott or Walter Raleigh

18) Curvaceous one of 26
19) Disciple of Jesus
24) Go back to the default settings
25) Santa checks it
26) Up to the present
28) ... pro quo
30) Conscious of
31) Really relax, in slang (with "out")
34) Furthest from the freshest
35) "When you wish upon..."
37) Clothing store section
38) Musician Clapton
39) Making copies in the office
40) Heavy measure
41) Outdoor sound blasters, briefly
45) Certain church official
47) Lacking pigmentation
48) Wild West drinking hole
49) Potpourri offerings
51) One spelling for an Indian princess
53) Irritated
54) Large African antelope
57) Any old Russian ruler
58) Jeweler Lalique or Hollywood's Russo

59) Inquires
60) Cowpoke's sweetheart
61) Yoko of the music world
62) Mo. of colorful foliage



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
It's one thing to keep your hopes high, it's quite another to be in complete denial as to what your real chances for success are. Be realistic today. You aren't doing yourself any good by ignoring the facts before you. Face them head-on, and you'll see they aren't as bad as you fear. Renewal is in the air right now, so if you can hold on and stay motivated long enough, you'll be able to enjoy the change in tide. This change will sweep a much happier era into your life.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
There are people who are planning something that you need to know about. It could be a party, it could be a meeting, it could be a deal! Whatever it is, it's sure to go a lot better if you're involved. Watch out for schemers and insinuate yourself into the situation. Wherever they are closed doors, knock. Whenever anyone's whispering, ask them what they're talking about. These folks will be wondering why they didn't come to you in the first place.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
The insight you've been taking from your dreams hasn't been of much use to you lately, so it might be time to start thinking about a better way to figure things out. Bizarre images you see as you sleep are little more than variations on your day. They aren't showing you the answers to your problems. If you really want to sort out what's been bugging you, stay awake and talk to someone you trust. Share your thoughts and ask for their input.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Hold on to your dreams and don't let go! You can't let anyone tell you that what you want won't ever come about. You have the passionate determination you need to make anything happen, and you don't need naysayers bringing you down right now. Stand firm. You want what you want, so give it everything you've got. Even if it looks like a long shot, as long as you have hope in your heart, hope survives! You have a vision of what you want the several months of your life to be like.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
It might sound impossible, but today your job is to analyze the unseen. You have all the clues and intuition you need to do just that. When your heart senses that someone is being less than up front with you, follow your suspicions. You'll soon see why you were so certain that you needed some time away from them. Or when your boss or another authority figure sends you a particularly complimentary email.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Are you feeling like you're stuck in a rut? Don't look to other people to dig you out! You have all the power and determination you need to dig yourself out. Remember that if you aim unrealistically high, you'll only give yourself an excuse not to try. Keep your goals more realistic right now and you'll be much more eager to pursue them. You need to motivate yourself creatively. Give yourself a special treat for every mountain you climb today.

01. Which British boxer lost the WBA world lightweight title in 1972?
A. Jim Watt
B. Charlie Magri
C. Ken Buchanan
D. Mike Tyson

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
You finally have the time you need to fully explore your feelings about someone. They've been sending you mixed signals, which has understandably frustrated and confused you. So it's a good thing you have some free time now to ponder just what the heck is going on! Make this the last time you put your life on hold to deal with this person. They've created enough confusion already. Decide what you want to do about the situation, and then don't give it any more thought.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Today, your business is your business and their business is their business. So keep your nose out of what's going on in other people's lives, or you could get an earful from someone who feels like their privacy is being invaded and their actions judged. Stay focused on your own path. Keep your eyes straight ahead and your feet pointed forward. Just keep marching along. There's nothing to see here. Even if there is, you need to stay out of it.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
You're an open person most of the time. You have nothing to hide, so why should you waste time covering things up? This might be true, but today you should guard your privacy at all costs. Certain people are trying to find out what you're up to, and their motivation could be jealousy. They could also just be looking for fodder for gossip, and they could easily twist the situation to make you look less than stellar. If anyone asks you what you're doing, tell them to mind their own business.

02. Apart from being the inspiration for several commercial brands, what is a cacique?
A. An antique Spanish boat
B. A species of parrot
C. A political leader or chief
D. A song

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Flipping a coin isn't the most sophisticated way of making a decision, but you've got to admit: It gets the job done. So if you're in an indecisive mood right now, grab a coin and let it make the choice for you. When you're so tied up with trying to see all sides of things, you could let the opportunity pass you by entirely. Sometimes it's best just to make a choice and go with it. There is no "right" way. There's just the way you've chosen.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
No matter how intense your emotions are, you can handle them! Don't be afraid of what your heart is feeling or fearing. Your inner strength enables you to step forward and accept the challenge. It's time to be brutally honest with someone you love. Who? Yourself. You can't hide from the truth about how you're feeling or what you want. You have to embrace it and move forward. Share your emotions with the people you love. They will support you.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
You have a fuzzy view of an issue today, but that might be for the best. Too many factors are yet to be determined. There's no point in pushing people to give you the information you seek. Any aggressive energy will only push them away. Instead, distract yourself with some fun errands or tasks you've been meaning to do. Keep yourself busy until things are clearer.

03. The co-creator and co-host of British radio show "The Museum of Curiosity" (2008 to present) also created what other show?
A. The Infinite Monkey Cage
B. QI
C. Mock the Week
D. Whose Line Is It Anyway

Answers: 1. C 2. C 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



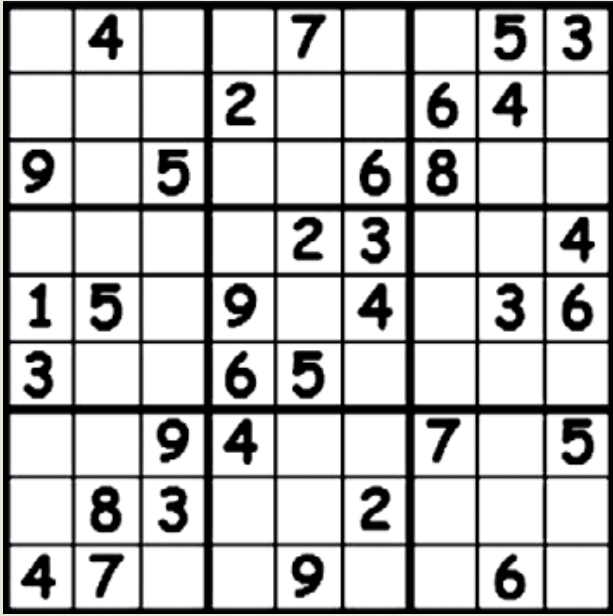
BOGGLER



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



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



SPOILSPORT

Clasico, arguably the biggest rivalry in modern football, overshadowed by Barcelona referee corruption charge

Barcelona, Spain - Spain's Clasico is one of the world's biggest sporting occasions, pitting giants Barcelona and Real Madrid head-to-head, but the build-up to Sunday's La Liga clash has been overshadowed by "Caso Negreira".

Barca have been charged with corruption by Spanish prosecutors for payments between 2001 and 2018 to the company of former refereeing chief Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira, totalling around 7.3 million euros (\$7.8 million).

The club say they were paying for reports and advice on refereeing but prosecutors have accused the club of seeking to gain favourable decision-making from officials.

Charges were filed last week against Barcelona, former vice president of Spain's refereeing committee (CTA), Negreira, and two former Barcelona presidents, Sandro Rosell and Josep Maria Bartomeu, among others.

Although La Liga leaders Barcelona can virtually clinch the title if they beat second-place Real Madrid on Sunday to move 12 points clear, headlines remain dominated by the Negreira case, with tensions rising around Spain.

In the first round of fixtures after Barcelona were charged last weekend, at various stadiums there was a form of protest against the supposed corruption scandal.

It was clearest in the Basque

country, where Xavi Hernandez's side faced Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Supporters threw mock money onto the pitch with "mafia" printed on it, along with Barcelona's club emblem.

"I was surprised at the hostile atmosphere towards Barca, it was sad to see," said Xavi after his team's narrow 1-0 win.

"(Barca) are being judged prematurely, which I don't think is good for society."

After Barcelona's payments to Negreira's company were un-

Movistar channel Vamos on Tuesday.

"The problem that we have is the worst. There are payments recognised by Barcelona to the vice-president of the CTA, that's something abnormal.

"It's understandable that tension is generated. The reputation of our football is at stake. I am ashamed. We have no explanation from Barcelona."

Playing the victim

Laporta did speak at a lunch event with the Equestrian Circle

federation, La Liga and Spain's national sports council.

Barcelona will not host the traditional directors lunch with Real Madrid and their president Florentino Perez ahead of the Clasico as a result, according to Spanish reports.

After a period of relatively friendly relations between the two clubs -- both collaborating on the failed breakaway European Super League plan -- it marks a cooling.

However, Perez was under pressure from supporters demanding Madrid take action against Barcelona.

Tebas spoke again Thursday, saying he did not think Barcelona had "bought referees" but he also said that "hiding is not the way" and the club had to provide full answers.

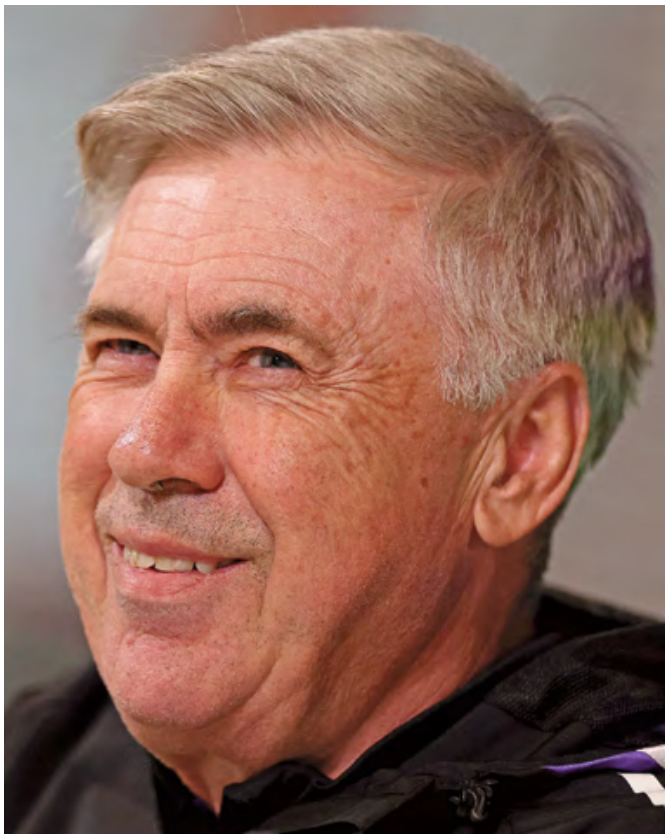
The league's president reiterated that no sporting punishment can be handed to Barcelona as the alleged infringements happened too long ago.

Laporta took to social media on Friday to try and turn attention towards the Clasico, asking for the fans' support more than ever as the club closes in on their first La Liga title since 2019.

"We will defend ourselves and we will attack, but now I want us to concentrate on cheering the team on," said Laporta.

"We shouldn't have our attention diverted by other things. Let's support Barca because we love them."

AFP



It's difficult to say what game we'll get (on Sunday). Barcelona defended a lot in that game (Copa first leg), because they went ahead.

This game will be different depending if we score early, or they do...

CARLO ANCELOTTI

We are more stable than ever - and they have been trying [to destabilise us] now since Day 1. We are completely focused on winning on Sunday and making a big statement in the title race. ... We are not thinking about anything else

XAVI HERNANDEZ



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior (L) with Karim Benzema

Ancelotti backs Vinicius to escape Araujo shackles

Madrid, Spain - Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti backed winger Vinicius Junior to escape Ronald Araujo's shackles when Los Blancos face Barcelona on Sunday in La Liga.

The Brazilian winger, key for Madrid this season, has been shut down by Barca defender Araujo in recent clashes with the Catalans, with coach Xavi Hernandez deploying the centre-back on the right to directly confront him. Vinicius has scored twice in 12 games against Barcelona, both times before Barcelona started using Araujo at right-back.

"He's had more difficulties than in other games, but Vini is always Vini, his mobility can help him get best (from himself) in tomorrow's game," Ancelotti said.

"I'm thinking of putting him on the right, let's see. He can play on the right, Vinicius."

Ancelotti later said he was joking about using Vinicius on the right flank, but reiterated that the forward could be given more liberty to drift from the left.

"Obviously that wasn't serious, but mobility could be important, not having a fixed reference point."

AFP

Isak fires Newcastle to within sight of top four in Premier League



Newcastle United's Alexander Isak (C) celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Nottingham Forest (AFP)

Nottingham, United Kingdom - Alexander Isak said Newcastle believe they will seal a place in next season's Champions League after the Swede scored twice, including a stoppage time penalty, to beat Nottingham Forest 2-1 on Friday.

Victory lifts the Magpies to within one point of fourth-placed Tottenham and with a game in hand to come on Spurs.

"We believe and we know that we have it in our own hands and have a good chance," said Isak after Newcastle signed off for the international break with back-to-back wins.

"It is important we have gone into this break with a good feeling with two wins from two games."

Defeat was Forest's first at home in the league since September and leaves Steve

We believe and we know that we have it in our own hands and have a good chance

ALEXANDER ISAK

Cooper's men still two points above the relegation zone.

"It's always the worst way to lose, in the last couple of minutes, having fought in the game," said Cooper. "We made some poor football decisions around the build-up to the goals and that's something we can only blame ourselves for."

Newcastle ended a near two-month wait for a Premier League win last weekend in beating

Wolves and came flying out the blocks at the City Ground.

But the closest the visitors came to turning their early dominance into a lead was when Renan Lodi turned Isak's cross onto his own crossbar.

Instead it was Forest who went in front completely against the run of play thanks to a howler from Sven Botman.

The Dutch centre-back has been a major factor in Newcastle's success this season but his attempted pass back to goalkeeper Nick Pope was intercepted by Emmanuel Dennis, who produced a stunning chipped finish for just his second Forest goal.

The crossbar came to the home side's rescue again when Sean Longstaff's deflected strike from the edge of the box came back off the woodwork.

Verstappen shrugs off bug to top practice in Saudi Arabia

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Max Verstappen showed no ill effects from a stomach bug on Friday as he topped the times for Red Bull ahead of Fernando Alonso in Friday's second free practice at this weekend's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.

The defending double world champion, shaking off the stomach upset that had delayed his arrival in Jeddah by 24 hours, clocked a best lap in one minute 29.603 seconds to outpace two-time champion Alonso's Aston Martin by 0.208 seconds.

Sergio Perez was third in the second Red Bull ahead of Esteban Ocon of Alpine, George Russell of Mercedes and Pierre Gasly in the second Alpine.

"I think we had a positive day, but I think there's still quite a few things we can improve," reported Verstappen.

AFP

Kahraba treble keeps alive Ahly hopes of survival

Johannesburg, South Africa - Mahmoud Kahraba scored a hat-trick as Al Ahly of Egypt triumphed 4-0 at Coton Sport of Cameroon on Friday to keep alive hopes of reaching the CAF Champions League quarter-finals.

It was a must-win match for the record 10-time African champions and a scoring burst during each half in the northwestern city of Garoua secured maximum points in Group B.

Despite the impressive victory, however, Ahly will be eliminated if Al Hilal of Sudan win at home to already qualified Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa on Saturday in matchday five.

Sundowns have 10 points and Hilal nine from four matches and Ahly seven and Coton none from five outings with group winners and runners-up progressing.

Should Hilal draw or lose, who accompanies Sundowns to the knockout phase will be decided



Mahmoud Kahraba

on March 31 or April 1 when the Sudanese outfit are away to Ahly.

Stunned by a 5-2 loss at Sundowns last weekend, Ahly made six changes for the match in central Africa, with Kahraba among those promoted. He rewarded Swiss coach Marcel Koller by scoring twice within six minutes midway through the opening half, finishing crosses from Mohamed

'Afsha' Magdy and South African Percy Tau.

Kahraba, his head bandaged after an early first half collision with Coton goalkeeper Gabin Al-lambatnan, completed his treble six minutes into the second half.

Tau, outstanding as a wide attacker for the second successive weekend, completed the rout soon after.



Elena Rybakina in action against Iga Swiatek of Poland in the semi-final of Indian Wells Open on Friday (AFP)

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

Rybakina topples Swiatek to book Indian Wells final with Sabalenka

Indian Wells, United States - Elena Rybakina again proved too much for world number one Iga Swiatek, denying the defending champion a return to the Indian Wells final with an emphatic 6-2, 6-2 semi-final victory on Friday.

Moscow-born Kazakh Rybakina, the reigning Wimbledon champion who stunned top-seeded Swiatek in the fourth round of the Australian Open on the way to the final, will now get a chance to turn the tables on Aryna Sabalenka, who beat her in Melbourne to capture a first Grand Slam title.

World number two Sabalenka advanced with a 6-2, 6-3 victory over seventh-seeded Maria Sakkari of Greece.

Rybakina, ranked 10th in the world, was all over Swiatek from the opening game, painting the lines with her punishing ground strokes and serving with pinpoint precision.

Swiatek, winner of the French and US Opens last year in a campaign that included eight titles in all, simply had no answer and surrendered the first set with a double-fault on the first set point.

It was more of the same in the second as Rybakina raced to a 5-0 lead. Swiatek, who revealed after the match she was dealing

with "discomfort" in her ribcage, finally managed a hold for 5-1, and pounced to break as Rybakina suddenly struggled with her first serve in the next game.

Rybakina still managed to muster two match points at 40-15, but Swiatek saved one with an overhead and another with a blistering return of a second serve, winning two more points to complete the break for 5-2.

But there would be no come-back. A mis-hit as Swiatek ap-

peared to trip chasing a ball back to the baseline gave Rybakina another match point and she converted it with confidence.

"I didn't expect that I was going to play that good today," admitted Rybakina, who battled through three sets to beat Czech Karolina Muchova in the quarter-finals.

"Hopefully I'm going to play

like this on Sunday," she added after denying Swiatek's bid to become the first woman since Martina Navratilova in 1990-91 to win back-to-back titles in the California desert.

Swiatek, who said she still expected to defend her title at the Miami Open that starts next week, was disappointed she couldn't execute her coach's ideas for stopping Rybakina.

"We were thinking about the Australian Open more like we

We were thinking about the Australian Open more like we wanted to kind of learn a lesson from that match. I wanted to kind of use his tips and improve my game. But I wasn't able to do that today

ELENA RYBAKINA



Sabalenka 'feels bad' for Ukrainian players amid war tensions

Indian Wells, United States - Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues to stir tension in the tennis world, and Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka said Friday that it's not only Ukrainian players who are feeling the strain.

"Of course it's a lot of tension between us," Australian Open champion Sabalenka said after beating Maria Sakkari to reach the final of the combined WTA and ATP Masters 1000 in the California desert. But, she added, "I still have this belief that I did nothing bad to Ukrainians - not me, not Russian athletes."

The WTA and ATP tours have barred players from Russia and its ally Belarus from competing under their national flags, but insist that individual athletes have a right to compete.

Wimbledon, which banned players from Russia and Belarus last year, is reportedly poised to allow them to return. Sabalenka, who said before the tournament that she wrestled with guilt last year but finally concluded that



Aryna Sabalenka celebrates after defeating Maria Sakkari of Greece in the semi final of Indian Wells Open on Friday (AFP)

the situation was not her fault, was thrust into the spotlight again this week when Ukraine's Lesia Tsurenko withdrew from their third-round match.

Tsurenko later said that she had a panic attack, the overwhelming emotions coming days after a conversation with WTA chief executive Steve Simon about the ongoing tensions related to the war in which she found Simon unsupportive.

Sabalenka said she felt the WTA had been even handed in dealing with players from all countries. "I was through so many bad things, and unfortunately, I'm not able to say that because who is gonna believe Belarusian girl," she said.

"I think Tsurenko withdrawing, there was more than panic attack or more than political situation.

"I think there is something more. I had a really tough situation last year with her coach the way he act to me. So I think that guy put so much pressure on her, and that's why that happened."

Rib injury threatens beaten Swiatek's Miami Open defense

Wells, United States - Iga Swiatek's Indian Wells title defense ground to a halt in a straight sets semi-final loss to Elena Rybakina on Friday, the world number one later revealing she is battling a rib injury.

"For sure, Elena played great tennis today, and I feel like against her I have to play better," Swiatek said after falling 6-2, 6-2 to the Wimbledon champion - who also shocked her in the Australian Open fourth round.

"Honestly, I feel like it's more me and kind of my mistakes," she said. "I'm also not feeling 100% physically. I have a little discomfort in my rib, and we're going to consult with medical team."

Swiatek said she still planned to defend her title at the Miami Open that starts next week.

"For now I'm preparing to play, but we'll see what (the) next days are going to tell us," she said. "I don't know yet."

Swiatek was disappointed that she was unable to imple-



Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return to Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina during their semi-final match of Indian Wells Open on Friday (AFP)

I have a little discomfort in my rib, and we're going to consult with medical team

IGA SWIATEK



ment the tactics her coach had devised after analyzing her loss to Rybakina in Melbourne.

"We were thinking about the Australian Open more like we wanted to kind of learn a lesson from that match," she said.

"We were analyzing ... so I wanted just to kind of use his tips and improve my game. But I wasn't able to do that today."

She said she hadn't had much experience of playing through injury, the only example she recalled coming at the 2019 French Open.

AFP

Adam Schenk grabs PGA Valspar lead with Spieth lurking

Miami, United States - Adam Schenk, playing for a 10th consecutive week, fired a two-under-par 69 to grab a one-stroke lead after Friday's second round of the PGA Valspar Championship.

The 31-year-old American, who shared the 18-hole lead, was on seven-under 135 after 36 holes at Innisbrook's Copperhead course in Palm Harbor, Florida.

"It really couldn't have been a ton better with the amount of putts I made," Schenk said. "We're doing a really good job managing the courses."

Countryman Kramer Hickok,

chasing his first PGA crown like Schenk, was second on 136 after a second 68 in windy conditions.

Three-time major winner Jordan Spieth, the 2015 Valspar champion, fired a 70 to share third on 137 with fellow Americans Cody Gribble and Davis Riley plus England's Tommy Fleetwood.

"Kind of an off day on approaching the greens, hit pretty rusty wedges," Spieth said.

"To shoot one-under on this golf course in the wind is a good score so I feel good about my position going into the weekend."

Schenk made a birdie-birdie

start, blasting out of a bunker to seven feet and sinking the putt at the par-5 first hole then dropping his approach inside three feet to set up a tap-in at the second.

After a three-putt bogey on the third, Schenk answered with a 17-foot birdie putt at the par-5 fifth and added another birdie from 4 1/2 feet at the 12th before a closing bogey after finding a greenside bunker.

"I had better control of my golf ball," Schenk said. "Made a few putts, had some nice saves for par which really holds the round together."

"It was another one of those



Adam Schenk plays an approach shot on the fifth hole during the second round of the Valspar Championship

rounds that could have been even par. It wouldn't have been 5- or 6-under ever but we managed it well and very pleased with 2-under."

Schenk, whose best PGA finish was third at the 2021 Shriners Children's Open, is keeping busy before the birth of his son next month.

"Having a little baby boy here in about a month and a half," Schenk said. "So trying to make as many points as I can to take as much time off as I can and spend time with him and my wife, which will be very special."

AFP



Bangladesh's Towhid Hridoy plays a shot during the first ODI against Ireland in Sylhet on Saturday (AFP)

Shakib, Towhid power Bangladesh to 338-8 against Ireland in first ODI

Sylhet, Bangladesh - Shakib Al Hasan and debutant Towhid Hridoy both narrowly missed centuries but Bangladesh still hammered Ireland's attack to post 338-8 in Saturday's first of three one-day internationals in Sylhet.

Shakib hit 93 and Towhid added 92 as the pair added 135 for the fourth wicket to lift Bangladesh from 81-3 after Ireland captain Andrew Balbirnie won the toss and elected to bowl.

Graham Hume claimed a career-best 4-60 but the hosts did well enough to post their highest one-day score against Ireland.

Shakib led the initial charge after Tamim Iqbal (3), Liton Das (26) and Najmul Hossain (25) fell cheaply.

He became the second Bangladeshi cricketer to reach 7,000 ODI runs after Tamim.

Shakib is now also just the third cricketer to surpass that milestone in ODI runs and 300 one-day wickets after Sri Lanka's Sanath Jayasuriya and Pakistan's Shahid Afridi.

Shakib shifted gears after reaching his third successive ODI fifty and hitting Harry Tector for five fours in an over.

He fell seven runs short of his 10th ODI hundred after chasing a wide yorker from Hume to get the bottom edge.

Towhid played the best debut innings for Bangladesh in ODIs, adding 80 runs for the fifth wicket with Mushfiqur Rahim, who struck 44 off 26 balls.

Hume removed both batsmen in the same over before taking the wicket of Taskin Ahmed but the tourists were unable to stop the flow of runs.

AFP

Sri Lanka in double trouble

Williamson, Nicholls double tons put New Zealand on top in second Test

Wellington, New Zealand - Aggressive double centuries for Kane Williamson and Henry Nicholls powered New Zealand's dominance in the second Test against Sri Lanka in Wellington on Saturday.

The Black Caps declared their first innings at an imposing 580-4 before reducing Sri Lanka to 26-2 at stumps on day two, leaving the tourists with a very slim prospect of squaring the two-match series.

The in-form Williamson scored 215 and Nicholls posted a career-best 200 not out, with the pair's third-wicket stand of 363 virtually batting Sri Lanka out of the contest.

Their partnership was the

Everyone in the group's been great and you really feel that support. For me, it was just about trusting that I had done it before. It hasn't happened as much as I'd like in the last period

HENRY NICHOLLS

fifth-highest by any New Zealand combination and they became the country's first batters to reach 200 in the same innings.

Sri Lankan captain Dimuth Karunaratne will resume on 16 on Sunday and nightwatchman Prabath Jayasuriya remains on four, with the deficit a daunting 554 runs.

Sri Lanka's bowlers struggled to generate life on a flat Basin Reserve pitch, forcing Karunaratne to set defensive fields during much of the mammoth partnership.

Williamson and Nicholls batted at a lively clip from the outset, advancing quickly from a 155-2



New Zealand's Kane Williamson (L) celebrates with team-mate Henry Nicholls after his double century against Sri Lanka in Wellington on Saturday

overnight score and barely looking troubled as they unleashed an array of attacking strokes through the first two sessions.

Williamson was impenetrable as he reached three figures for the third time in successive Tests, becoming the first New Zealander to pass 8,000 runs in the process.

It was a sixth double-century for the 32-year-old - whose un-

beaten 121 was pivotal in a final-ball first Test in Christchurch earlier this week.

Having resumed on 26, Williamson struck 23 fours and two sixes before holing out in the deep off spinner Jayasuriya as he tried to escalate the scoring rate.

Nicholls marched on from his overnight 18 to reach three figures before pushing past his previous-best score of 174.

His aggressive 240-ball knock, which featured four sixes, represented a remarkable return to form for the left-hander, whose place in the team was under pressure after failing to reach 40 in his 15 previous innings.

Nicholls said he was aware of criticism of his ongoing selection but said he was made to feel comfortable by support from his teammates and coach Gary

Stead.

"Everyone in the group's been great and you really feel that support," he said.

"For me, it was just about trusting that I had done it before. It hasn't happened as much as I'd like in the last period.

"Now the challenge is doing it again knowing that the blueprint is there."

AFP

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Strong performance from Al Harthy in maiden FIA WEC qualifying at Sebring



Ahmad Al Harthy in action at FIA World Endurance Championship qualifying session on Thursday

Muscat - Oman's Ahmad Al Harthy produced excellent pace during his maiden FIA World Endurance Championship qualifying session at Sebring International Raceway on Thursday to secure a highly competitive third on the GTE Am grid for the first race of the season.

Having progressed well with team-mates Michael Dinan and Charlie Eastwood throughout the various testing and free practice

sessions during the week, Al Harthy's first ever visit to the American track, the Oman Racing with TF Sport trio headed into qualifying in confident mood.

Al Harthy climbed behind the wheel of the No.25 Aston Martin GTE for Thursday evening's session and the FIA WEC debutant delivered a fantastic performance. Ending the run with a best time of 1m59.657 seconds (181.1 km/h), he secured the third

fastest time and only just missed out on the GTE Am front row by 0.3 seconds.

As well as emerging as the fastest of the Aston Martin entries, the Omani - supported by the Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS - was notably happy with the overall handling and performance of his car. "I'm really happy with our performance from qualifying," he said.



Esapekka Lappi of Hyundai in action at the Mexico Rally on Friday

Lappi fend off serial winner Ogier to lead in Mexico

Paris, France - Esapekka Lappi held off Sebastian Ogier to lead the Mexico Rally after Friday's stages as championship leader Ott Tanak was among the drivers to hit problems at altitude in the rugged mountains.

Tanak had led overnight after winning the opening two stages but lost power on Friday's opening stage, known as El Chocolate.

"Turbo," said Tanak from the road. "There is a turbo in the car, but it's just dead."

Lappi, a Finn who drives for Hyundai, grabbed the race lead as Tanak limped in 7mins 47sec behind.

Frenchman Ogier, in a Toyota,

who has won the rally six times, took the next stage but the Finn hit back to take the morning's final stage by 0.6sec and stretch his lead to 1.4sec.

"Seb has won this rally so many times and we can match his pace, so I need to be very pleased with that," said Lappi.

In the afternoon back-to-back stage wins in Las Minas and Las Dunas gave Lappi some breathing space, and he ended the day 5.3sec up on Ogier who took the Distrito Leon super special.

"I am a bit surprised, but I take it as it is," Lappi told wr.com.

"This was probably one of the best days of my career."

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MUSEUM
REVIEW

ART provenance

SWISS MUSEUM REVIEWS COLLECTION FOR NAZI-LOOTED ART

Kunsthaus Zurich, one of Switzerland's top art museums, launched a new review last week aimed at clarifying whether any of its artworks might be cultural property looted by the Nazis.

Ann Demeester, who took over as the museum's director in January, wants to tackle the thorny issue of provenance and art confiscated by Nazi Germany.

The museum said it wanted to see a national independent commission set up to investigate cultural property looted as a result of Nazi persecution.

In the meantime, it said it was setting up its own international commission of independent experts this year.

"Our overriding objective must always be to review professionally the origins of the works we hold," said Philipp Hildebrand, chair of the Zurcher Kunstgesellschaft, the art association which owns the collection and oversees the museum.

"We must enable just and fair solutions where there are substantiated indications of cultural property confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution.

We are aware that this will be a lengthy and complex process," said Hildebrand, a former Swiss central bank chairman.

The museum said it would submit its own



An art educator explains to a group of youth visitors next to 'The Couple (The Wretched Ones)' 1904 by Pablo Picasso and 'Jeanne Hebuterne, seated' 1918 by Amadeo Modigliani, two masterpieces, part of the Merzbacher Collection exhibited at the Kunsthaus Zurich

collection as well as new acquisitions to the provenance search.

"The provenance of works created prior to 1945 that changed hands between January 1933 and May 1945 will be reviewed," the museum said, referring to the years of Nazi rule in neighbouring Germany.

Demeester, the Belgian former director of the Frans Hals Museum in the Netherlands, said Kunsthaus Zurich had to be proactive and transparent on provenance research.

"As a museum, we bear a great social responsibility," she said, adding, "Just as important as the research itself is what we do with the results."

The museum faced criticism in 2021 when it opened a new wing to house the collection of arms dealer Emil Buhrlé, who made his fortune during World War II.

The German-born industrialist became a naturalised Swiss citizen in 1937 and died in 1956, having amassed one of Europe's most prestigious private art collections.

The Buhrlé Foundation itself confirmed that 13 paintings he bought had been stolen by the Nazis from Jewish owners in France.

Following a series of court cases after World War II, Buhrlé in the 1940s returned all 13 pieces to their rightful owners and then repurchased nine of them, the foundation said.

The collection was long displayed at a private museum on the outskirts of Zurich, but it was decided it should be moved following the spectacular 2008 heist of four 19th-century masterpieces.

AFP



Our overriding objective must always be to review professionally the origins of the works we hold

PHILIPP HILDEBRAND



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STRAY DONKEYS

Ass-tonishing incidents in Al Amerat

Road accidents involving stray donkeys in Al Amerat have got animal activists up in arms, seeking appropriate action from the civic authority that seems to turn a Nelson's eye towards the potential hazard for the beasts of burden as well as humans

Hubert Vaz

Animal activists and animal lovers were up in arms last week when a series of incidents involving injured donkeys alongside roads in Al Amerat went viral on social media.

Frequent calls were made by concerned citizens seeking medical attention or transportation of a couple of injured donkeys which lay bleeding and writhing in agony, while the civic authorities did not provide any assistance in this regard, they said.

Medical attention was initiated by a few animal welfare activists who arranged for veterinarians to visit the site for necessary action even as angry citizens and residents voiced their concern on social media. The sight of unattended injured animals moved many by compassion while no assistance came forth from those authorised to rise up to the occasion.

A civic source pointed out that the rising numbers of donkeys in Al Amerat has become a matter of concern for those residing there and people have been trading sarcasm about it for long. However, the recent spate of injuries to the stray animals cannot be brushed under the carpet, he said, hoping that the matter would receive due attention from those concerned.

Immediate action needed

Ammu Ravindaran, an animal lover who has been working for the welfare of stray dogs in Muscat, said there is need for a long term solution for the donkeys in Al Amerat, such as TRN (trap, neuter and release) to curb their numbers. This cannot be done my small non-governmental organisations and need the support of government agencies that can provide vehicles, equipment and man power for trapping stray animals as large as donkeys. She disclosed that formation of an Animal Welfare Society, under the Ministry of Social Welfare, is currently pending approval, and once that materialises issues like this would get better redressal.

Amour al Tauqi, a private sector employee and resident of Al Amerat said, "It's quite shameful to see an area, as developed as Al Amerat, full of stray donkeys. Every street, especially at night, has donkeys crossing. That's not all, when I go for my early morning prayers, often I have been chased by donkeys and had to run because they are quite aggressive." He suggested that the stray animals be taken out of the city and put to use by farmers in the interior or kept in special enclosures, like zoos.

Fatmah Said, an Al Amerat housewife, said, "I think, the sight of donkeys loitering is not befitting of a civilised town. Al Amerat is

a very busy and developing area, and the sight of donkeys everywhere is quite an odd one.

"I believe, the concerned authorities can do something better about it, like taking them to the outskirts of the city. Donkeys are good at many things like livestock guards and for pulling carts in farms," she said, adding, "I almost got involved in an accident twice due to donkeys on the road."

Hazard for donkeys and drivers

Dr Mansour, a veterinarian at Al Amerat Veterinary Clinic, who was one of the first to reach the spot to attend to an injured donkey in Al Amerat last week, at the behest of a



Phots: V K Shafeer



The government needs to spread awareness about the welfare of animals, build a sanctuary for donkeys in Al Amerat, which has huge spaces available, and make contracts with companies that have experience in managing projects that could be beneficial using these animals

Dr Reham Mohamed Youssef

animals on the outskirts of the city so that they can be transported there in a bid to curb accidents.

Move them to shelters

Another specialist in educational psychology, Dr Reham Mohamed Youssef, who is a representative of the Swiss organisation NetApp for animal rights, asserted that animals such as donkeys share the same right as humans to live on land and that development works in cities often robs them of their nat-

ural habitat.

About the recent road accidents involving donkeys in Al Amerat, she said, "It is vey unfortunate that these animals are frequently exposed to traffic accidents and cruel treatment after being hit by cars and left to suffer, bleeding and with fractures which are difficult to heal without medical intervention. These incidents are equally dangerous for the drivers who could also suffer injuries or get killed.

"The government needs to spread aware-

ness about the welfare of animals, build a sanctuary for donkeys in Al Amerat which has huge spaces available and make contracts with companies that have experience in managing projects that could be beneficial using these animals. Milk of donkeys is considered most expensive and used in making hair and skin creams."

She also suggested neutering some of the animals to reduce their numbers in the long run, or entrusting them to farmers with additional privileges.

Stating that no warning signs have been put up along roads in Amerat about the possibility of donkeys crossing, Dr Reham also pointed out, "The biggest problem faced by rescuers is the lack of clinics to treat the animals and that rescuers are expected to transport the animal on their own to the government veterinary clinic only during specific work hours."

Since most incidents happen during the night, vets from private clinics who attend to the animals are compelled to euthanise the injured donkey to rid it of its agony since it cannot be kept waiting till the next morning, Dr Reham lamented.

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