



10% rise in revenues expected

DRAFT BUDGET 2023

Initial public revenues for state's general budget announced

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Finance announced on Tuesday that the total initial public revenues for the state's general budget for the year 2023 are estimated at about RO11.650bn, ten per cent more than the approved budget for 2022.

This came during a media presentation of the state's general budget for 2023, which saw the participation of the topmost officials of the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and Oman Investment Authority.

A statement issued by the Ministry of Finance said, 'The state's general budget for 2023 will be calculated at a price of US\$55 per barrel of crude.'

It estimates the 2023 budget deficit will amount to about RO1.3bn - 11 per cent of the total revenues and three per cent of the GDP. Preliminary estimates for the 2023 budget show that total public spending will be RO12.950bn, seven per cent up from the approved spending in



the 2022 budget. The average rate of oil production is expected to rise to 1.175mn barrels per day, priced at an average price of US\$55 per barrel.

According to H E Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, estimates of the state's general budget until the end of 2022 indicate that the average price of oil is expected to reach US\$94, bringing revenues of



RO14.234bn, while spending will be RO13.88bn to record a surplus of RO1.146bn.

The estimated investment expenditures for 2023 is RO4.5bn of which RO1.1bn is from the budget, RO1.9bn from investments of Omani Investment Au-

thority, and RO1.5bn from Energy Development Oman.

On the issue of income tax, H E Habsi said, 'The income tax will not be applied in 2023.'

At the presentation, the Ministry of Economy stated that the total development expenditure since the beginning of the 10th Five-year plan (2021-2025) until the end of November 2022 amounted to RO2.029bn. 'The

prominent projects for 2023 are the construction of 15 schools in various governorates, the construction of health centres in some wilayats, implementation of a number of dual carriageways and service roads, natural parks and dams, and establishment of a fishing port in the Mahut.

Oman Investment Authority informed that it will spend RO 1.9bn in business ventures next

including 19 in the logistics sector, five in energy, 12 in communications and information technology, five in mining, 12 in services, and 12 in food and fisheries.

At the media presentation, H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, informed that the number of investors who obtained investor residency in the sultanate has risen to 1,090 individuals from 29 countries. The volume of foreign direct investment till the end of the second quarter of 2022 was RO17.98bn.

'A total of 802,524 applications were submitted through Invest Easy and 765,324 licences were issued automatically since the launch of the service in April 2021. The decision to reduce government services fees between 17 and 100 per cent aimed at stimulating and supporting the national economy and providing facilities to beneficiaries of these services boosted economic activities,' said H E Yousef.

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H E QAIS MOHAMMED AL YOUSEF

government was able to control inflation and provided support for basic services, with the total support amounting to RO1.6bn last year. It will continue to provide support.'

According to the Ministry of Economy, among the most

year, including expanding and enhancing existing projects, completing under-construction projects, and developing new projects.

The authority confirmed that the number of new and expansion projects in 2023 will be 65,

Public debt down from 70% to 43%

Our Correspondent Muscat

At a media presentation on Tuesday, H E Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, said global economic and geopolitical variables and factors have been taken into account when preparing the draft general state budget for 2023. The sultanate directed the increase in oil prices to pay off public debt, which led to its decrease from about 70 per cent in 2020 to 43 per cent in 2022.

According to the minister, the government sought to find a unified and clear approach through the government services pricing guide to determine the prices of government services provided; the fees of a number of units of the state's administrative apparatus were studied during the first and second phases of implementing the guide. The study findings will be applied during the next stage to the remaining government agencies.

H E Habsi stressed that the government will start implementing the financial sustainability programme and development of the financial sector by creating initiatives and joint projects with the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority to enhance the role of the banking sector in financing and investment in order to complement the objectives of the national programme to achieve fiscal balance.

The minister indicated that a



Inflation was controlled at safe limits, not exceeding three per cent. Total support in 2022 amounted to more than RO1.6bn

H E SULTAN AL HABSII

group of national programmes will continue to be supported, such as the National Programme for Economic Diversification, the National Programme for Attracting Investment, the National Programme for Digital Transformation, and the National Employment Programme.

He also said that inflation was controlled at safe limits, not exceeding three per cent. Total support in 2022 amounted to more than RO1.6bn.

He informed that the Ministry of Finance is working to restructure Oman Development Bank to play a greater developmental role in terms of the amount of financing it provides to private sector companies and small and medium enterprises.



GRAND RECEPTION

Argentina's players celebrate on board a bus with supporters after winning the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as they leave Ezeiza International Airport en route to the Argentine Football Association training centre in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires, on Tuesday (AFP)

Jabal Shams experiences freezing temperatures

Our Correspondent Muscat

The mercury dipped further on Tuesday morning resulting in freezing conditions at Oman's highest peak - Jabal Shams.

Jabal Shams recorded the lowest temperature of the year

so far at 0.3°C in the early hours of Tuesday, while the second coldest place in the sultanate was Saiq at 6.6°C, followed by Muqshin (11.8°C), Mazyunah (13.1°C) and Haima (13.6°C).

The Directorate General of Meteorology expects partly

cloudy skies over Al Wusta, Dhofar and South Sharqiyah with chances of isolated rains on Wednesday. 'Clear to partly cloudy skies are expected along the coast of the Sea of Oman with chances of isolated rains.'

Clear skies are expected over

the other governorates with chances of late night to early morning low level clouds over parts of Al Wusta and Dhofar.

The Met Department also alerted fishermen and seafarers to be cautious as it expects a rise in sea waves on Wednesday in most coastal areas.

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WELL DONE QATAR



Omanis, who had been to the global showpiece, came back with lifetime experiences - in stark contrast to criticisms that were mounted on Qatar, which, according to officials in that country, were an attempt to cast doubt on the Arab world's right to hold such a big event

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

Despite all the criticism, Qatar made whole world understand that the World Cup tournament can be held anywhere after successfully hosting the world's biggest sporting event that concluded on Sunday.

The Qatari government taught the world how to respect the diversity of cultures, civilizations and religions. Global events such as the World Cup should reflect all colours and cultures of the world - was its message.

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Qatar's Emir, who gave Argentine captain Lionel Messi a

traditional bisht after his side won the trophy, tweeted, 'We have fulfilled our promise to organise an exceptional championship by Arab countries, which provided an opportunity for the people of the world to learn about the richness of our culture and the originality of our values'.

Messi was prominently pictured wearing a bisht that the emir presented to the football icon before he lifted the World Cup trophy for his country.

Qatar 2022 was unique in many ways. First of all, Qatar is the first Muslim, Arab and Middle Eastern country to host the event. Second, Qatar is the smallest country among the



There was no room for complaints. From the airport security gates to the metro in the city... the stadiums, all were in perfect sync. I would say well done Qatar for everything

AHMED AL SAEEDI

hosting states in the history of the World Cup and many had doubts that such a small country could host the tournament.

But Qatar government successfully built eight stadiums and many other facilities for the event.

Qatar's Emir said on Sunday that the Gulf state had delivered on its vow to hold an 'exceptional' World Cup.

According to Ahmed al Saeedi, a photographer, who has spent the whole World Cup season in Doha, Qatar organised this World Cup very well. "The organisation was the best and the security was great. Qatar has won a lot of friends by superbly organising the event," he said.

"There was no room for complaints. From the airport security gates to the metro in the city... the stadiums, all were in perfect sync. I would say well done Qatar for everything."

"I am proud to get an official accreditation from FIFA to photograph the World Cup matches, and significantly I documented the opening and closing with 16 matches. In terms of organisation and hosting, it was the best in all aspects," he added.

Qatar had spent more than US\$200bn on stadiums and new infrastructure ahead of the first World Cup in an Arab nation, which FIFA leader Gianni Infantino said was the 'best ever'.

However, Qatar continued facing criticisms, which its officials said were an attempt to cast doubt on the Arab world's right to hold such big events.

Tariq Barwani, an Omani IT expert, who got back from Qatar on Monday after spending three days, said, "I was attending not just the match at the stadium with my entire family but also was visiting every corner of the activities organised by Qatar for the FIFA World Cup. It was mesmerising for all of us."

Barwani added, "The weather was amazing, the activities and entertainment across the country were well-organised with easy transportation to move from one location - be it a stadium or an event - to another. There was excitement everywhere and in every corner - for the crowd and for the organisers as well. And all that continued in a secure, pleasant and controlled manner."

According to Barwani, there was everything available for everyone visiting and spending time in Qatar.

"My wife, daughter and son along with my sister's family and children enjoyed the total atmosphere - from entertainments to hospitality; from the high-voltage match to the cheers and supports of the crowd from virtually every part of the world. In one line, I would say, this was a lifetime experience that my family and I would always treasure indeed," he said.



Programme for national leaders launched

Muscat - The Royal Academy of Management (RAM) launched a programme titled 'Public Policies and Strategic Planning' on Tuesday, aimed at preparing national leaders and executives in the field of drafting, implementing and drawing up strategic policies. It targets undersecretaries and general managers in the State's Administrative Apparatus.

Dr Ali Qasim al Lawati, Chairman of RAM, said that the programme seeks to contribute to establishing an innovative administrative apparatus that would be capable of devising smart future policies.

H E Sheikh Khalifa Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, said that the programme offers an opportunity to explore the experiences of top executives tasked with strategic planning and drafting general policies of relevance to Oman Vision 2040.

The programme has been initiated in conjunction with international institutions such as the Civil Service College, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore and the International Institute for Management Development in Switzerland.

The programme operates in two parallel tracks. The first one is dedicated to undersecretaries and it comprises eight units in the formulation of public and strategic policies. It will run until March 2023. The second track, which targets general managers, will run till May 2023.

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MUSCAT DAILY PRESENTS

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23-year-old cyclist kick-starts two-year trip from Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

On a mission to explore the Arab world and African continent on a bicycle, 23-year-old Indian blogger Arunima IP started a two-year trip from Oman on December 14.

Before flying to Muscat from Mumbai, India, Arunima cycled 2,500km from Kerala to Mumbai in ten days. Since her arrival in Oman, she has cycled around the country, creating vlogs of her escapades in the sultanate.

With over 126,000 followers on YouTube and 104,000 on Instagram, Arunima, who goes by the name Backpacker Arunima on social media, and has been travelling solo for many years.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, she said, "I have been travelling since childhood. Most of my trips now are solo. This is my passion and



since a few years my profession. I create content for social media platforms. My vlogs are on the places I visit and the daily stuff common people do."

Until two years back, the native of Palakkad hitch-hiked across India. She then decided to cycle rather than walk.

In Oman, she has pedalled her way to several places, including Quriyat, Bimmah Sinkhole, Amerat Heights, Sal Steps and Muttrah Souq. "I will be in Oman for ten days. Among the places on my itinerary are Barka and Sohar. After Oman, I am off to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. To some places, I need to send my cycle by flight or ferry."

Arunima claimed the reason

why she started this trip in Oman is because she's been in love with the country ever since she first saw videos of its natural beauty.

On her trips, she meets her followers and subscribers who give her food, shelter and mostly importantly travel tips for their city. In Oman, she came across many followers who were thrilled to receive her and provide her accommodation in Bausher.

Arunima informs that while she has never faced any dangerous situation, she has encountered very bad weather on innumerable occasions. "After Egypt, I will be visiting South Africa, which is also a dream destination. There I expect to get up close and personal with some wild animals. But I will be careful."

Her backpack has all the essentials, including a tent and a GoPro. She shoots her videos and edits these on her phone.

Pact signed to train youth in design field

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The National Employment Programme (NEP) on Tuesday signed a memorandum of cooperation (MoC) with Al Awalim Company (Bara'ah Academy) to develop skills of citizens in the field of design.

The MoC targets graduates majoring in disciplines such as architecture, interior design and graphic design. The academy offers specialised training courses for graduates in their respective specialisations.

The MoC was signed by Khalid Salim al Ghammari, head of Capacity Building at NEP, and Said Sultan al Shidhani, CEO of Al Bara'ah Academy.

The MoC aims to train and qualify Omani design graduates through courses such as industrial and commercial design, product design, analytical services for lighting and energy, furniture and jewellery design, among others.

According to Ghammari, the agreement is part of NEP's efforts to qualify Omani youth and train them for technological developments in different sectors to be ready for the labour market.

"The MoC will achieve several objectives, including develop the capabilities of participants and develop their ideas at all stages of designing to suit the Omani labour market. It aims also to facilitate guidance from experts and specialists and partnerships with local, regional and international bodies," Ghammari said.

NEP also recently signed an agreement with Mazoon Electricity Company and the Industrial Innovation Academy to implement an initiative titled 'Augmenting local content in the energy sector'.

The agreement seeks to enhance cooperation among the three parties to fulfil the requirement of local manpower in the energy sector and empower Omani small and medium enterprises operating in the sector.

30 projects approved for Bilarab Award

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Thirty projects have been approved in the first stage of the second edition of the Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design, which involves designing the Maritime History Museum in Sur.

A statement issued by the Office of Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design said, 'H H Sayyid Bilarab chaired a meeting of the main committee of the award on Tuesday and approved 30 projects to qualify for the first stage of the award.'

Next week, the 30 finalists will join a technical workshop with the aim of acquiring the necessary skills that can help them develop their projects in order to reach the second stage. 'This will be followed by ten best projects being selected to compete for the first place,' it stated.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has provided 14,154sqm of coastal land for the Maritime History Museum project.

1st millennium BC city found by joint MHT-Polish team in Dhahirah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), in cooperation with a Polish mission from the University of Warsaw, has discovered an ancient city dating back to the 1st millennium BC in Dhahirah.

A statement issued by MHT said, 'Excavations carried out at the Ain Bani Sa'ida archaeological site, now in the sixth season, resulted in finding remnants of an ancient city, which dates back to the 1st millennium BC of the Iron Age.'

Dr Peter Belinski, from the University of Warsaw, said, "We discovered a small ancient city, reflecting the social situation that occurred at that time. A decorated pottery bowl made by hand was also found at the site, which is one of the first whole ceramics found."

According to Belinski, besides



the bowl, other pottery vessels, ladders and cooking stoves were also found at the site. He added that when the villagers left the site, they probably took with them the small pottery vessels and left the larger ones that were used to store water and grain. Dozens of such vessels were found at the site.

However, the mission was unable to find out how the inhabitants of the village prepared food.

"But we do know how they stored their food."

Belinski added that the inhabitants fetched water every morning in large vessels for the entire village. "The inhabitants may have sent women to do this task and all the food was stored in rooms, which means that we can calculate the number of inhabitants by counting the number of rooms and places to make fires."

"It is likely that the big house belonged to the sheikh. We do

not know if he was considered a sheikh or had another name, but a leader or ruler lived there with his family, unlike others who lived in humble accommodation."

Ali bin Khamis al Sudairi, director of the Heritage and Tourism Department in Dhahirah, said that this site has a historical connection with other archaeological sites such as Bat, Salut and Dahwa in Saham.

"It is closely linked to these ancient archaeological sites," Sudairi said.

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Fresh Blossom

Hydrom invites proposals for first green hydrogen projects in sultanate

First projects to be awarded by Q1 2023 to meet 2030 production target

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Hydrogen Oman SPC (Hydrom), the fully owned subsidiary of Energy Development Oman (EDO), has released the Request for Proposals (RFP) to qualified applicants for the first round of its public auction process to award large-scale integrated green hydrogen projects to developers.

Oman aims to award the first land blocks in 2023 in order to meet its 2030 production target of at least 1 million tonnes of green hydrogen per annum.

The release of RFP constitutes a key milestone in the auction that started on November 6 with the release of the Request for Qualifications (RFQ). Qualified applicants will now have two months to prepare and submit their bids, which will then be evaluated by Hydrom with the goal of awarding the first project by Q1 2023.

Since the launch of the bid round, Hydrom has received positive feedback from the market on the steps Oman is taking to accelerate the development of its green hydrogen economy, a press release stated.

'This was reflected in more than 180 registrations, and more than 50 applicants granted ac-



cess to RFQ till date and the numbers keep on progressing forward.'

Green hydrogen constitutes a strategic opportunity for the country to ensure its energy security and diversify its economy while supporting the decarbonisation efforts of hard-to-abate sectors both in Oman and around the world.

Oman is blessed with abundant renewables resources, positioning it as one of the most attractive locations on earth to produce green hydrogen competitively and at large-scale.

Hydrom is regulated by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and has mandate to delineate government-owned land areas and structuring of associated

large-scale green hydrogen projects, managing the process for their allocation to developers, facilitating the development of common infrastructure and connected ecosystem industries and hubs, as well as promoting investment opportunities in this promising sector, and facilitating investment-related processes.



Sohar International targets green energy financing

Muscat- In line with its aspiration to bring the best of the world to Oman, Sohar International has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Fortescue Future Industries (FFI), a green energy company based in Australia with renewable energy projects across the world.

The MoU, while non-binding, reflects the shared focus by both parties to explore business opportunities locally, with Sohar International facilitating FFI's entrance into the Omani market by mutually identifying potential projects that meet FFI's investment criteria. In addition, Sohar International will arrange the required financing including equity, debt or syndication for such projects.

The MoU was signed recently at the Green Hydrogen Summit between Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer at Sohar International, and Julie Shuttleworth, Head of Global Growth at FFI in the presence of H E Saleem bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Abdulwahid al Murshidi, Chief Islamic Banking Officer at Sohar Interna-

tional.

Commenting on the initiative, Musalmi said, "Green hydrogen has seen increasing demand in recent years and has been recognised as a key investment area to meet the nation's energy transition goals. By joining hands with FFI, Sohar International seeks to give further impetus to transitioning Oman's energy sector, and continuing to support

Sohar International will arrange the required financing including equity, debt or syndication for such projects

Oman's Vision 2040 and Net-Zero 2050 commitment.

"The bank, through meaningful partnerships with international organisations, will continue to take the required efforts to aid in the scalable development and deployment of Oman's energy sector inclusive of green hydro-

gen value chain. Leveraging its excellent track record in the industry and years of market knowledge, the bank will remain at the forefront of change and act as a critical catalyst to drive development of Oman's green hydrogen market."

He added, "As a bank, we are on the right track to implement sustainability-related practices into the way we conduct our business.

We are delighted to partner with such a reputable international company and are certain that this collaboration will be instrumental in driving socio-economic progress in the country."

Moataz Kandil, FFI President for MENA region, said, "Oman has recognised FFI's global credentials as a leader in the green energy industry.

Yet partners like Sohar International are the enablers we need to make our projects a reality in the short time frames needed to drive real impact to countries seeking to respond to the issues of climate change to drive a better future for their people and the planet".

Inflation hits 2.06% in November

Muscat - The inflation rate of the Consumers Price Index (CPI) in the sultanate stood at 2.06% during November 2022, according to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicated a rise in the prices of main groups of CPI in November 2022 compared to November 2021, such as food and non-alcoholic beverages by 5.01%, restaurants and hotels by 4.02%, health by 3.82%, furniture, household equipment and routine household maintenance by 2.14%, miscellaneous goods and services by 1.65%, clothing and footwear by 1.48%, recreation and culture by 1.26%, housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels by 0.84%, transport by 0.55% and education by 0.05%. Meanwhile, inflation de-



clined in the communications group by 0.06%.

Prices also went up for oils and fats by 19.98%, meats by 9.24%, milk, cheese and eggs by 7.24%, fruits by 5.75%, non-alcoholic beverages by 5.23%, bread and cereals by 4.59%, other foodstuff by 2.71% and sugar, jam, honey and sweets by 2.41%.

Prices dropped for vegetables

by 3.48% and fish and seafood by 3.38%.

As far as governorates are concerned, Buraimi recorded the highest inflation rate of 3.38%, followed by Dakhiliyah (2.75%), Dhahirah (2.21%), Muscat (2.02%), North Batinah and South Batinah (1.95%), North Sharqiyah and South Sharqiyah (1.72%) and Dhofar (1.68%).

ONA

Muscat to host 34th session of Arab insurance conference on February 18

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Oman Insurance Association, hosted the meeting for the General Arab Insurance Federation (GAIF) Council on Tuesday to discuss the preparations for hosting the 34th Session of the General Arab Insurance Federation's Conference that will take place in Muscat from February 18 to February 21, 2024.

It is considered to be an important event for those interested in the insurance industry globally and in the Arab World. During the meeting Chakib Abuzaid, Secretary-General of the Federation, and the hosting committee of the conference discussed the necessary arrangements for the confer-



ence such as forming a preparatory committee which will include Abuzaid, Ahmed Ali al Ma'mari, Vice-president of the Insurance Sector in CMA, Nassir Salim Al Busaidi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association, Romel Tabaja, Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association, Omar

Ahmed al Sheikh and Hasan al Lawati, members of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association.

'The hosting of the conference reflects confidence of the Arab and global insurance markets in the Omani insurance sector, Oman Insurance Association stated. 'It also adds a tremendous economic value for

the sector since it will be the focus of attention of the Arab insurance companies. In addition, this conference will be the perfect opportunity to highlight the potentials of the insurance sector in terms of legislations and digitalisation, which is witnessing a noticeable advancement.'

The public conferences, held by GAIF, are extremely important since they bring together more than 1,500 Arab participants and discuss topics related to insurance and reinsurance. They also offer an opportunity for partners in the field to build communication channels to utilise the available business opportunities in the Arab insurance and reinsurance markets.

World Bank slashes China growth forecasts on COVID woes, property crisis

Beijing, China - The World Bank on Tuesday slashed its China growth forecast for the year as the pandemic and weaknesses in the property sector hit the world's second largest economy.

In a statement, the institution slashed its forecast to 2.7 percent from 4.3 percent predicted in June. It also revised its forecast for next year from 8.1 percent down to 4.3 percent.

Both figures are well below Beijing's GDP growth target of around 5.5 percent for the year, a figure many analysts believe is now unattainable.

"Economic activity in China continues to track the ups and downs of the pandemic -- outbreaks and growth slowdowns have been followed by uneven recoveries," the World Bank said.

"Real GDP growth is pro-

jected to reach 2.7 percent this year, before recovering to 4.3 percent in 2023, amid a reopening of the economy."

After years of sudden lockdowns, mass testing, long quarantines and travel restrictions, China this month abruptly abandoned its zero-Covid policy.

But disruption to businesses has continued as cases surge and some restrictions remain in place.

Health authorities have admitted that official figures no longer capture the full picture of domestic infections now that mass testing requirements have been dropped.

"Continued adaptation of China's COVID-19 policy will be crucial, both to mitigate public health risks and to minimise further economic disruption," Mara Warwick, World Bank Country



Director for China, Mongolia and Korea, said.

Last week the IMF warned it too would likely downgrade its projections for China again, blaming a predicted continued

rise in cases.

The fund cut its growth projection for China in October to 3.2 percent this year -- the lowest in decades -- while expecting growth to rise to 4.4 percent

next year.

But "very likely, we will be downgrading our growth projections for China, both for 2022 and for 2023", IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva told AFP.

Other stresses

Experts fear China is ill-equipped to manage the exit wave of infections as it presses ahead with reopening, with millions of vulnerable elderly people still not fully vaccinated.

"Accelerated efforts on public health preparedness, including efforts to increase vaccinations especially among high-risk groups, could enable a safer and less disruptive reopening," Warwick said.

The economy is under pressure on other fronts, too.

"Persistent stress" in the real estate sector -- which accounts for about a quarter of annual GDP -- could have wider macro-economic and financial effects, the World Bank noted.

And it added that youth unemployment, the risks from extreme weather caused by

climate change and the wider global slowdown also threatened growth.

The world economy is being battered by surging interest rates aimed at fighting runaway inflation that has been triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine as well as global supply chain snarls.

Beijing has sought to mitigate low growth with a series of easing measures to provide support, slashing key interest rates and pumping cash into the banking system.

"Directing fiscal resources towards social spending and green investment would not only support short-term demand but also contribute to more inclusive and sustainable growth in the medium term," said the World Bank's Lead Economist for China Elitza Mileva.

AFP



Yen surges on Bank of Japan policy move

London, United Kingdom - The yen soared to a four-month high against the dollar Tuesday after a surprise tweak to monetary policy of the Bank of Japan, which has decided against hiking interest rates to tame decades-high inflation.

Rallying also against the euro, the yen's jump weighed heavily on share prices of Japanese exporters.

"The shift in (Bank of Japan) policy was slight," noted Susannah Streeter, senior investment and markets analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown.

"The decision is being read as a sign of testing the water, for a potential withdrawal of the stimulus which has been pumped into the economy."

The Bank of Japan (BoJ) adjusted its parameters for controlling bond yields, in a shift away from its long-running dovish stance of keeping rates ultra-low to boost the struggling economy.

Inflation in Japan has risen sharply this year, with the consumer price index in October at 3.6 percent, the highest in four decades, though bank boss Haruhiko Kuroda and other officials have said that would be temporary, citing a lack of strong demand and wage rises.

The BoJ move sent the yen to 132.30 per dollar, its strongest level since August.

Japan's unit has been hobbled this year by its central bank's determination to stick to its loose monetary policy - hitting a 32-year low of around 150 to the dollar in October -- even as the Fed ramped up borrowing costs.

Tuesday's policy move "was bound to happen with inflation rising in Japan, it's just happened sooner than many thought", said Amir Anvarzadeh of Asymmetric Advisors.

"It could spark money flowing back into Japan."

Elsewhere, stock markets fell following a spike in Covid infections in China as officials roll back many of the strict containment measures that have been in place for almost three years.

The World Bank on Tuesday slashed its China growth forecast for the year as the pandemic and weaknesses in the property sector hit the world's second largest economy.

A so-called Santa rally appears to be eluding investors, with the mood

Tuesday's policy move was bound to happen with inflation rising in Japan, it's just happened sooner than many thought

AMIR ANVARZADEH

dampened by last week's warnings from the Federal Reserve and European Central Bank that they would likely push interest rates higher than expected next year.

The remarks dealt a blow to a short rally across equities that had been fuelled by data showing inflation coming down.

"Those who were in the camp of a year-end rally are now second-guessing their investment thesis," said JC O'Hara of MKM Partners.

"The markets may have placed a little too much faith in Santa Claus and the rally he typically brings."

Adding to the selling pressure were comments from former New York Fed chief William Dudley, who told Bloomberg Television that any sign of optimism in markets could make monetary policymakers tighten even more.

AFP

Endless cycle of destruction and repair for Ukraine's energy workers

Kramatorsk, Ukraine - It has become a daily struggle for Ukrainian technicians: mending pipes damaged by Russian airstrikes in a desperate bid to keep the energy grid working in freezing temperatures, even as attacks continue.

"We repair. And if they destroy, we will repair it again. That's the job," Oleksandr, who declined to give his full name, told AFP while completing a welding task for a municipal company in the eastern industrial city of Kramatorsk.

His firm is responsible for heating and electricity in half the buildings in the city, which had a pre-war population of more than 150,000.

To keep up with the escalating workload, it now employs 40 technicians -- double the number it needed before Russia invaded in February.

A few metres from where Oleksandr worked, a yellow excavator dug a trench for pipes.

The company used to have only one such machine and has been forced to rent a second from a private company.

Even with the extra resources, it can seem impossible to keep up with urgent tasks.

In a nearby trench marked off by tape, two large pipes needed for heating dozens of buildings



A technician mans an excavator as they repair heating pipes damaged during Russian shelling in the city of Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine, on December 19 (AFP)

were waiting to be covered.

They were hastily repaired after sustaining damage in late September, but the company hasn't yet found time to finish the job.

"In normal times, this would have been done a long time ago. But we are short of time and equipment," the company's deputy director, Rinat Milushov, told AFP.

Working 'day and night'

Kramatorsk is an administrative capital in the Donetsk region, which is partially controlled by pro-Russian forces and has witnessed fierce fighting since February.

The situation has improved after several settlements were retaken in a Ukrainian counteroffensive this autumn, but battles are still ongoing nearby, especially in the key town of Bakhmut, some 50 kilometres (30 miles) to the southeast.

Like all of Ukraine, Kramatorsk suffers from frequent power cuts following Russian strikes that have repeatedly left millions in the dark and without heat and running water.

The temperature in Kramatorsk is now just below zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit), but later in the winter it can drop to a bone-chilling -15C or even -20C degrees.

"The workers work day and

night to guarantee heating for the population, but each time the electricity is cut, they have to start over," Milushov said, pointing out that systems need to be restarted "manually".

He highlighted the stress placed on workers, who are paid the equivalent of around 150 and 200 euros a month -- less than the average salary in Ukraine -- as well as the potential long-term damage to the energy network.

"I have been working for 20 years. I've seen complicated situations, but what we are currently experiencing is without comparison," Milushov said.

"We have to get used to this new rhythm," he added.

'Impossible' to prepare

Adapting to harsh wartime conditions has become the credo of many Ukrainians, who are bracing for a long winter.

"We can get used to all the disasters, manage water or electricity cuts... But not the bombings," said Yulia, who runs a grocery store left in darkness because of a power cut.

"If the situation does not worsen, we will get through this winter," said Anna Prokopenko, a woman in her seventies.

Isabella and Vasily Maslivets, a retired couple headed out for a stroll in the sun, said they planned to be similarly resilient.

"The last time we had no heating, it was 12 degrees inside the house. It was not a total disaster, we just put on more coats," Isabella said.

"We are receiving humanitarian aid, our pensions have been paid, the shops are open, we have enough food. We have enough to cope," Vasily added.

But although the deputy mayor of Kramatorsk, Andrei Bessonny, praised the "extraordinary work" of the technicians and other officials, he remains worried. "The biggest problem ahead is the cold and the risk of frozen pipes," he said.

AFP

IMF approves programme to help Ukraine secure donor funding

Washington, United States - The IMF said Monday it had approved an economic monitoring programme for Ukraine which could help Kyiv secure funding from donors, with the war-torn country needing more than \$40 billion this year.

The monitoring program "is designed to help Ukraine maintain stability and catalyze donor financing amid very large balance of payment needs and exceptionally high risks," following the Russian invasion, the International Monetary Fund said in a statement. Ukrainian authorities are committed to economic and

financial reforms, concerning in particular tax collection, the domestic debt market, transparency and the independence of the central bank, the IMF said.

They have four months to prove their progress as per the Program Monitoring with Board involvement (PMB) scheme, the statement said. The framework of measures monitored by the IMF aims to pave the way for financing, which can "come from many sources," said Gavin Gray, the IMF's head of mission for Ukraine.

Ukraine needed between \$40 billion and \$57 billion to cover its budgetary and operating needs



for 2023, Gray said.

Following the IMF's recommendations would "give the donors the confidence to provide resources," he said.

Russia's invasion "continues to have a devastating social and economic impact on Ukraine," with mounting civilian casualties and a third of the population dis-

placed, IMF First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said in a statement.

"Notwithstanding all these strains, the authorities have largely managed to maintain macroeconomic and financial stability, and they are committed to continue adapting policies to fast-changing circumstances, including in the case of a severe downside scenario," Gopinath said. "Large and predictable external financial support will be critical for the success of the authorities' strategy, and front-loaded disbursements would help address strains in early 2023,"

she said.

If Ukraine successfully follows the monitoring program, it "should help pave the way toward a possible full-fledged IMF-supported program," she said.

Gray stressed it was "too premature" to say how big the IMF program could be.

The IMF has provided \$2.7 billion in emergency aid to Kyiv since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February.

The European Commission has just proposed aid of 18 billion euros (\$19 billion) in 2023 in the form of loans.

AFP

Amazon strikes deal with EU to close anti-trust probes

Brussels, Belgium - Online retailer Amazon has reached an agreement with the European Commission to close two inquiries into anti-competitive tactics, notably using third-party seller data to improve its own sales.

EU vice-president Margrethe Vestager announced Amazon's commitments and hailed them as a victory for smaller retailers selling products on Amazon's online marketplace.

Amazon, and its software, will be forbidden from analysing non-public third-party seller data, and will treat all sellers equally when deciding which offer to put in the best screen location.

Sellers will also be allowed to



File photo of EU President Ursula von der Leyen (R) with EU Vice-President Margrethe Vestager taken on Dec 14 (AFP)

choose their own delivery firm, rather than being obliged to use the service chosen by Amazon's "Prime" premium service.

"And this means that by next

summer. Amazon will have to end any preferential treatment towards its own retail and logistics operations in Europe," Vestager told reporters.

"So today's decision sets the rules that Amazon will need to play by in the future, instead of Amazon determining these rules for all players on his platform," she said. "With these new rules competing independent retailers, carriers and European customers, well, they will have more opportunity and more choice."

An Amazon spokesperson said the firm, which operates the world's biggest online store, was pleased to have responded to the European Commission's concerns. "While we continue to disagree with several of the preliminary conclusions the European Commission made, we have engaged constructively to

ensure that we can continue to serve customers across Europe and support the 225,000 European small and medium-sized businesses selling through our stores," the spokesperson said.

Vestager's investigators were concerned that Amazon was tracking sales by private retailers using its platform to identify lucrative markets and target its own offers. They also accused Amazon of favoritism is deciding which offers appear in the "Buy Box", the most prominent panel on a product's web page with a one-click buying option that accounts for the vast majority of sales.

AFP

UK fines TSB Bank nearly £50 million for IT fail

London, United Kingdom - British regulators on Tuesday said they had fined TSB Bank £48.7 million (\$59 million) over an IT upgrade that left customers unable to access services.

The fine adds to £32.7 million paid by the British lender to compensate customers for fallout from its migration to a new system in 2018, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) said in a statement.

A "significant proportion" of the bank's 5.2 million customers



were affected by the switchover that took months to resolve, it added.

"The failings in this case were

widespread and serious which had a real impact on the day-to-day lives of a significant proportion of TSB's customers,

including those who were vulnerable," said Mark Steward, FCA executive director of enforcement and market over-

sight.

"The firm failed to plan for the IT migration properly, the governance of the project was insufficiently robust and the firm failed to take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively."

The fine was handed down in conjunction with another British watchdog, the Prudential Regulation Authority.

Former TSB Bank chief executive Paul Pester stepped down in 2018 following the IT debacle.

AFP

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Omani runners conquer Doi Inthanon in Thailand

Five Omani ultra-trail runners - Hamed al Harthi, Hamdan al Khatri, Mohammed al Shizawi, Issa al Abri and Dr Yaqoob al Nadabi - completed the challenging Thailand by UTMB set within the Doi Inthanon National Park near to Chiang Mai in the country's north.

Fresh from a successful race at the Himam Trail Run Race, all five travelled to Thailand to gain more experience and acquire the Running Stones credits needed to qualify for the big one: UTMB Chamonix 2023, to be held at the end of August next year.

According to a press release, Hamdan al Khatri finished second in the Al Hajar Range Challenge 100km race in Birkat al Mouz, just seven minutes behind legendary nine-time Marathon des Sables champion Rachid el Morabity of Morocco. He continued his good form by finishing the Summit 160km race in 31 hours, 36 minutes and 51 seconds, finishing 43rd out of 287 finishers.

"I really enjoyed the race. At times it was difficult, but I trained well, and the Himam Trail Run was great preparation. I feel I am running really well in all conditions and will look to continue this form as we get close to UTMB Chamonix 2023 in August and September," Hamdan said, adding, "it really was amaz-



ing to see the landscape and turning the corner to see the mountain tops and rice fields gave all of us, I think, the inspiration to keep going."

As one of Oman's most experienced ultra-trail runners, Hamed al Harthi has completed

races all around the world. This time out he also took on the summit 160km race, completing the course in 45 hours, 56 minutes and 23 seconds. At 64 years old he was one of the oldest competitors in this year's race and finished 2nd in the 60-64

age category. Fellow Omani Mohammed al Shizawi finished 155th overall in the Summit 160km race, crossing the line after 42 hours, 32 minutes and 25 seconds.

Speaking after the race, Hamed said, "Switching from the



dry heat of Oman to the humidity of Thailand takes time to acclimatise to and adds a new challenge to the race. I am pleased with my performance to have completed the course. Aside from the conditions, the climb to over 2000 metres is difficult but

the views from the top are worthwhile. I am thankful to the local people for their kindness in welcoming all of the runners to their region; it really shows that we are all one community."

Dr Yaqoob completed the 100km Al Hajar Range Challenge

at the Himam Trail Run Race in 27th place - crossing the line with a time of 26 hours, 23 minutes and 41 seconds. Issa raced The Adventure 55km route in Birkat Al Mouz, finishing 7th overall in a time of seven hours, 16 minutes and 49 seconds.



Omantel ropes in Oman Air to distribute Tourist SIM cards

Omantel has inked an agreement with Oman Air to provide passengers flying to the Sultanate of Oman with Tourist SIM Cards on board their flight.

The one-year partnership emerged from a shared vision between the two companies to enrich the digital experience for travellers through hassle-free and efficient solutions to attract tourists to Oman and allow them to experience the effective process of subscribing through

the Omantel application, benefiting from the unique services the widest 5G network in town offers.

Aladdin Baitfadhil, Chief Commercial Officer at Omantel, said, "We are thrilled about our partnership with Oman Air, and we are all set to provide passengers flying to Oman with seamless and hassle-free connectivity even before landing, while we increase our customer base."

Abdul Rahman Nasser, Chief Commercial Officer at Oman Air,

said, "We are delighted to once again join hands with Omantel, and we will all benefit from the spillover effect of this great buzz happening around the region. I am confident that our year-long partnership will be a success, and it will bring convenience to our passengers and save them time and effort upon arrival."

Omantel has another partnership with Oman Air in which customers can convert their Makasib points to Sindbad miles.

GFT signs agreement with Visa for physical, virtual cards

Global Financial Technology LLC, a licensed payment service provider and owner of the OM Pay mobile application, has recently signed an agreement with the world leader in digital payments, Visa, to issue Visa branded physical and virtual cards.

OM Pay, the soon to be launched key product of GFT, is a PCI DSS certified product. It offers a digital wallet and a payment gateway for the benefits of consumers and businesses. With this agreement, GFT will be able to benefit from Visa's payments expertise, global reach, and secure and seamless digital payments technology.

Abdulaziz al Rawahi, CEO, GFT, comments, "It is an honour for us to collaborate with Visa, the world leaders in digital payments. This collaboration presents us with an opportunity to learn and benefit from Visa's expertise, mentorship, and global network."

"With Visa's support, we can craft more innovative solutions and bring more value to our users. Our aim is to support



Oman in its journey towards becoming a digital economy and partnering with key players like Visa is the key to making this aim a reality."

Manish Gautam, Visa's Country Head for Oman, said, "We are delighted to partner with GFT to support the growth of digital payments and drive financial inclusion in Oman. We are particularly keen to provide end-to-end, innovative technology solutions to our partners such as GFT, enabling them to join us in our mission to give more consumers and businesses

in Oman access to the digital economy by bringing them the latest in digital payment solutions."

Global Financial Technology LLC is a payment service provider (PSP), based in Muscat, which provides fintech services through its wallet and payment gateway. It was founded in 2022 by Abdulaziz al Rawahi and Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel). The company is the owner of OM Pay (stands for Oman Pay) brand, Oman's first super app that offers mobile payment solutions in

the form of a digital wallet to consumers and enables merchants to receive payments through its NFC, QR code, point of sale, bank transfer and online payment gateway offerings. Having graduated from CBO Sandbox Live Testing, OM Pay application will be available on Android and Apple Store.

Visa Inc is the world's leader in digital payments. Our mission is to connect the world through the most innovative, reliable and secure payment network - enabling individuals, businesses and economies to thrive. Our advanced global processing network, VisaNet, provides secure and reliable payments around the world, and is capable of handling more than 65,000 transaction messages a second.

The company's relentless focus on innovation is a catalyst for the rapid growth of digital commerce on any device for everyone, everywhere. As the world moves from analog to digital, Visa is applying our brand, products, people, network and scale to reshape the future of commerce.

Al Mouj Muscat breaks ground at Golf Beach Residences

A ground-breaking ceremony has taken place at Al Mouj Muscat marking the start of construction at Golf Beach Residences. This prestigious collection of homes will add to the impressive portfolio of properties at the lifestyle destination which along with a commitment to spend the majority of the US\$3.5bn development costs locally, continues to drive economic growth throughout Oman.

Al Mouj Muscat is a thriving master-planned community and a joint venture between Omran, Tanmia and Majid Al Futtaim, and Golf Beach Residences is the latest contribution to this uniquely successful community.

Since it was established in 2006, Al Mouj Muscat has maintained its strategic aim of maximising opportunities for



local enterprise through the development of its world-class homes, lifestyle and leisure amenities. By awarding the construction contract for Golf Beach Residences to an Omani-based company, it will once again contribute to in-country

spend and ongoing positive economic impact, as Al Mouj Muscat's operations and assets have already created over 2,200 indirect jobs.

Once complete, Golf Beach Residences will add 51 exceptional family homes, set within

the stylish Shatti district, and with easy access to the beach and multi-award-winning Al Mouj Golf. Their launch has gained international recognition, winning the Real Estate Asia award in July this year, with 90 per cent of the first phase of these contemporary five and six-bedroom villas achieving sales within four weeks of launch.

Al Mouj Muscat CEO Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani said, "It is with great pride that we have broken ground on Golf Beach Residences, where location and uncompromising design principles will create one of the most desirable addresses in Oman."

"The success of these homes, both in terms of sales and international recognition, demonstrates that Al Mouj Muscat understands and responds to buyer aspirations and the mar-

ket. I am also delighted that we have appointed an excellent Omani contractor with the skills and experience in place to begin construction in record time.

"These superb homes have also elevated our profile on the international stage, further stimulating interest and investment opportunities within our prestigious community."

"Al Mouj is where people aspire to as this is the ideal destination to live, work and play. Our philosophy of placemaking has ensured that our residents enjoy a true sense of belonging."

Al Mouj Muscat is Oman's first Integrated Tourism Complex, a lifestyle community that is home to 8,000 people from 85 countries and attracts over 3.9mn visitors to its boulevard style, world-class retail, dining and leisure experiences.

Christmas festivities begin at Hormuz Grand Muscat

Hormuz Grand Muscat is offering endless fun and a variety of culinary offers, delightful entertainment and exciting activities in a luxurious setting this festive season.

'Indulge in festively themed surroundings, with our beautiful Christmas tree and gingerbread house scene in the lobby, whilst enjoying our renowned attentive service and culinary delights. We are all about creating memorable festive experiences and elevating guests' enjoyment to new heights,' it said.

Christmas celebrations officially began at Hormuz Grand Muscat's traditional gingerbread house with decoration competition and the lighting of a Christmas tree on December 6.

'For an early start to the fes-



tivities, join us at the Festive Friday brunch with a special selection of treats, including traditional turkey with trimmings, beef Wellington, Yorkshire pudding and much more on December 23 and Christmas Day brunch offers an exceptional spread of traditional treats, live carving stations, grills and a decadent dessert station, starting from 1pm to 5pm on December 25', it announced.

Bentley extends wheelbase for Bentayga range of SUVs

Bentley Muscat launched the all-new Bentayga Extended Wheelbase at a special event held at Al Mouj Muscat's Zunairah Villas, a press release said.

Bentley confirmed Type Approval and a set of performance figures that delivers the renowned effortless luxury of a Bentayga, without compromise.

Bentayga Extended Wheelbase (EWB) has increased the Bentley range to five models, the result of a nine-figure investment to create the best rear cabin experience since the Mulsanne. It builds on the strengths of the Bentayga, a car that defined the luxury SUV sector. The EWB accounts for approximately 40 per cent of total Bentayga Global orders and further cements the model as Bentley's best-selling.

Powered by Bentley's proven 4.0-litre 32-valve dual twin-scroll turbocharged V8 petrol engine, the Bentayga EWB V8 offers supercar performance, developing 542bhp (550PS) and 770Nm of torque, resulting in a top speed of 290km per hour and 0-100km per hour in 4.6 seconds.

To complement this performance with an unrivalled cabin, the extension of the wheelbase of the Bentayga by 180mm includes changes to the under-floor, side panels and roof. The increased length is all in the rear door, creating an exceptionally luxurious rear cabin that is larger



than any other luxury competitor. This allows an emphasis on wellness, with the introduction of the world's first auto climate and advanced postural adjustment rear seat.

Bentley Extended Wheelbase is available with three seating configurations, including a standard, all-new 4 + 1 layout with occasional middle seat, alongside four and five-seat versions. Luxurious, 16-way adjustment, heating, ventilation and five massage programmes help minimise fatigue throughout a journey.

Optional Airline Seat Specification offers maximum relaxation in the rear, with backrests that recline to 40 degrees and make it easier to sleep. Other key features include Seat Auto Climate, Postural Adjustment, additional cushion and backrest bolster adjustment, plus heated rear door and centre armrests.

A spokesperson for Bentley Motors, said, "The new Bentayga Extended Wheelbase is the next chapter in the Bentayga story which, since the original luxury SUV came to market in 2015, has

transformed the sector and resulted in record sales. At Bentley, we collaborated with our customers to stretch the class-leading SUV's breadth of ability even further, leading to a rear-cabin experience comparable to the legendary Mulsanne.

"We combined the highest levels of innovation, craftsmanship and sustainability. Each car produced contains leading technology and is an artisanal piece of art, handcrafted using only the finest of materials, in true Bentley fashion."

Knowledge Oman honours member

As part of encouraging and motivating members to contribute to the society's development, Knowledge Oman, the leading knowledge-sharing platform in the sultanate, has awarded its long-time serving distinguished team member, Tomy Bosco, with the 'Lifetime Achievement Award', recognising his notable achievements over the past 14 consecutive years.

The award was presented by Knowledge Oman president Balqees al Hassani, in the presence of the newly appointed chairperson Dr Yasmeeen al Bulushi, at a team gathering event.

"Tomy Bosco has been part of Knowledge Oman since the inception back in 2008. His quality contribution, professional collaboration with the multinational volunteer team, and constant support and leadership for the technical development of the platform is noteworthy. We are honoured to award Tomy with the lifetime achievement award, being the oldest and most longest quality serving member in Knowledge Oman," said Balqees.

Tomy Bosco said upon receiving the award, "I am thrilled and honoured to be recognised for the community work I do, and for the country I hold close and dear to my heart. I will continue serving Knowledge Oman to my best ability and I thank all who put trust and belief in me."

Tomy Bosco joined Knowledge Oman in 2008 as a mem-



ber and has played an important role in the development of the technology of the platform since inception. Due to his contribution, Tomy was promoted as a moderator overseeing the discussion platforms and progressed to heading the overall technology that drives the platform's engagement with the society today.

Tomy is a graduate of bachelors with honors in computer engineering from Glasgow Caledonian University, Master of Business Administration from University of Wales and Exercising Leadership, Organizational Leadership from Havard University. Currently, Tomy leads Nortal's strategy and digital transformation powerhouse operations in Oman as its Partner, Business Area Director.

Knowledge Oman empowers local and expat passionate individuals living in the country by facilitating, creating and leading knowledge transfer initiatives. Whilst committed to quality output and the direct benefits for participants, the platform is equally focused on the bigger picture.

Knowledge Oman is an award-winning social enterprise focused on the transfer of 'sustainable knowledge' to improve national performance. Knowledge Oman has annually been recognising team contributions and encourages talents in the country who are regarded as role models. Diverse team has been attracted and created from the community in order to work and lead various initiatives that impact the society.

Indian School Muladha celebrates 32nd annual day

The 32nd annual day celebration was held in sheer resplendence and decor at Indian School Muladha on December 15, said a press communique.

The chief guest of the function was Indian Ambassador H E Amit Narang, while H E Ammar Salim Mohammed al Mardhuf al Saadi, a Shura member representing the wilayat of Musannah, graced the occasion as the special guest.

Guest of honour Dr Sivakumar Manickam, chairman of the Board of Directors-Indian Schools in Oman; Sirajudeen Nhelat and Aswini Sawrekar, directors in-charge of Indian School Muladha; Jayapal Dethre, Second Secretary-Political & Education from the Indian Embassy; Musthafa Madathodiyil, president of the school management committee (SMC) were also present to grace the occasion.



The event commenced with a performance by the school choir comprising 270 students. The chief guest and the other dignitaries on the dais jointly lit the lamp. The digital presentation of the annual report by the principal gave a kaleidoscopic view of the various spheres of activities performed by the students during

the academic year.

In the prize distribution ceremony that followed, the members of the staff who completed 25 years, 20 years and 10 years of service in the institution were felicitated.

The toppers in AISCSE and AISSE were honoured with a token of appreciation.

Myriad Muscat celebrates 1st anniversary

The Myriad Muscat - first All Ladies Living Community & Retail Complex - is celebrating its first anniversary, a press release said.

The Myriad Muscat endeavours to incorporate comfort and safety in a modern living environment dedicated exclusively to women. It is in the heart of Al Khoud, near SQU, and is well connected to the Muscat Expressway.

The property sprawls over 14,000sqm, offering accommodations to over 2,700 women. Residents have the freedom of choice between various single and multi-occupancy room types to best suit their needs.

"The Myriad Muscat is one of its kind, designed to be a launchpad for young women in Oman. Our mission is to provide a safe and fulfilling community exclusively for women and to be pioneers in student and working women's housing.

"We have created this beautiful project based on in-depth research and analysis of today's local and global expectations of women," said Ilavarasi Raja Bhatia, GM, The Myriad Muscat.



The accommodations available at the property are inclusive of WiFi and utilities, and the residents also benefit from on-site laundry facilities.

"Along with a unique accommodation, we ensure a convenient day-to-day experience with

two floors of retail space and recreational facilities, including a mix of restaurants, cafés, shops, gaming, a supermarket, study and workspaces, health and beauty services, and much more," she added.

"It also houses a state-of-the-art gym -LYFT, the largest gymnasium in Oman for women."

The mall area will be accessible to residents and non-residents. Residents can use

separate entrances from guests visiting the mall, and dedicated reception areas ensure secure access. There are ample parking spaces available for both residents and visitors. The Myriad Muscat is comprised of three buildings, including two basement floors, two retail floors, and six residential floors.

A new lifestyle awaits women at The Myriad Muscat, the group said.

MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup of 2022 comes to end

The MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup of 2022 came to an end on Saturday with an award ceremony held at the Rozna Boulevard for the winning members and teams.

In the presence of chief guest Brigadier Dr Mohammed al Rawas, Director of Traffic-ROP; chairman Salim al Maskiri and vice chairman Brigadier Jamal al Taie; the award ceremony was held in the premises of Oman Automobile Association (OAA) after the last race.

The association presented the awards to the winners who came out on top from amongst a total of 137 drivers from 16 different countries participating in this intense five-day karting tournament. OAA managing director Suleiman al Rawahi said, "When we took the responsibility to organise this event, our aim was to bring everybody together to develop karting in the region and we can see in this series that the level of competition is very high.



"There are drivers who started off their first karting competition here and have gone onto win and earn high rankings at international events. And this is what we

set out to do and the reason behind this MENA championship."

When asked on how he felt about his win, champion of the Micro Max category, nine year old Faris Haroun said, "I feel so good. I feel like I want to explode. We should appreciate how much

OAA spent time on MENA to make this come true because this is sincerely one of the best days of my life."

Rotax World Karting Champion, Christopher Feghali (13), winner of the Junior Max Category, said, "It's crazy to think that

THE WINNERS			
Micro Max Category Champion - Faris Haroun (UAE) Runner-up - Joe Mourad (Lebanon) 3rd Place - Adam Awan (Oman)	Junior Max Category Champion - Christopher Feghali (Lebanon) Runner-up - Georges Nassar (Lebanon) 3rd place - Luca Houghton (Bahrain)	DD2 Category Champion - Abdullah al Rawahi (Oman) Runner-up - Kayne Cherian (UAE) 3rd place - Omar al Dereyenne (KSA)	RD1 Elite Sprint Category Champion - Tarik Almou Runner-up - Wadee al Kharusi 3rd place - Faesal al Yafei
Mini Max Category Champion - Maxim Bobreshov (UAE) Runner-up - Darek Rivera (UAE) 3rd place - Omar Sindi (KSA)	Max Category Champion - Theo Kekati (UAE) Runner-up - Lewis Smith (Bahrain) 3rd place - Zack Scoular (UAE)	DD2 Master Category Champion - Nadir Kabbage (Morocco) Runner-up - Mohammed al Balushi (Oman) 3rd place - Patrick Sarraih (Lebanon)	RD1 Elite Endurance Category Champion - Team 2 Lebanon (Matthias Najjem and Christopher Najjem) Runner-up - Team 2 Oman (Faisal al Raisi and Wadee al Kharusi)

we won the Grand Final almost three weeks ago and now we've won the Junior Max of the MENA cup, so it's a really nice feeling."

Rally driver Abdullah al Rawahi, competed in the tournament and won first place in the

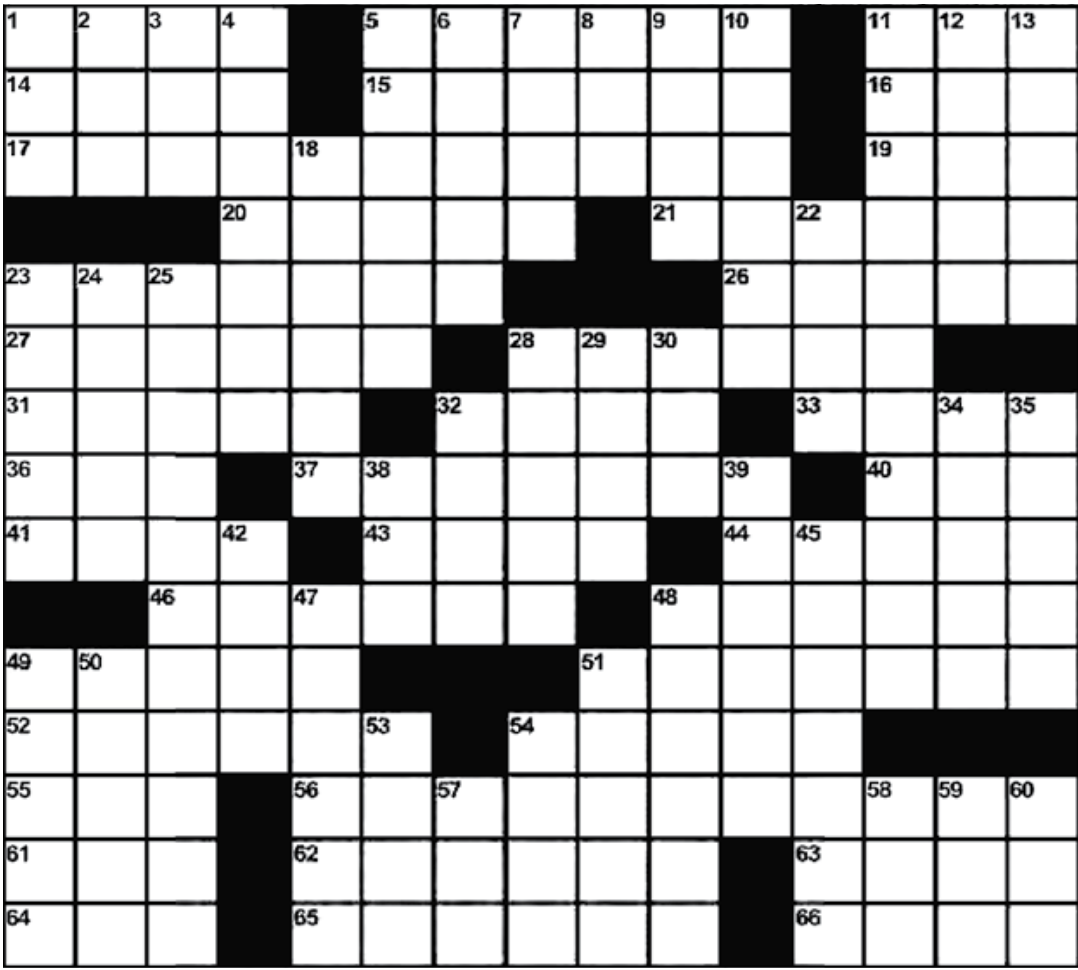
DD2 category.

He said, "I started off with a lead in the first few laps then I got side tracked and didn't feel I was up to pace but kept hanging on and waiting for a miracle. I saw the opening gap in the second-last lap due to the collision be-

tween the other two drivers, and so I took that opportunity and managed to take the win."

Overall, the champions of the MENA Karting series 2022 was team Lebanon which accepted their trophy with joy as they waved their country flag.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Omani, e.g.
 - 5) Emulate a sponge
 - 11) Corn holder
 - 14) Actor LaBeouf
 - 15) Evening party
 - 16) Big-eyed bird
 - 17) Motley assortments
 - 19) Paternity prover
 - 20) Academy newcomer
 - 21) He may hold all the cards
 - 23) Like some Riesling wines
 - 26) Leave out, in speech
 - 27) Figures of speech
 - 28) "I, Robot" author
 - 31) Carnival attractions
 - 32) Jewish month
 - 33) Blab
 - 36) 21-Across may give you one
 - 37) Beginning walker
 - 40) Guanabara Bay city, briefly
 - 41) Someone may 66-Across for it
 - 43) Tree trunk
 - 44) Coral isle
- 46) Not in any way
 - 48) Arduous, as a battle
 - 49) Member of the low-est
 - Hindu caste
 - 51) Vial relatives
 - 52) Sorrowful sound
 - 54) Colorado resort
 - 55) Wayside stop
 - 56) They may not be re-lated by blood
 - 61) Resinous substance
 - 62) Bank, often
 - 63) Continental cash
 - 64) Director Spike
 - 65) Fruit-ripening gas
 - 66) Peruse a book

DOWN

 - 1) Fire castoff
 - 2) Fraternity letter
 - 3) Lend a hand
 - 4) Scottish instrument
 - 5) Old Turkish coins
 - 6) Type of prize
 - 7) One of four in a square
 - 8) Alternative to "net"
 - 9) Cattail, e.g.
 - 10) Suit, old-style
 - 11) Fish-derived supple-ment
- 12) Possessed entirely
 - 13) Blast a trumpet
 - 18) Firstborn
 - 22) Words after "Thanks"
 - 23) Kind of hanger
 - 24) Susan Lucci's Emmy-winning role
 - 25) Some theatrical cho-reography
 - 28) Confuse
 - 29) Post-Christmas event
 - 30) Ill temper
 - 32) Hullabaloo
 - 34) City in northern France
 - 35) More than rests
 - 38) _-Wan Kenobi
 - 39) One way to descend a mountain
 - 42) Aaron Spelling's daughter
 - 45) Boom from above
 - 47) Finagle
 - 48) Strike caller
 - 49) Overturn, as milk
 - 50) Certain long bones
 - 51) Bloodless
 - 53) Barfly's binge
 - 54) Unpopular facial spots
- 57) "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-_"

58) Regret

59) Historic time

60) Affirmative action?
- NOTE PAD**
- | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | S | A | A | C | S | C | R | I | M | F | A | T | |
| D | E | L | T | A | M | A | N | I | A | I | D | O | |
| S | C | I | E | N | C | E | F | A | I | R | R | I | O |
| S | C | I | E | N | C | E | F | A | I | R | R | I | O |
| U | N | S | N | A | R | L | S | C | O | O | T | S | |
| N | I | C | E | S | T | S | H | O | W | U | P | | |
| S | N | I | T | S | S | C | E | N | E | E | L | I | |
| E | O | N | S | A | L | I | A | S | G | R | I | N | |
| T | N | T | S | C | U | F | F | W | A | S | A | T | |
| I | S | T | H | M | I | G | O | T | O | N | E | | |
| B | L | A | R | E | S | C | O | L | O | N | E | L | |
| S | A | L | M | I | P | R | O | F | | | | | |
| A | N | A | F | I | R | E | S | C | A | P | E | S | |
| G | A | T | E | R | U | P | T | U | P | S | E | T | |
| A | L | E | S | E | N | S | E | B | R | I | N | Y | |

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Very few times over the course of a year, the Universe taps us on the shoulder and lets us know, via a great big coincidence, that today is our lucky day. This one is yours. Now that you know, imagine all the options you have.

The first, of course, is to jump right on any chance you come across (as long as it doesn't cost you anything you can't afford, of course) and see what happens.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You love entertaining and being entertained, so you're not famous for staying home. At the moment, however, there's probably nothing you can think of that you'd rather do than sit still and enjoy the company of loved ones, and no one will have to jump up on the table to hold your attention, although you won't be mad if they do. Your friends have come to count on that freewheeling attitude, so they've been pouting since you started hibernating. Once they invite themselves over they'll be better. Don't be mad. You spoiled them!

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's not universally true that opposites attract, but you've been noticing some magnetic energy between two very different and very single people in your life. You could be in a position to foster that connection. Are you up to the task? Think about what it's like on the other end of things and subtly dig for some clues about how interested these two parties may be in each other. Follow your gut. If you're ready to connect them, do it!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Telling you not to worry now won't do much good. Even if you temporarily believe it, it will still be only too easy for you to talk yourself into worrying about what's going on and forget about your original objective. In the meantime, try to ignore what's going on and think about what you're after. Still, believe it or not, luck is definitely on your side. Here's a tip: do something different and think outside the box.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Someone who's been at the edge of your radar for a long time could suddenly move to the center of your field of vision today. They want your attention, and they want to inspire you. And if you give them a chance to make their case, they just might. They're ready to prove to you that what they have to offer isn't a correction; it's a suggestion. Getting involved in a new venture could give you the energy and ego boost you've been looking for. Say yes.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You've had the urge to travel lately, and whether it's for business or pleasure, you're still not willing to forget about it, so don't. Pick your destination, make your reservations, and if you can, take a loved one along for the ride. Who knows what might happen when you get there? At the very least, you'll be able to enjoy yourself like you know you need to. Indulge yourself. If anyone has earned it, it's you.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you're attached, expect to suddenly feel much closer to your partner now, more so than you have in some time. In other words, the connection you've been after could be right around the corner. That goes double if you're single, so don't argue with a friend, sibling, or neighbor who insists that they know just the person for you, even if they've tried this before and it wasn't a match made in heaven (to say the least). This time they could be right. You can't win if you don't play.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

If anyone is known for specializing in establishing good working relationships, it's you. You've most likely got better rapport with your boss than they have with their best friend, in fact, and your coworkers are probably like a second family to you. So now, when you need some encouragement to get you through a tough professional dilemma, don't be shy about asking for a pat on the back or pep talk. You deserve it. Bet you won't have to ask twice either.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

It's not often that the heavens arrange themselves so perfectly that all circumstances just can't help but work out well, but when they do, we're morally obligated to indulge. It's your turn now. If you refuse, you'll always wonder what might have happened, so don't even think about it. Let the stars lead you along their merry path. You know exactly who to invite along for the ride. Don't tell them why, though. The surprise will make them (and you) even more excited.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Getting you out of the house now will be next to impossible, especially if you have friends, family, or kids on hand. The more loved ones you have nearby to hug, feed, and nurture, the harder it will be to get you to leave. Don't let anyone make you feel guilty about it either. Home and family and nurturing are your specialties. When you have the chance to indulge in all three, why would you want to leave?

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You need a plan, and the right ideas just aren't coming to you. Don't panic. Call in an expert in the area, namely one of your friends who is as resourceful and determined as you usually are. Two heads are definitely better than one. They'll bring some additional information to the picture that you haven't yet thought of, prompting some forward motion in your own brain. Be ready to do them a big favor as well.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You know all about pushing the envelope, making waves, and all those crazy things you hear other people doing. When it comes to doing those things yourself, however, you're not the type. You'd much rather take what comes and deal with it. At the moment, however, the Universe is pushing on your behalf, and putting you close to many incidents you'd never have provoked. It's okay. Sit tight and cooperate. That's all you're being asked to do. That, and solemnly promise to enjoy yourself.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

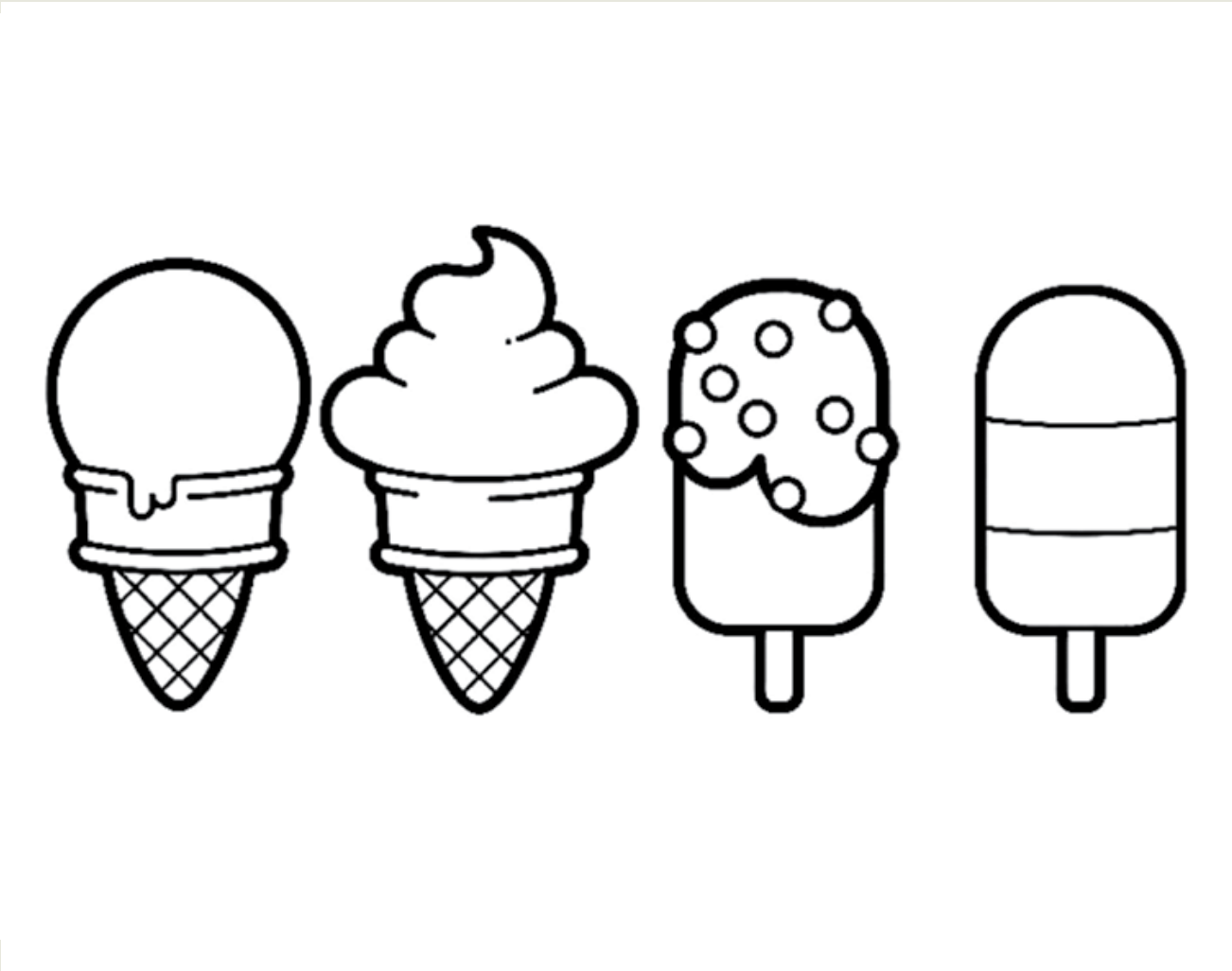
- 01. Nick Leeson became famous in 1995 for what activity?**

 - A. Bombings
 - B. Serial killings
 - C. Fraud
 - D. Internet hacking
- 02. Who formally opened the 2020 Summer Olympics?**

 - A. President Xi Jinping of China
 - B. President Moon Jae-in of South Korea
 - C. President Emmanuel Macron of France
 - D. Emperor Naruhito of Japan
- 03. The names of how many continents end with the same letter that they started with?**

 - A. 3
 - B. 7
 - C. 5
 - D. 1
- Answers:** 1. C 2. D 3. C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

A	T	S	R
R	A	R	V
K	R	I	E
S	E	F	A

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

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

Jordan hosts Middle East summit ‘Baghdad II’

The summit brings together regional and international players hoping to help resolve regional crises

Sweimeh, Jordan - Jordan was hosting a Middle East summit on Tuesday, bringing together regional and international players hoping to help resolve regional crises, particularly in neighbouring Iraq.

The ‘Baghdad II’ meeting, which also includes officials from France and the European Union, follows an August 2021 summit in Iraq’s capital organised at the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron.

Iraq only recently arrived at a fragile compromise government after a year of political stalemate.

The summit, held at Sweimeh on the shores of the Dead Sea, was aimed at providing ‘support for the stability, security and prosperity of Iraq’, the French presidency said in a statement, adding it hoped this would benefit ‘the entire region’.

The meeting takes place as several countries in the region are mired in unrest. Syria remains a battleground for competing geopolitical interests and Lebanon is stuck in an economic and political quagmire.

For over three months, Iran has bloodily suppressed a wave of popular demonstrations sparked by the September 16 death in custody of Mahsa



Leaders and representatives of various countries and institutions pose together at the start of the ‘Baghdad Conference’ in Sweimeh in central-west Jordan on Tuesday (AFP)

The meeting, which includes officials from France and European Union besides regional leaders, takes place as several countries in the region are mired in unrest

Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman of Kurdish origin.

The meeting was also being

attended by the EU’s top diplomat, Josep Borrell, who has been mediating talks aimed at reviv-

ing the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Borrell met with Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on Tuesday ahead of the summit’s official launch.

The European diplomat tweeted that the meeting was ‘necessary... amidst deteriorating Iran-EU relations’ and that they agreed to keep communications open.

‘No one expects miracles’

Baghdad II will see Jordan host Iraq’s new Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, Iran’s foreign minister and delegations from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Jordan, which has seen strikes and protests against rising fuel prices in recent days, has said the army will deploy on the road

from Amman airport to the Dead Sea conference centre, about 50 km (31 miles) west of the capital.

“This summit has great ambitions but no one expects miracles,” says Riad Kahwaji, director of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis.

France’s role as a mediator is crucial, Kahwaji said, with Paris ‘keeping the thread of dialogue

on behalf of Westerners with Iran, especially as the Vienna nuclear negotiations are currently in stalemate’.

The Dubai-based analyst said it is necessary to gauge the ‘disposition of Tehran - which plays a central role in the crises of the region from Iraq to Syria through to Lebanon and Yemen - to compromise’. Iran’s involvement in the Ukrainian conflict through the supply of drones to Russia further complicates the discussions, Kahwaji said.

Tehran has accused regional rival Saudi Arabia - with which it has had no diplomatic relations since 2016 - of fomenting unrest in Iran as protests rage on.

Ahead of the summit, Iran’s Amir-Abdollahian said Tehran was ‘ready to return to normal relations’ with Riyadh ‘whenever the Saudi side is ready’.

Test for Iraq

The conference is also a test for Iraq’s Sudani, appointed prime minister in late October after more than a year of political deadlock.

Considered closer to Iran than his predecessor, Mustafa al-Kadhemi, this is Sudani’s first major international meeting.

AFP

Turkey slams Sweden’s refusal to extradite reporter

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkey on Tuesday slammed Sweden’s refusal to extradite a reporter that Ankara has demanded in exchange for its ratification of Stockholm’s NATO membership.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants Sweden to return dozens of people that he suspects of involvement in a failed 2016 coup.

But the now-closed *Today’s Zaman* newspaper’s former editor-in-chief Bulent Kenes was the only person Erdogan mentioned specifically by name.

Sweden’s Supreme Court cited the risk of Turkey’s ‘persecution based on this person’s political beliefs’ when it blocked the request on Monday.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu lashed out at the decision in brief comments to reporters.

“The rejection of our request for the extradition of Bulent Kenes is a very negative development,” Cavusoglu said.



Turkish exiled journalist Bulent Kenes poses for a photographer in Stockholm, Sweden on Monday (AFP)

Cavusoglu stressed that Sweden’s extradition earlier this month of one man suspected of membership of a banned Kurdish insurgency group was insufficient to win Turkey’s approval.

“If they expect that they can return one person and then close this affair, this is not realistic,” Cavusoglu said.

“We no longer want to hear good words from Sweden and Finland, we want to see concrete steps.”

Sweden and Finland broke with decades of military non-alignment and decided to apply for NATO membership in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Turkey and Hungary remain the only NATO member states to have failed to ratify the Nordic countries’ applications.

Cavusoglu said he would have more discussions about the dispute during a visit to Ankara on Thursday by Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom.

AFP

Tunisia arrests former PM Ali Larayedh

Tunis, Tunisia- Tunisian police have arrested former prime minister Ali Larayedh, his Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party said on Tuesday, accusing authorities of trying to divert attention from calls for President Kais Saied to quit.

The arrest of the Ennahdha number two comes just days after nearly 90 per cent of voters boycotted an election to a toothless new parliament established by Saied following his seizure of sweeping powers in 2021.

Larayedh, who served as premier from 2013 to 2014, was detained as part of an investigation into alleged connivance in the departure of thousands of young Tunisians to fight with militant groups abroad.

As many as 6,000 Tunisians travelled to Libya, Iraq and Syria to volunteer as foreign fighters, a number that secular opposition groups say indicates deliberate neglect.

The investigation, which has also targeted Ennahdha’s veteran leader Rached Ghannouchi, was launched after the vehem-



This file photo shows Tunisia’s former premier Ali Larayedh addressing a press conference in Tunis on September 26, 2022 (AFP)

mentally anti-Islamist president sacked the government and suspended parliament in July 2021.

Saied has defended his power grab as necessary to end the repeated political crises that accompanied the North African country’s transition to democracy following the first of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011.

But his efforts to legitimise his new powers have been repeatedly snubbed by voters, first in a widely boycotted July referen-

dum and then in Saturday’s parliamentary election.

Ennahdha, which like almost all Tunisian parties boycotted the vote, accused Saied’s government of ‘systematically targeting’ its leadership.

The party said that Larayedh’s arrest marked a ‘desperate effort by the coup administration and its president, Kais Saied, to cover up the farce of the parliamentary election which was boycotted by 90 per cent of voters’.

Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, president of the country’s main opposition coalition, told journalists on Tuesday that the arrest was

The arrest of the Ennahdha number two comes just days after nearly 90% of voters boycotted an election to a new parliament

intended ‘to distract attention from the results of an election ignored by the public’.

Chebbi’s National Salvation Front, which includes Ennahdha, had said the slim election turnout should be a cue for Saied to step down. But Saied hit back at his critics on Monday, noting that some of them had criminal charges hanging over them, a veiled reference to investigations into Ennahdha officials.

AFP

‘Iran releases dissident after three months in jail’

Paris, France - Iranian authorities have released one of the country’s best known dissidents after he spent three months in jail as protests shook the country, his brother said.

Majid Tavakoli was released on bail from Tehran’s Evin prison after 89 days behind bars, his brother Mohsen wrote on Twitter late on Monday. Tavakoli had been arrested shortly after the start of the anti-regime protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini who had been arrested by the morality police for allegedly violating Iran’s strict dress rules for women.

Iran has arrested prominent lawyers, actors, cultural figures, journalists and campaigners in a crackdown that according to the UN has seen at least 14,000 people detained. “We are happy about

this news, but our happiness will be complete when all the dear ones who are in prison are released,” said Mohsen Tavakoli, posting a picture of his brother outside jail clutching a bouquet of flowers.

Tavakoli has spent much of the last one and a half decades in and out of jail and became prominent as a student leader during the 2009 mass street protests over disputed presidential elections.

He is hugely respected by activists as one of the most astute and analytical rights campaigners remaining inside Iran.

In 2013 he won the Student Peace Prize, which is awarded every two years in Norway.

His release comes after Iranian authorities in late November released the prominent dissident Hossein Ronaghi.

AFP

London Arabic bookshop to shut after 45 years

London, UK - Salwa Gaspard gazes fondly at the hundreds of Arabic-language books displayed on dark wooden shelves, putting some back in place while exchanging a few words with customers.

In just a few days’ time, her London bookshop, known to literary enthusiasts throughout the Middle East, will close for good.

Al Saqi Books is another victim of the pandemic, and the economic upheaval in the UK and Lebanon, from where Gaspard and her husband Andre’s publishing house prints and ships most of its books.

Since they opened the bookshop in a white colonnaded building not far from Paddington railway station in west London in 1978, it has become a must-see for visitors from the Middle East.

“They would go to Oxford Street (the main shopping street), to Knightsbridge (the area around the famous Harrods



Bookshop director Salwa Gaspard at Middle Eastern specialist bookshop, Al Saqi Books, in Bayswater, west London (AFP)

shop) and to Al Saqi,” she told AFP. In Arabic, Al Saqi means a water carrier in the desert, the 74-year-old bookseller said, describing it as a ‘perfect name’.

“We thought it was a very nice name for a bookshop, because we were carrying Arabic culture,” she added.

The bookshop also sells English-language publications on the Arab world ‘to give them a differ-

ent idea of the Middle East, which is not about the violent images they see on TV, or they read in the newspaper’, she said.

‘Refuge’

The bookshop’s success helped the couple to set up a publishing company, initially translating Arab works into English, such as *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* by French-Lebanese author

Amin Maalouf.

For more than 40 years, many writers have come to the London bookshop to present their works, including Syrian poet Adonis.

It also became a meeting place, even a ‘refuge’, for those uprooted by conflict and turmoil in the Middle East.

But Al Saqi Books always fiercely defended its independence and open-mindedness.

“It was like a safe haven. But also it was like they felt they were with friends who could understand them, because we all understood what was happening,” said Gaspard.

Even though the owners have always been careful to stay out of politics, the bookshop has not escaped the jolts of geopolitics.

In 1988, when Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* was published, the bookshop’s window was smashed.

But Gaspard said: “We never believed in censorship... we didn’t want to ban anything.”

The couple were also attacked when they published Israeli Abba Eban’s translation of a work by the Egyptian author Tawfiq al-Hakim.

She recalled outrage, as the book came out before the peace process but she said it was simply an ‘intellectual union’ between and Egyptian and an Israeli.

The announcement on December 5 that the bookshop will close at the end of this month prompted an avalanche of messages. UK-based Algerian journalist and academic Ouissal Harize wrote on Twitter: “You will definitely be missed. Thank you for giving us a home away from home.”

The editor-in-chief of *Esquire Middle East*, Nasri Atallah, called the closure ‘incredibly sad’.

Al Saqi was ‘a mainstay of my whole existence in London - and of my father before me’, he wrote.

AFP

US lawmakers call for criminal charges against Donald Trump

Washington, US - Lawmakers investigating last year's assault on the US Capitol recommended on Monday that Donald Trump be charged with multiple offenses including insurrection - raising the stakes in a parallel criminal investigation that could put the former president in jail.

The House of Representatives select committee called for the indictment - as well as charges of obstruction of an official proceeding and conspiracy to defraud the United States - after an 18-month probe into the storming of Congress on January 6, 2021. At least five people died after a mob whipped up by Trump's false claims of a stolen election, and directed to march on Congress by the defeated president, ransacked the seat of US democracy in a thwarted bid to prevent the transfer of power to President Joe Biden.

The bipartisan committee voted unanimously to refer the charges to the Justice Department after opening remarks by vice-chair Liz Cheney in which she accused Trump of 'a clear dereliction of duty' in failing to immediately attempt to stop the riot and called him 'unfit for any office'. "No man who would behave that way at that moment in time can ever serve in any position of authority in our nation again," she said.

The referrals are seen as largely symbolic, as the panel has no control over charging decisions, which rest with the Justice Department.

Jack Smith, a largely independent special prosecutor appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland, is leading his



This file photo shows US President Donald Trump speaking to supporters from The Ellipse near the White House, in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021 (AFP)

own investigation into Trump related to the 2020 election.

Major blow

Trump issued a statement claiming that the purpose of the investigation was to 'keep me from running for president because they know I'll win' and that any prosecution would be 'a partisan attempt to sideline me'.

Trump's approval ratings are underwater - at minus-20 per-

centage points in the RealClearPolitics average, compared with minus-eight per cent for Biden.

But the lawmakers' move is nevertheless historic, as Congress has never made a criminal referral against a sitting or former president, and it will add to the clamour among Trump's opponents for prosecution.

It is also a major blow to Trump amid a series of missteps in the weeks since he announced

a comeback bid for the White House - including the Republicans' poor midterm election showing in states where the tycoon endorsed candidates.

Charges could result in a ban from public office for the 76-year-old Republican, who still wields considerable power in the Republican Party, and even prison time.

"To cast a vote in the United States is an act of faith and

hope," committee chairman Bennie Thompson said.

"That faith in our system is the foundation of American democracy. If the faith is broken, so is our democracy. Donald Trump broke that faith."

The seven Democratic and two Republican panel members are winding down their work before the end of the year, and have compiled their findings into an eight-chapter report set to be released on Wednesday.

The committee's case is that Trump 'oversaw and coordinated a sophisticated seven-part plan to overturn the presidential election and prevent the transfer of presidential power'.

Investigators say the plot began with Trump's campaign to spread allegations he knew were false that the election was marred by widespread fraud.

He is accused of trying to corrupt the Justice Department and of pressuring his vice president Mike Pence, as well as state election officials and legislators, to overturn the vote by violating the Constitution and the law.

Trump is also accused of summoning and assembling the mob in Washington, and directing it toward the Capitol despite knowing it was armed with assault rifles, handguns and numerous other weapons. And for hours he ignored pleas from his team to take action to stop the violence, lawmakers say.

Democratic panel member Zoe Lofgren said Trump's false fraud claims were part of a deliberate attempt to sow distrust in democracy that began long before the insurrection.

AFP

Junta court trial of Myanmar's Suu Kyi enters final phase

Yangon, Myanmar - A junta court will hear the final arguments in the 18-month-long trial of Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi next week, a legal source said on Tuesday, before reaching its final verdicts against the Nobel laureate.

Suu Kyi has been a prisoner since the military toppled her government in February 2021, ending the Southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

The junta court has found her guilty on every one of the 14 charges it has heard so far, including corruption, illegally possessing walkie-talkies and flouting COVID restrictions, and jailed her for 26 years.

Rights groups have slammed the trial as a sham and designed to remove the democracy figurehead permanently from Myanmar's political scene.

Lawyers from both sides will make 'final arguments' relating to five remaining charges of corruption on December 26, according to a source with knowledge of the case. "The verdict will be given after that stage," the source said, adding a date had not yet been set.

Verdicts in Suu Kyi's previous trials have typically come days after final arguments.

Each corruption charge carries a maximum jail term of 15 years. In previous corruption cases, the court has generally sentenced Suu Kyi to three years per charge.

Suu Kyi, 77, appeared in good health, the source said.

Turmoil

Since the coup, Suu Kyi has largely disappeared from view, seen only in grainy state media photos from the bare courtroom.



Aung San Suu Kyi (AFP)

The country has plunged into turmoil, with some established ethnic rebel groups renewing fighting with the military in border areas and the economy in tatters. Dozens of 'People's Defence Forces' eschewing Suu Kyi's strict policy of non-violence have also

The junta court has found her guilty on every one of the 14 charges it has heard so far, and jailed her for 26 years

sprung up to battle the junta and have surprised the military with their effectiveness, analysts say.

There are almost daily killings of low-level junta officials or anti-coup fighters, with details murky and reprisals often following quickly.

The military alleged widespread voter fraud during the November 2020 election, won resoundingly by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, although international observers said the poll was largely free and fair.

AFP

Calls for rescue of boat holding Rohingya refugees

Jakarta, Indonesia - Southeast Asian politicians called on Tuesday for the rescue of a boat carrying as many as 200 Rohingya refugees including women and children stranded at sea for several weeks.

Thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, heavily persecuted in Myanmar, risk their lives each year in long, expensive sea journeys - often in vessels in poor condition - trying to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

The boat carrying the refugees has been reported in waters close to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and India in the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

"We urgently call on ASEAN member states and other countries in the region to... launch search and rescue operations," said ex-Indonesian MP Eva Sundari, who is a member of advocacy group ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), in a statement.

"It is disgraceful that a boat filled with men, women, and children in grave danger has been allowed to remain adrift."

Charles Santiago, a former Malaysian MP and chairman of APHR, said in the same statement that the delay in rescuing the stranded refugees likely 'has already caused untold suffering and loss of life'.

AFP

UK nurses stage new one-day strike for better wages

London, UK - UK nurses on Tuesday staged a second one-day strike amid an increasingly acrimonious fight with the government for better wages and warnings that patient safety could be jeopardised.

Up to 100,000 members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland walked out for the first time in the union's 106-year history last Thursday.

They want an above-inflation pay increase to make up for years of real-terms salary cuts, but the government insists it cannot afford anything above a roughly 4-5 per cent rise.

On the picket line outside a central London hospital opposite parliament, Mamta Pun, 25, said Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's stance on the pay dispute was 'a slap in the face for all healthcare staff, the general public and pa-



Healthcare workers hold placards at a picket line outside Guy's Hospital in London on Tuesday (AFP)

tients'. The intensive care nurse at the St Thomas' Hospital, where former premier Boris Johnson was treated in intensive care for COVID-19, said she and her colleagues finished shifts 'anxious, scared, terrified' because of their workload.

Outside Aintree University Hospital in Liverpool, northwest

England, Suni George, 45, said his pay had hardly changed in his 17 years as a nurse.

"We get a lot of tax so even when the annual income looks like it's gone up, we don't have more money," he said.

The striking nurses are among growing numbers of UK public and private sector workers taking

industrial action over pay and working conditions, as they grapple with a cost-of-living crisis worsened by decades-high inflation. The UK consumer prices index is currently running at nearly 11 per cent, with inflation in double digits and energy prices soaring on the back of the war in Ukraine.

Ambulance workers, including paramedics and call handlers, are set to strike on Wednesday, prompting fears that many emergencies will not be dealt with. A second walkout is scheduled for December 28, while others, including postal, railway and Border Force staff, are staging stoppages over the busy Christmas travel period.

'Unaffordable'

The RCN has criticised Rishi Sunak's government for refusing to discuss pay as part of stalled

negotiations.

RCN chief Pat Cullen said nurses would take wider industrial action next month if the dispute was not resolved.

"If this government keeps giving our nursing staff the cold shoulder as they have to date then, it's really unfortunate, that come January, we will see more hospitals being involved and striking and that means more nursing staff involved," she said.

The union has also accused Health Secretary Steve Barclay of adopting a 'macho' negotiating style during brief meetings held recently.

"The RCN's demands are unaffordable during these challenging times and would take money away from frontline services while they are still recovering from the impact of the pandemic," Barclay said on Monday.

AFP

Harvey Weinstein guilty of Hollywood rape, jury finds

Los Angeles, US - Disgraced US movie titan Harvey Weinstein was convicted on Monday of the rape and sexual assault of a woman a decade ago, in what prosecutors said was part of his 'reign of terror' over aspiring young actresses in Hollywood.

The 70-year-old *Pulp Fiction* producer, who was once one of the most powerful men in the film industry, faces up to 24 years in jail, in addition to a sentence he is already serving for sex crimes in New York.

His victim in the Los Angeles case said on Monday she hopes he 'never sees the outside of a prison cell during his lifetime'.

"Harvey Weinstein forever

destroyed a part of me that night in 2013 and I will never get that back," the woman, identified during the trial as Jane Doe #1, said in a statement.

A weeks-long trial heard graphic descriptions of encounters between the once-powerful producer and women who were trying to make their way in the world of movies.

Prosecutors painted a picture of a predatory ogre, who for years used his physical size and his professional prowess to rape and abuse women with impunity.

His victims were left terrorised and afraid for their careers if they spoke out against a man who dominated Tinseltown,



Harvey Weinstein (AFP)

prosecutors said.

Rumours of Weinstein's impropriety had circulated in Hollywood for years, but his position at the apex of the industry meant few were prepared to challenge

him.

That all changed in 2017 with the publication of bombshell allegations against him, ushering in the #MeToo movement and opening the floodgates for

The 70-year-old Pulp Fiction producer, who was once one of the most powerful men in the film industry, faces up to 24 years in jail

women to speak out against sexual violence in the workplace.

Dozens of women have since alleged they were victims of Weinstein. His convictions in New York, which landed him with a

23-year jail term, were followed by charges in Los Angeles, ultimately relating to four women.

On Monday after two weeks of deliberation, a jury convicted him of three of the seven counts

he faced - forcible rape, forcible oral copulation and sexual penetration by a foreign object - all relating to Jane Doe #1 in a Beverly Hills hotel room in February 2013.

The eight men and four women on the panel acquitted him of one charge of sexual battery by restraint involving another woman.

They did not reach a verdict on charges relating to the alleged assaults of two other women, one of whom was identified by her lawyers as Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the wife of California Governor Gavin Newsom.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Lisa Lench declared a mistrial on those counts.

Weinstein faces up to 18 years in prison for the counts on which he was convicted, but aggravating factors could increase that to 24 years.

Attorneys will be back in court on Tuesday for arguments as to sentencing.

Siebel Newsom welcomed the verdicts. "Harvey Weinstein will never be able to rape another woman," she said.

"He will spend the rest of his life behind bars where he belongs. Harvey Weinstein is a serial predator and what he did was rape." Siebel Newsom said that 'throughout the trial, Weinstein's lawyers used sexism, misogyny and bullying tactics to intimidate, demean and ridicule us survivors. This trial was a stark reminder that we as a society have work to do.'

AFP

Pakistan: Hostages freed, captors killed

Militants who seized the police station were killed and hostages freed in an operation by special forces

Bannu, Pakistan - All 33 suspected militant prisoners who seized a Pakistan police station over the weekend were killed and their hostages freed in a clearance operation by special forces on Tuesday, the defence minister said.

The hostage takers, who were suspected of being members of various militant groups including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), overpowered their jailors and snatched weapons on Sunday. "All the hostages have been freed," Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif told parliament. "Ten to 15 men from the SSG (special forces) including an officer were wounded while two were martyred."

Elite troops stormed the police station around noon when differences broke out between the hostage takers over how to handle their captives, with witnesses reporting blasts and



Police stand guard along a road they blocked after Taliban militants seized a police station in Bannu on Monday (AFP)

heavy firing. The suspected militants, who were being held on suspicion of terrorism, had demanded safe passage to Afghanistan in return for releasing the hostages - at least eight police officers and military intel-

ligence officials - Muhammad Ali Saif, a spokesman for the provincial Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, said earlier.

"There were 33 terrorists from different groups who had been arrested and jailed in the

counter-terrorism department compound," Asif said.

"One of them hit his guard on the head with a brick while going to the toilet and snatched his weapon," he added, explaining how the siege unfolded.

The police station is within a cantonment area in Bannu, adjacent to Pakistan's formerly self-governed tribal areas and near the border with Afghanistan.

Offices and roads were closed and checkpoints have been set

up around the area.

Local schools were also ordered shut on Tuesday out of fear of more kidnappings, a senior government official at the scene told AFP.

The same source earlier said

Pakistani officials had asked the government in Kabul to help with the release of the hostages.

The TTP, separate from the Afghan Taliban but with a similar hardline Islamist ideology, said its members were behind the incident and demanded authorities provide them safe passage to border areas.

A spokesman told AFP that special forces suffered heavy casualties and had not been able to enter the police station.

Increase in violence

The TTP emerged in 2007 and carried out a horrific wave of violence in Pakistan that was largely crushed after a military operation beginning in 2014.

However, attacks are on the rise again since the Afghan Taliban seized control of Kabul last year, with most targeting security forces. A shaky months-long ceasefire between the TTP and Islamabad ended last month.

Overnight on Monday, at least 50 Pakistan Taliban militants stormed another police station in Wana - also close to the Afghan border and some 200km south of Bannu - according to local government and senior police officials, both of whom asked not to be named.

The group locked up police officers and seized weapons before border force troops moved in to take back control.

AFP

Six found dead as Thailand navy search for missing sailors

Prachuap Khiri Khan, Thailand - Six bodies have been found and one survivor was rescued on Tuesday, after the sinking of a naval vessel two days ago in the Gulf of Thailand, the Thai navy said.

Seventy-six sailors from the HTMS Sukhothai have been hauled from the sea after the vessel went down late on Sunday roughly 37km (22 miles) off the country's southeastern coast.

There were 23 personnel still missing, a navy spokesman said.

Helicopters, two planes, and four ships - the HTMS Kraburi, HTMS Angthong, HTMS Naresuan and HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej - continued searching for survivors on Tuesday.

The bodies of four men were recovered, commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Navy Choenchai Chomchoengpaet told a press conference in Bangkok.

The navy later revised the toll upwards to six dead. "We will



A survivor being carried on a stretcher at U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield in Rayong Province on Tuesday (AFP)

keep going until the mission is complete and we bring our people back," Choenchai said.

A helicopter transported the deceased to a naval pier late on Tuesday night, where a fleet of ambulances waited to take them to a local hospital for autopsies.

The Sukhothai was carrying extra personnel as it was joining an anniversary celebration of the navy's founder, said Choenchai,

admitting that there were insufficient life jackets onboard.

"Having a life vest doesn't mean you won't die," he said.

Admiral Chonlathis Navanugraha called the incident 'one of the most severe tragedies' in the navy's history.

Waiting for news

At a pier in Prachuap Khiri Khan province, anxious families of

those missing gathered.

Earlier, they were buoyed by news that Chananyu Gansriya, 23, had been pulled from the water.

Siri Esa, the mother of 21-year-old Saharat Esa who was on board, had a smile on her face when she heard about the latest rescue.

"I also have faith in my son. This is good news," she said.

But Tuesday's waves were still high, navy spokesperson Admiral Pogkrong Montrapalini said, noting the search area had grown and was focusing 'on the area near shores, according to the currents and the wind'.

Some of those rescued 'suffered from broken bones in the upper arm and fingers', Wara Selwattanakul, a doctor with the provincial health department, said. Phongsri Suksawat, 50, said she hoped that her 22-year-old son Chirawat Toophorm would come home.

AFP



Beds for patients are seen in partitioned rooms at a makeshift fever clinic at a stadium in Beijing on Tuesday (AFP)

China's crematoriums 'packed' as COVID cases soar across country

Beijing, China - Crematoriums across China are straining to deal with an influx of bodies as the country battles a wave of COVID cases that authorities have said is impossible to track.

Cases are soaring across China, with hospitals struggling and pharmacy shelves stripped bare in the wake of the government's sudden decision to lift years of lockdowns, quarantines and mass testing.

The United States has warned the outbreak is now of concern to

the rest of the world, given the potential for further mutations and the size of China's economy.

From the country's northeast to its southwest, crematorium workers told AFP they are struggling to keep up with a surge in deaths. In Chongqing - a city of 30 million where authorities this week urged people with mild COVID symptoms to go to work - one worker told AFP their crematorium had run out of space to keep bodies.

"The number of bodies picked

up in recent days is many times more than previously," a staffer who did not give their name said.

"We are very busy, there is no more cold storage space for bodies," they added.

"We are not sure (if it's related to COVID), you need to ask the leaders in charge."

In the southern megapolis of Guangzhou, an employee at one crematorium in Zengcheng district told AFP they were cremating more than 30 bodies a day.

AFP

Ex-Nazi camp secretary receives suspended sentence

Itzehoe, Germany - A German court on Tuesday handed a two-year suspended sentence to a 97-year-old former Nazi camp secretary over complicity in the murder of more than 10,000 people.

In one of the country's last Holocaust trials, presiding judge Dominik Gross read out the verdict for defendant Irmgard Furchner for her role in what prosecutors called the 'cruel and malicious murder' of prisoners at the Stutthof camp in occupied Poland.

Furchner sat in a wheelchair in the courtroom, wearing a white cap and a medical mask as Gross found her guilty of thousands of counts of accessory to murder. She was the first woman in decades to be tried in Germany for Nazi-era

crimes. Gross noted that justice had come 'truly very late' in the case, and only because 'the defendant has been lucky to have a particularly long life'.

Furchner, whose image the court ordered blurred in media photographs, had expressed regret as the trial drew to a close this month. "I'm sorry about everything that happened," she told the regional court in the northern town of Itzehoe. Gross lamented that she had not given a fuller account of her time at Stutthof.

"We would have preferred a defendant who spoke - she chose to remain silent," he said.

Furchner had tried to abscond as the proceedings were set to begin in September 2021.

Tears of joy as opposition reach deal to unseat Fiji PM

Suva, Fiji - Ecstatic Fijians poured onto the streets to celebrate the end of Frank Bainimarama's 16-year rule, after election opponents reached a deal on Tuesday to form a coalition government.

Former rugby international and coup leader-turned-democrat Sitiveni 'Rambo' Rabuka, is set to be the country's next prime minister, after securing the support of a minor party and enough seats for a parliamentary majority. "I would like to thank and congratulate the people of Fiji," Rabuka said, claiming victory after Wednesday's contentious election. "They have voted for change."

Rabuka and his coalition allies have vowed to renew Fiji's democracy and introduce a 'more caring, compassionate' and accountable government after what they see as a decade and a half of semi-authoritarian rule.



Sitiveni Rabuka greets party workers after securing a support of the SODELPA to form a new government in Suva on Tuesday (AFP)

"It's been too long," said 21-year-old politics student Vilivo Amo, who was one of thousands on the streets of Suva. "They are bringing democracy back."

"This current government, people get taken to task for no reason, they get trouble from the police. That will change."

Bainimarama, a former naval

commander, came to power in a 2006 coup but later won two elections to legitimise his hold on power.

He has dominated Fiji's politics and while not an outright autocrat, his government has frequently used the legal system to sideline opponents, silence critics and muzzle the media.

I feel like breaking open the ceiling and celebrating. It's been 16 years of this oppressive government. You can't even protest

ELIJAH ROKODERA

As news of the coalition deal trickled out, euphoric and tearful supporters outside Rabuka's headquarters erupted into song.

Fireworks exploded, car horns blared and supporters danced, brandishing traffic cones, flags and placards.

Some chanted 'New government!' in Fijian, while members of the administration-elect sang the US civil rights hymn 'We shall overcome'.

Rabuka supporter Elijah

Rokodera expressed relief to see Bainimarama lose power.

"I feel like breaking open the ceiling and celebrating man," he told AFP. "It's been 16 years of this oppressive government. You can't even organise a protest."

Security guard Mitele Tuqiri said he was ecstatic.

"We are going to celebrate tonight, and then tomorrow it will continue."

Four coups

Bainimarama has not spoken in public since casting his vote last Wednesday.

He has vowed to respect the outcome of the election, but many Fijians will wait anxiously to see his response.

Fiji has been upended by four coups in the past 35 years, and the possibility of military intervention loomed over this year's vote.

AFP

Former South Africa cricketer Gary Kirsten to visit Oman for four-day camp

Muscat: Oman cricketers, young and senior, will have a lifetime opportunity to interact with a South African legend when **Gary Kirsten** will visit Oman in February 2023.

Confirming the visit of the World Cup-winning coach, Oman Cricket (OC) said that Kirsten will be visiting the Oman Cricket Academy (OCA) facilities to supervise a four-day camp that will target grassroots

development and also include a high-performance camp from February 1-4.

This will be the second camp organised by Gary Kirsten Cricket (GKC) Academy following their success in the inaugural edition in October.

Evert Laubscher, Oman Cricket Academy manager, said: "We are delighted to receive the confirmation that Gary Kirsten will visit Oman in February when

the GKC will hold their second camp.

"We had got an encouraging response during the first camp in October. Oman Cricket has been constantly working to ensure that the domestic coaches, young cricketers and beginners are provided top-class facilities to learn, train and improve their skill sets."

Kirsten will be accompanied by a couple of GKC Academy



coaches and will begin the programme with a grassroots camp on February 1 followed by a high-performance camp from February 2-4, aimed at under-14 and under-19 age groups.

A coaches educators' workshop will also be held during Kirsten's stay.

Oman Cricket has opened registrations for interested beginners and young cricketers with a fee of OMR 50 for the

three-day high-performance camp. OMR 10 will be charged for the grassroots camp with the youngsters getting an opportunity to interact with the legend at the OCA premises.

All the participants will receive a certificate of participation and will also be given a branded shirt from OC and GKC.

A Q&A session is also being planned with the South African batter, who achieved glory as a

cricketer and later as a coach.

In October OC joined hands for their maiden partnership initiative with South Africa's GKC Academy. A total of 75 players attended the five-day coaching camp that catered to grassroots players, high-performance cricketers and domestic coaches.

It was conducted by two coaches from the GKC Academy – Ryan van Niekerk and Garreth Von Hoesslin.

TOTAL DOMINATION

Harry Brook stars again as England win Karachi Test by eight wickets to inflict first-ever 3-0 home whitewash on Pakistan

Karachi, Pakistan - England beat Pakistan by eight wickets in the third and final Test in Karachi Tuesday to sweep the series 3-0 and hand the Pakistanis their first home whitewash.

Resuming on 112-2, England reached the modest 167-run target in just 38 minutes, with Ben Duckett and Ben Stokes finishing unbeaten on 82 and 35 respectively.

England won the first Test in Rawalpindi by 74 runs and the second in Multan by 26 runs.

This was England's first Test tour of Pakistan since 2005, having refused to tour the South Asian country in the years since because of security concerns.

Duckett cracked his 12th boundary off fast bowler Mohammad Wasim to seal the victory on the fourth day, with England finishing on 170-2.

Agha Salman dropped Stokes off spinner Abrar Ahmed with the English captain on 22 and just 19 needed for victory. With nine wins in their last 10 matches, England have vindicated their newly adopted freewheeling approach to Test cricket dubbed 'Bazball', after the nickname of coach Brendon McCullum.

McCullum and Stokes took

charge of a misfiring side in May that had won just one of their previous 17 Tests, including a 4-0 humiliation in the Ashes in Australia.

England played power-packed cricket right from the start of the Pakistan tour, smashing 506-4 to set a record for the most team runs on the opening day of a Test.

Four batters – Zak Crawley, Ollie Pope, Harry Brook and Duckett – scored hundreds that

We were particularly good with the ball. Whoever I threw it to, they seemed to deliver. The commitment and mindset has been top drawer

BEN STOKES

day, another record.

Bold captaincy

Stokes was also bold in his captaincy, setting a tantalising 343-run target for Pakistan in Rawalpindi and then setting unusual fields to get wickets.

"It's perfect," said Stokes of the 3-0 result. "We've got a process we want to play but the challenge was the different



England's Ben Duckett (R) and Ben Stokes celebrate their victory on the fourth day of the third Test against Pakistan at the National Stadium in Karachi on Tuesday (AFP)

pitches for every Test."

Although the batters shone on Pakistan's run-friendly wickets, he also had praise for his bowlers.

"We were particularly good with the ball. Whoever I threw it to, they seemed to deliver. The commitment and mindset has been top drawer," he said.

Player-of-the-series Harry Brook, who accumulated 468 runs with three hundreds, was also singled out by Stokes.

"Every person has stood up at some point, but Brook has been unbelievable. He's set Pakistan on fire... the calmness and belief is high class."

Pakistan's problems were compounded by injuries to their fast bowlers, with Shaheen Shah Afridi ruled out before the series with a knee injury.

Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah missed the last two Tests with fitness problems.

But Pakistan suffered major batting collapses, losing their last six wickets for 108 in the first innings in Karachi and seven for 52 in the second. Tuesday's defeat means it is also the first time Pakistan have lost four home Tests on the trot, having been beaten by Australia in Lahore in March.

AFP

Azam still wants to captain Pakistan despite whitewash

Karachi, Pakistan - Babar Azam has no intention of giving up the Pakistan captaincy despite overseeing a first-ever 3-0 Test series whitewash at home, saying that leading the side was "a matter of honour".

Pakistan lost to England Tuesday in the third and final Test in Karachi by eight wickets, after going down in the first two matches by 74 runs in Rawalpindi and 26 in Multan.

It was also the first time Pakistan have lost four Tests on the trot, having been beaten by Australia in Lahore in March. Asked if he would quit the captaincy to concentrate on batting, Azam told a news conference he still enjoyed the challenge.

"Captaincy is a matter of honour for me. I will do whatever best I can for my country and for myself," he said.

"I enjoy it more when under pressure and it doesn't affect my batting."

But Azam acknowledged his disappointment at the result of the series. "We could not apply ourselves in the series," said Azam, who suffered his sixth defeat in 16 Tests as skipper.

"I keep Pakistan first and the rest after that. So that motive and my aim is paramount," he said.

He also backed the players and team management, saying he was confident they would bounce back.

"I will defend other players as captain. I will take that front on...



Pakistan's Babar Azam walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal by England's Rehan Ahmed on the third day of the third Test on Sunday

I will be there for others."

But he urged his teammates to rise to the challenge.

"Coaches give us plans and we have to execute that. It's for the players to step up," he said.

Azam, however, rued the loss through injury of key bowlers -- specifically Shaheen Shah Afridi,

who missed every game of the series, and Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah, who were out of the last two.

"We were unfortunate that our main fast bowlers were not fit and the new players we played could not execute the way we wanted," he said.

Whitewash 'pretty special', says England skipper Stokes

Karachi, Pakistan - England's 3-0 series whitewash over Pakistan will take a while to sink in, skipper Ben Stokes said Tuesday, calling the result "pretty special".

The tourists wrapped up the third Test and the series by effortlessly knocking off the 55 runs needed for victory, taking the match by eight wickets to go with wins by 74 runs and 26 runs in Rawalpindi and Multan.

"It won't really sink in until we get home or in the new year," Stokes said after securing what was only England's second series whitewash in the subcontinent following a similar result in Sri Lanka in 2018.

"I know it's a cliched thing, but being out in the subcontinent is one of the hardest places to do it," Stokes said.

"I understand, and we understand, what we've done is pretty special... to win 3-0 out here, it will be something to be really proud of."

The win validated England's decision to play the bold and aggressive cricket dubbed "Bazball" after the nickname of head coach Brendon McCullum.

England under the new set-up of McCullum and Stokes have now triumphed in nine of their last 10 Tests since taking charge of a misfiring side that had won just one of their previous 17 - including a 4-0 Ashes humiliation in Australia.

AFP

Buoyant India look for clean sweep over Bangladesh

Dhaka, Bangladesh - India will look to steamroll a plucky but inconsistent Bangladesh in the second Test starting on Thursday in Dhaka to cement their standing in the ICC Test Championship.

The visitors will however again be without injured skipper Rohit Sharma after he missed the first Test with an injured thumb, the Indian cricket board said Tuesday. India are currently second in the Test Championship league table behind Australia, who are currently 1-0 up against South Africa in a three-match series at home.

The current cycle runs to June 2023, with the nine teams each playing six series. The top two sides will meet in the final at the Oval in London.

India beat Bangladesh in the first Test in Chittagong by 188 runs but the visitors, led by KL Rahul in the absence of Rohit, had to work hard for the victory.

Set a monumental target of 513 runs, Bangladesh put up a strong fight with Zakir Hasan and Najmul Hossain sharing a record opening partnership of 124.

Debutant Zakir made 100 and skipper Shakib Al Hasan added 84 but India kept their cool and got the win, with Axar Patel taking four wickets and Kuldeep Yadav - the player of the match - grabbing three.

"That's Test cricket. You are never going to get a win that is easy. We have played enough



India's batting coach Vikram Rathour (R) speaks with Shubman Gill during a practice session in Dhaka on Tuesday (AFP)

cricket to understand that there will be phases when the opposition plays well and you need to respect that," Rahul said.

Cheteshwar Pujara scored 90 and 102 not out in two innings, while Shubman Gill also recorded his maiden Test hundred in the second innings.

Bangladesh, bottom of the table in the Test championship with just one win from 11 matches, were left reeling their dismal first innings.

"The most disappointing thing is the poor decision-making from the batters," said coach Russell Domingo.



(From L) France's Olivier Giroud, Antoine Griezmann, Aurelien Tchouameni, Kylian Mbappe and coach Didier Deschamps greet supporters at Hotel de Crillon in Paris on Monday (AFP)

Jubilant welcome for French team on World Cup return despite loss to Argentina in final

Paris, France - Supporters packed a square in central Paris on Monday to give a rousing welcome to the French football team despite their loss to Argentina in a nail-biting World Cup final.

Fans filled the Place de la Concorde in central Paris to welcome the team who were driven straight to the square from the airport after touching down from Qatar.

They appeared on the balcony of the Crillon Hotel overlooking the square to a rousing welcome.

Despite their disappointment, all 24 French players, including striker Kylian Mbappe whose hat trick failed to bring France glory, appeared on the balcony in regal style to acknowledge the applause.

"Frankly, it's magnificent, it

Frankly, it's magnificent, it warms the heart, it's a great pleasure to see that we were able to make so many French people proud and happy

MARCUS THURAM

warms the heart, it's a great pleasure to see that we were able to make so many French people proud and happy," forward Marcus Thuram told TF1 TV. "We wanted to see them (the fans) on our return from Doha because I think it's the least we can do to come and see them and thank them for their support," he added.

Goalkeeper and captain Hugo Lloris told TF1 that it was a chance to "greet them (the fans), to thank them for their support and, after yesterday's pain, to

seek their consolation."

Supporters had been kept guessing for most of the day about whether the disappointed players would travel to central Paris to meet them.

Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera had said early Monday that the team planned to go to the place de la Concorde.

'Magnificent present'

But within hours, the French Football Federation (FFF) president contradicted the minister,

saying the players would head home straight from the airport.

"When you don't win you don't feel like wandering down the Champs Elysees or anywhere else," Noel Le Graet told the BFMTV broadcaster, in reference to the glamorous avenue running from Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe.

But the FFF then confirmed that the event would take place.

France lost on penalties on Sunday after the match ended 3-3 following extra time, but French commentators still heaped praise on the defeated side, while highlighting the crucial role of Argentinian captain Lionel Messi.

"Invited to the coronation of Lionel Messi, Les Bleus were heroic," said *L'Equipe* sports newspaper.

The match was dominated by Argentina for the first 80 minutes before a quickfire double by Mbappe ignited France. Mbappe went on to score a third goal, becoming only the second player in history to grab a hat-trick in a World Cup final.

"Proud of our Bleus," read a headline on the front page of *Le Parisien* newspaper with a picture of the team standing together during the penalty shootout.

"Football is often more than a sport. In the run up to Christmas, this World Cup has been a magnificent present," the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* said.

A total of 24.08 million people watched the match on Sunday on TF1 television, an all-time record audience for a French network, the channel said.



French President Emmanuel Macron hugs France's Kylian Mbappe during the World Cup trophy presentation ceremony in Lusail on Sunday (AFP)

Emmanuel Macron intervened to ask French team to greet fans: federation

Paris, France - President Emmanuel Macron intervened to ask France's footballers to greet fans after their defeat in the World Cup final, leading to a brief public ceremony, the French football federation chief said Tuesday.

France's players initially wanted to head straight home Monday after their loss on penalties to Argentina the previous evening, the head of the French Football Federation, Noel Le Graet, told AFP in a statement.

"Under the weight of the disappointment, the sadness and such strong emotions, I understood this choice and I respected it," he said.

"The situation changed around 10:00 am (on Monday) after an exchange with the president, who wanted a moment of communion. Naturally I accepted along with the team," he added.

After a confusing day of contradictory statements, the French players eventually appeared for a few minutes on Monday evening on the balcony of the five-star Crillon hotel at the historic Place de la Concorde.

Around 50,000 people packed the public square to wave, cheer and sing the national anthem, many having waited for more than four hours in the dark and cold.

Despite a mostly festive at-

mosphere, some in the crowd grumbled that the players were barely visible as they waved regally from the balcony behind a wide police cordon.

Several French players said they were delighted by the sight of the crowd.

Reaction in France has been overwhelmingly supportive of the national team which came

Around 50,000 people packed the public square to wave, cheer and sing the national anthem

close to retaining the World Cup despite a series of injuries to senior players such as Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema and a virus in the camp last week.

Macron's performance at the final at the Lusail Stadium outside Doha on Sunday has sparked almost as much commentary as that of the team.

The 44-year-old football fan could be seen jumping from his seat during the game before descending to console the distraught players at the end as they crumpled to the turf following the penalty shoot-out.

AFP

Semi-automated offside in Serie A from January, hunt for new ref chief on

Milan, Italy - Semi-automated offside technology will be introduced to Serie A next month, the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) announced on Monday as the country's refereeing association searches for a new president following a drugs scandal.

In a statement FIGC said that the technology, developed by global governing body FIFA and used at the World Cup, will be used from the 20th round of matches on the last weekend of January after consultations with domestic refereeing association AIA.

Those fixtures, which include Serie A leaders Napoli hosting fierce rivals Roma, mark the second half of a league campaign which gets underway again in early January following the World Cup and winter break.

The technology was trialled at February's FIFA Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi and last year's Arab Cup before being used at the World Cup in Qatar and the group stage of this season's Champions League.

It utilises both dedicated and broadcast cameras around the stadium to give the exact position of players on the pitch, offering match officials precise information within seconds.

The optical tracking system has the aim of making offside calls faster and more accurate.



Alfredo Trentalange

Offside decisions have continued to cause controversy in the VAR era in Italy

Offside decisions have continued to cause controversy in the VAR era in Italy, with one particularly strange case penalising Juventus against Salernitana back in September.

A VAR review led to Arkadiusz Milik's header deep in stoppage time, which would have given Juve a 3-2 win, being ruled out for Leonardo Bonucci

being offside and interfering with play. Footage revealed later showed that Salernitana's Antonio Candreva had kept everyone aside but as he was stood by the corner flag he was not spotted by the VAR officials.

Drugs scandal sinks ref chief

The decision caused outrage not just at Juve but among football fans and pundits all over Italy, incredulous as to how the decision could have been gotten wrong with so many cameras in place at the Allianz Stadium.

AIA said at the time that the VAR officials did not have access to cameras which would have

shown that Milik's goal should have stood.

The announcement was made after Monday's FIGC board meeting in which president Gabriel Gravina also said elections for a new head of AIA would take place within 90 days following Alfredo Trentalange's resignation on Sunday.

Trentalange stepped down under pressure from Gravina, who had threatened to put AIA under administration if he did not relinquish his post, following the arrest of the body's chief prosecutor for his alleged involvement in an international drug trafficking ring.

AFP

Ivory Coast's Brito, paralysed at 1995 Rugby World Cup, dies

Paris, France - Max Brito, who was left a tetraplegic during his country Ivory Coast's 1995 Rugby World Cup pool match with Tonga, has died aged 54, his family announced on Tuesday.

A dashing, 27-year-old dreadlocked winger, he arrived at the tournament in South Africa full of hope for himself and his team and got his starting spot for the Tonga clash due to his brother being injured.

But just minutes into the game in Rustenburg, he collapsed under a crunching tackle from flanker Inoke Afeaki and was crushed beneath an avalanche of bodies. Two of his vertebrae were shattered.

"The Brito family, his children Mike and Anthony, sadly announce the death of Max Brito, on Monday December 19 at 1830 (1730 GMT)," read the family statement on the website of French club Biscarrosse Olympique Rugby.

"Max went on his last voyage with dignity and without suffering."

Brito, despite undergoing several operations following the incident, could only move his head and upper body and had limited movement in his arms.

His wife left him and he was increasingly embittered as al-



The accident was violent. But after that I had a spiritual enlightenment and I understood that it was necessary to accept my handicap

MAX BRITO

though some came to his aid financially - New Zealand legend Jonah Lomu auctioned his All Black shirt from the 1995 World Cup - many did not.

"It is now 12 years since I have been in this state. I have come to the end of my tether," Brito told *Le Monde* newspaper in 2007. "If one day I fall seriously ill, and if I have the strength and courage to take my own life, then I will do it."

"This bloody handicap. It's my curse. It kills me and I will never accept it. I can't live with

it and it's going to be with me for the rest of my life."

However, as time moved on Brito came to accept his plight.

"I would say there were 13 or 14 years of fog where I didn't know where I was," he told Britain's *i* newspaper in 2020.

"The accident was very violent. But after that I had a spiritual enlightenment and I understood that it was necessary to accept my handicap."

"And from that moment on, all the doors were open."

AFP



Argentina captain Lionel Messi (C) with teammates on board a bus as they celebrate their World Cup triumph with supporters in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires, on Tuesday (AFP)

Argentina lauds united footballers in divided crisis-riven country

Buenos Aires, Argentina - For the last month, Lionel Messi and his Argentina teammates have brought success and unity to their fans, in stark contrast to the country's economic woes and polarised political landscape.

Years of economic crisis weighs heavily on the daily lives of people in a country where some 40 percent live in poverty as rampant inflation and a depreciating currency have decimated ordinary people's savings and purchasing power.

And yet on Sunday the whole country was draped in the national blue and white colours as political and sporting rivalries were put to one side and 45 million people celebrated a first World Cup success in 36 years.

But experts say the elation will not last.

"What happens is that sport, and particularly football in Argentina, has the ability to unite us through emotion, and that is very important in terms of national symbolism," sociologist Rodrigo Daskal told AFP. "But that does not mean that it can be effectively

transferable to other fields."

During Sunday's match, supporters of bitter city rivals such as Boca Juniors and River Plate in Buenos Aires, or Rosario's Newell's Old Boys and Rosario Central, stood shoulder to shoulder during the thrilling and at times torturous penalty shoot-out victory over France in Qatar.

"This passion and this unity,

we're united we all pull in the same direction," said Julio Berdun, 50, as he walked through the iconic Plaza Mayo in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace with his family.

"We have to close this rift that makes us so divided as a country," he said, his face painted blue and white, wearing a curly wig and draped in the Argentine flag.

'Playing for people'

What resonated with fans was the players' emotional commitment, embodied in Messi's brilliance, his team-mates' joy and the tears of coach Lionel Scaloni.

"This team plays for the people, for the Argentine fans, there are no individual egos, everyone plays for the team and for the country," said Scaloni.

The political class is the polar opposite, and not just because of the fractious relationship between the Peronist government and right-wing opposition.

The current administration has been beset by an ever-growing fissure between President Alberto Fernandez and his vice-president and former leader Cristina Kirchner.

"This competitive, effective and humble team with good vibes contrasts with a political class fighting amongst itself that doesn't improve things in the country," said political scientist Carlos Fara.

"Society is very tired with this rift. They feel like it's political

business and a barrier to development." But, he added, "I don't see the political class reflecting on this. Most probably, after the euphoria passes, things will be the same again.

"The economic problems are long-term and the World Cup win doesn't mitigate that."

The victorious team will celebrate on Tuesday with fans at the capital's iconic Obelisk monument. But there are no plans to meet the president.

"The people feel that this is a triumph for the national team and the people themselves, and it's better for politics to stay out," said Fara.

While Argentina's greatest football hero, the late Diego Maradona - who led the country to World Cup triumph in 1986 - was vocal in his support for various left-wing Latin American causes, the current squad is apolitical.

And for many, the fact that no political force will try to capitalise on the football team's glory is in itself a victory.

AFP

This passion and this unity, hopefully it will serve as an example for the future and to make us realise that we are better together

NICOLAS TAGLIAFICO, Argentina

hopefully it will serve as an example for the future and to make us realise that we are better together," said fullback Nicolas Tagliafico.

The team's success and their tangible togetherness has created a sense of hope amongst some Argentines.

"It's not about forgetting our problems, it's about reminding us that we can unite, and when

At the same time, there is scepticism and weariness that comes from decades of broken promises and shattered dreams.

"We're world champions, but nothing more. I have to go to work, everyone has to go work. The situation won't change, it will be like always, only that in the sporting domain we're world champions," said architect Ricardo Grunfeld, 65.



Lionel Messi holds the World Cup Trophy upon arrival at Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires on Tuesday (AFP)

Argentines ready to party with Messi, World Cup winners

Buenos Aires, Argentina - Thousands of Argentines began massing in the capital from dawn on Tuesday preparing to shower their World Cup heroes led by Lionel Messi with adulation.

The new world champions were due to head to the iconic Obelisk monument in central Buenos Aires in an open-top bus parade at midday (1500 GMT), the Argentine Football Association (AFA) said on Twitter.

And they were given a taste of what was to come when they returned home from Qatar in the early hours of Tuesday morning when tens of thousands of people lined the route from the Ezeiza international airport, where they landed at 2:40 am, to the Argentine Football Association (AFA) training complex a short distance away.

"Good morning," wrote Messi on his social media accounts, alongside a picture of him lying in bed hugging the World Cup trophy at the AFA complex, where the team spent the night.

A massive security operation has been planned with millions expected on the streets of Buenos Aires to

celebrate Sunday's thrilling World Cup final victory over France.

Tuesday has been declared a public holiday for the celebrations.

Fans wearing the national team's blue and white replica shirts and draped in flags sang, danced and set off fireworks as they began camping out at night to secure spots along the planned route.

"We will be here all night and tomorrow as well," student Ayrton Kerdocas, 25, said.

"Tomorrow we are not working, we won't do anything and we'll go directly to the Obelisk with Argentina."

Argentina won the final in Qatar 4-2 on penalties after a rollercoaster 3-3 draw over 120 minutes of unparalleled drama for their first world title in 36 years.

Messi, who scored twice in the final, was the first player to emerge from the plane, holding the World Cup aloft, with coach Lionel Scaloni right behind him.

A picture of Messi was emblazoned on the plane's tail with the words: "one team, one country, one dream" on its side.

AFP

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MOH No: 558/2022

HANOI'S OLD VILLAS

COLONIAL CRACKS



Nguyen Manh Tri in the doorway of an old villa where he lives in Hanoi

The race to save Hanoi's crumbling villas is on as residents are wary of abandoning their heritage homes

In a small corner of a once-grand villa in the heart of Hanoi, Nguyen Manh Tri surveys the home he has loved since childhood but is now giving up as its foundation cracks, roof crumbles and staircase buckles.

Tri, 47, lives in three rooms of the subdivided house, one of around 1,200 French-style villas in the city on a list of protected homes published this year.

Most of the villas are close to a century old, built during French colonial rule, and have been degraded by age and humidity. The five families living inside face cramped, damp and noisy conditions.

Despite their protected status, the future of these homes - and their inhabitants - hangs in balance, say architects, as residents struggle to afford their upkeep and the state flip-flops over how best to preserve the crumbling heritage of Vietnam's capital.

"When I was a kid, I remember this was a beautiful house," said Tri of the 1930s villa where he was born, which weaves local design and elements of the Art Deco movement.

"It was romantic. I could hear the bell



from the post office and the sound of the train in Hanoi station."

But since then, the outer shell of his home has begun to crumble and inside "the structure of the house has been deformed" as families built makeshift extensions, trying to eke out a little more space, Tri told AFP.

Cracks are spreading across the walls, ceilings and balconies, and clay tiles plunge from the wide, overhanging roof - prompting his family's decision to

move out.

Damage and collapse

The listed villas - now often hidden behind cafes, noodle shops and fashion boutiques - were built by both, French and Vietnamese architects, for their wealthy compatriots working under the colonial power.

When the French left in 1954, thousands of these homes were taken over by the communist government and turned into offices, while authorities required any

collapse.

"Those built at the beginning of the 20th century need continuous renovation and maintenance every 20 to 30 years, it should not be longer," he said.

In 2015, two people died when a villa built in 1905 - and home to around 20 people - fell to pieces.

US\$1mn restoration

Authorities first drew up regulations to protect the villas in 2013, but have gone back and forth over the path forward for the homes.

A large swathe of villas has already been razed, Anh says, while in April the city announced a plan to sell 600 of those owned by the state, before retracting the idea just days later.

Now, Hanoi says, it aims to renovate 60 by 2025, but faces long drawn-out negotiations to convince each and every res-



owners still in Vietnam to divide up their property and give portions to poor Vietnamese.

Some private owners, such as Tri, are now keen to escape the villas for modern apartments, but others prefer to stay despite the poor conditions and without knowing if their homes will survive the coming decades.

"I have been living here my whole life, so I don't want to move anywhere else," said 65-year-old Hoang Chung Thuy, who shares her three-storey villa with 10 other households, a seafood restaurant, a clothes shop, and a tea stall.

She cannot fix the crumbling walls without approval and money from her neighbours upstairs but she is determined not to leave the house her grandparents built.

Tran Huy Anh of the Hanoi Architect Association says without proper maintenance, these buildings risk damage and

ident to move.

It had taken a decade for the first project - US\$1 million restoration of an old villa - to begin. But now, the city is determined to return the house to its former glory, says Pham Tuan Long, an architect and chairman of Hoan Kiem district, where this villa and Tri's are found.

"We are trying to preserve the original elements and architectural values as much as possible by using traditional materials and traditional renovation techniques," Long said.

Just a few streets away, Tri packs up his home, uncertain of its future. Moving out is difficult, he says, but even harder is imagining a time when the house is no longer standing.

"It has been a part of my life. This house is the place where I was born, got married, had kids," he said. "But we can't get out of this situation."

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Guests visit the exhibition 'Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams' during a media preview at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in Tokyo.

'DESIGNER OF DREAMS'

CHRISTIAN DIOR

Tokyo exhibit showcases Dior's passion for Japan

A hit exhibition showcasing Christian Dior's work opens in Tokyo this week with a focus on the French designer's fascination with Japan and the country's influence on his pieces.

'Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams' arrives in Japan after drawing huge crowds in Paris, London and New York. Opening Wednesday, the exhibition features 350 haute couture dresses - including Japan-inspired gowns displayed in settings intended to pay tribute to Japanese culture.

Architect Shohei Shigematsu created structures including a room covered with an undulating three-dimensional facade constructed from translucent traditional washi paper pasted over wooden frames.

"When Dior makes a skirt, there is a structure and then the fabric is laid on top of it," he told AFP. "I was asked to create a Japanese traditional structure, so I thought about shoji screens, for example, which have a wooden structure and are covered with paper."

Each section features a different interior design intended to show various parts



of Japanese culture.

"There is a section inspired by an orderly tatami room separated by sliding doors. But not everything in Japan is simple and minimal," he said. "We have different designs like Japanese gardens and flashy kimonos. I wanted to show the sides of Japan people don't know."

The Dior house first presented a show in Japan in 1953, and the designer had a well-known fascination with the country.

"Dior had a lot of respect for traditional Japanese culture and he wrote about it in his memoir," curator Florence Muller told AFP. "I think there is a mutual fascination between France and Japan."

Starting in the 1950s, Dior also collaborated with Japanese companies, giving them the rights to adapt and reproduce Dior looks to cater to local tastes.

In a sign of the brand's popularity, Japan's former empress Michiko chose a



Dior gown made from Japanese textiles when she married then-prince Akihito in 1959.

The Tokyo show, which runs until May 28, includes archive pieces as well as works by more recent creative directors, and showcases several items inspired by Japan.

Among them is a John Galliano coat with 'The Great Wave Off Kanagawa' print emblazoned on the base of its full

skirt, and robes cinched with Japanese obi-style belts created by Raf Simons.

Dior's austere jacket dress named 'Rashomon' - the name of a Japanese novel and film directed by the legendary Akira Kurosawa - is also on display.

"This exhibition shows the mutual respect between Japan and France in their approach to crafts, fashion, design and art," said Shigematsu.

AFP



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