



Oman gets credit rating boost

S&P GLOBAL RATINGS RAISED ITS LONG-TERM FOREIGN AND LOCAL CURRENCY SOVEREIGN CREDIT RATINGS OF OMAN TO 'BB+'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The world's largest rating agency has upgraded Oman's sovereign credit rating for the second time in less than a year, reflecting the improved 'resilience' of the sultanate's economy to external shocks.

On Friday, S&P Global Ratings raised its long-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings of Oman to 'BB+' from 'BB', thanks to the government's broader structural reforms and a continued positive outlook for the oil sector.

Last week, Fitch Ratings also upgraded Oman's long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating to 'BB+' from 'BB' with a stable outlook. This upgrade, the rating agency stated, is a result of Oman's use of high oil revenues to reduce debt and extend its maturity, disciplined spending to reduce external risks, and an increase in Fitch's oil price forecast.

S&P also affirmed Oman's short-term ratings at 'B' on Friday, with the long-term ratings maintaining a stable outlook.

'The upgrade (of the sultanate's ratings) reflects the improved resilience of the Omani economy to external shocks, driven by continued positive prospects for the oil sector, sovereign balance sheet deleveraging and broader structural reforms,' S&P said in a statement.

It anticipates that high oil prices will continue to support Oman's fiscal surpluses and the government's efforts to reduce debt. Important government reforms, such as the reorganisation of government-related entities, are also starting to yield results, improving operational efficiency and strengthening the financial profiles of these individual companies, according to S&P.

In 2022, Oman achieved a fiscal surplus of 1.8% of GDP, fol-



lowing eight years of occasional substantial deficits. S&P expects ongoing fiscal surpluses to be maintained, averaging 1.4% over the period until 2024, supported by growth in government revenues and expenditures averaging about 3% and 4%, respectively.

S&P anticipates that Brent oil prices will average US\$83 per barrel in 2023 and US\$85 in 2024 and beyond. 'This will support the government's efforts to use ongoing fiscal surpluses for debt repayment. We estimate that government debt will decrease to 38% of GDP in 2023, down from close to 40% in 2022,' stated the rating agency.

Fiscal reforms continue

S&P expects Oman's govern-

ment to continue its fiscal and economic reforms momentum over 2023-2026. However, as oil prices remain high, the government has moderated some measures to support economic activity and reduce the impact of past austerity measures on the population, the rating agency noted.

'While revenue will continue to be heavily reliant on oil and gas receipts, the Omani government has been working to reduce the budget's dependence on these in line with its Medium-Term Fiscal Plan, which is currently being updated. We expect the government will focus on improving corporate tax administration and collection to strengthen non-hydrocarbon receipts,' S&P said.

See also [Page 04](#)

Ten-place improvement in Global Innovation Index in 2023

Muscat - Oman has made a significant leap - up ten places - in the Global Innovation Index 2023 issued by the World Intellectual Property Organization.

Currently, Oman holds the 69th position among 132 economies assessed for their innovation capabilities. This upward movement highlights the nation's concerted efforts to enhance innovation across various sectors.

Regionally, Oman ranks tenth among 18 economies assessed in Northern Africa and Western



Asia. It shows its strongest performance in human capital and research, infrastructure and institutions, with global rankings of 52nd, 61st and 62nd respectively. However, room for improvement exists, particularly in

The substantial jump was the result of joint efforts between various national institutions and programmes dedicated to enhancing innovation indicators

H E DR SAIF BIN ABDULLAH AL HADDABI

business sophistication, creative outputs, and knowledge and technology outputs, where Oman ranks 95th, 79th and 75th respectively.

Notably, Oman marked its position among the top 20 coun-

tries globally in five sub-indices. It stood second in the percentage of science and engineering graduates, ninth in government spending per student, 16th in availability of information and communication systems tech-

nologies, and 19th in both business enabler policies and work productivity sub-indices.

A substantial 93-place jump in the work productivity sub-index is a testament to Oman's ongoing developmental strides.

For the 13th year in a row, Switzerland is the most innovative economy in 2023 followed by Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom and Singapore.

H E Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi, Undersecretary for Scientific Research and Innovation

in the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation and Head of the National Team to Improve Oman's Performance in the Global Innovation Index, confirmed that the substantial jump was the result of joint efforts between various national institutions and programmes dedicated to enhancing innovation indicators.

He elaborated that the team initiated concerted efforts following the release of the innovation report last year.

► NEWS BRIEF

OIA LAUNCHES SECOND JOINT FUND WITH SPAIN

Madrid, Spain - Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has expanded its collaboration with Spain's government-owned Cofides announcing the launch of Spain-Oman Private Equity Fund II.

This development took place during the annual meeting of the International Forum for Sovereign Wealth Funds in Madrid on Saturday.

The new fund aims to draw more companies to the Omani market. This strategy promises the inflow of technical expertise and knowledge from Spanish companies into Oman.



Ons Jabeur wins her fifth WTA title in Ningbo Open



Beatboxers battle in Britain as global community grows

MHT to consolidate tourism sector amidst challenges

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Addressing the financial hurdles faced by some investors, H E Salem bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, has assured that the ministry is actively collaborating with sector partners to formulate robust solutions.

Targeting an investment volume of RO3bn between 2021 and 2025, the minister acknowledged the existing financial and partnership challenges within the industry. "A programme is being worked out to come up with a set of appropriate solutions to the most prominent challenges in the tourism sector," he said.

The minister highlighted the consistent growth in Oman's tourism sector despite these challenges. He was optimistic that tourism's contribution to the GDP will reach 2.75% in the next two years, from 2.4% at the end of 2022. Last year, the tourism sector contributed RO1.1bn to the GDP, marking a 33% increase from 2021. The country saw a remarkable 47.3% surge in tourism income in 2022, totalling RO1.9bn.

In view of a steady rise in both domestic and international tourist numbers, H E Mahrouqi unveiled an extensive plan to boost all facets of tourism. The coming year will see the launch of major international events, including ITB Berlin 2024, where Oman is the official partner.

Emphasising workforce development in tourism, he informed about a special programme aligned with the National Employment Programme. This initiative is set to enhance Omanisation of jobs,



Tourism's contribution to the GDP will reach 2.75% in the next two years, from 2.4% at the end of 2022. Last year, the tourism sector contributed RO1.1bn to the GDP

H E SALEM AL MAHROUQI

provide training, establish professional standards and qualify Omanis for managerial positions in premier hotels.

Acknowledging the potential environmental impact of intensified tourist traffic, H E Mahrouqi said MHT is committed to sustainability. A dedicated programme covers economic, social and environmental aspects to ensure local communities benefit from tourism without detrimental effects on the environment.

The minister stressed the importance of clear policies and procedures, especially considering the ongoing global climate challenges that permeate various sectors, including tourism. This approach consolidates Oman's commitment to a resilient and sustainable tourism sector, promising continued growth and community development.

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

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Oman Sail's 49er team of Musab al Hadi and Walid al Kindi arrived home on Friday following the sultanate's first-ever silver medal at the Asian Games.

This win marked the end of a 13-year medal drought for Oman, earning the team automatic qualification to the Asian Qualification Regatta in Chon Buri, Thailand in December.

Returning to a hero's welcome at Muscat International Airport, the team has now set its sight on confirming a place in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

Dr Khamis al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail, commended the pair's exceptional performance, describing it as a culmination of years of dedicated training and planning. He thanked all the support staff for their unwavering

Our journey in sailing spans years, and the key factors behind our success are continuous development, unceasing training and fostering synergy among team members

WALID AL KINDI

commitment, emphasising the anticipation of more wins in upcoming championships and Olympic qualifiers.

Echoing Jabri's sentiments, Hashim al Rashdi, Head Coach at Oman Sail, hailed the win as a result of intensive preparations and continuous training. He high-



lighted the stiff competition faced by the team from top professionals across Asia, underlining the achievement as an addition to Oman's robust sports legacy.

In his homecoming comments, Hadi voiced the team's collective pride and commitment to high performance, while Kindi highlighted the years of training and team synergy as key to their success.

"Our journey in sailing spans years, and the key factors behind our success are continuous development, unceasing training and fostering synergy among team members," Kindi added.

"We have also sought to harness the experience of international exposure whenever the opportunity arose. I am immensely proud of our accomplishments and hope that this milestone serves as inspiration

for all athletes in Oman, demonstrating that winning medals is not an insurmountable feat but an attainable goal through relentless effort and meticulous planning."

This commendable feat echoes the legacy of Mohammed al Malki who in 1986, won a bronze medal in the 400m race at the Seoul Asian Games. Malki once again proved his mettle, this time securing a gold medal in the same 400m race at the 1990 Beijing Asian Games.

In 1998, Omani athletes made the nation proud by clinching a bronze in the 4x100m relay at the Bangkok Asian Games. More recently at the 2010 Guangzhou Games, Omani athletes added another bronze medal - particularly through Barakat al Harthy's exceptional performance - in the 4x100m relay

Our Correspondent

Muscat

The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, will celebrate the Omani Day of Physical Activity on Monday.

An open event will be held targeting all citizens and residents of the sultanate, regardless of gender, at Al Sahwa Park to observe the day.

Saud bin Badr Ambusaidi, Assistant Director General of Sports Activities at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and head of the supervisory committee of the event, stated, "The



He emphasised that observing the day is in response to the rising statistics of chronic diseases and the accelerating increase in physical inactivity rates in Oman.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth aims to promote a culture of physical activity in the workplace, contributing to increased productivity, and changing lifestyles and routine by shifting individual preferences towards physical activities that will benefit them in the long run. It also aims to create a sports community atmosphere by organising various competitive and recreational sports activities and programmes.

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Represented by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the sultanate is set to host the annual meeting of the International Forum for Sovereign Wealth Funds in November 2024.

Nasser Sulaiman al Harithi, Vice-President of Operations at OIA, described the Muscat meeting as a golden opportunity to enhance Oman's global profile and draw foreign investments. Participants will include heads of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, collectively exceeding US\$8tn in assets, accounting for

80% of the global sovereign
wealth fund assets.

This assembly will forge new partnerships and acquaint the leaders with Oman's rich natural resources and investment opportunities, thereby amplifying its global footprint and luring foreign capital.

Harithi emphasised the event's potential of bolstering long-term investment relationships, significantly aiding in economic diversification and growth of Oman's national economy.

Marking the first meeting of its kind in the Middle East since Qatar hosted it in 2014, the event is anticipated to consolidate

OIA's global stature, underscoring its commitment to international norms, principles and rules.

Harithi highlighted the authority's adherence to the Santiago Principles, recognised unified standards ensuring transparency and accountability, and risk management of sovereign wealth funds, further reinforcing its global recognition and commitment to excellence.

Initially an observer member at the forum's inception in 2009, OIA achieved full membership on March 9, 2015 reflecting its ongoing dedication to global best practices in governance and investment management.

HILAL TARIQ AL BARWANI IS A YOUNG COMPUTER ENTHUSIAST WHO ENJOYS WRITING AND SPEAKING ON COMPUTERS AND TECHNOLOGY

Out shopping for boxing gloves at a mall in Muscat recently, I couldn't help but notice how well secured malls and public places are these days. One of the first things that caught my eye were the CCTV surveillance cameras positioned in every corner of the mall, watching each and every move customers make wherever they are. I also noticed how most clothing shops installed anti-theft equipment outside their shops which create a loud sound whenever someone with an unpaid or stolen item passes by to prevent theft. These are only a few examples of what security systems in public places look like today.



evolution of technology, what would these security systems look like in the near future? And could we see any of these predictions come true here in Oman, especially in the area of digital security?

With advancements, we could be soon seeing surveillance camera solutions providers like Dahua and Hikvi-

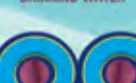
sion integrate high-level precision AI into their cameras. Through deep learning, the cameras will be able to detect any suspicious behaviour and theft attempts, which will then lead to it sending an alert to security personnel. And if these intelligent systems are installed in places where only authorised individuals can enter, the cameras would be able to identify who can enter and who can't. We may see fewer security personnel and operations staff due to automated and self-reliant systems in place to do the job.

But what about security personnel who walk around malls? Yes, these may be replaced with technology. We could possibly see public places use automated AI driving drones for security. Equipping AI-integrated cameras

with these drones would advance the camera's mobility allowing it to scan each and every corner of the mall while detecting any suspicious behaviour and reporting back on the same. Why need a physical security staff if I can get a few AI driven drones to do the job?

Replacing security officers and employees by robots, thanks to advancements in technology, is a scary but apparent possibility. Anything is possible with the way AI has been developing. No one's sure what the future holds for us in digital security, but with the way technology is advancing, we could see loads more happening. One thing is for sure, drones flying while robots roam around will be the next thing in the evolution of AI in digital security.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of **Muscat Daily** or Apex Press & Publishing. The writer can be reached at hilal@tarig.net



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Vaping: A rising concern amidst health implications



There's a misconception that vaping is a solution to curb smoking, but it's the young ones who are inadvertently introduced to this dangerous habit

DR JAWAD AL LAWATI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

On a leisurely walk along the cornice or in the lanes of Ghubra and Shatti al Qurum, it has become increasingly common to see individuals, most the youth, blissfully vaping. Despite Oman's stringent regulations against vaping, its allure has undeniably penetrated Omani society, prompting a serious debate over its health implications.

Expressing concern, Dr Jawad

al Lawati, a senior consultant in public health focused on tobacco control, said, "There are no definitive studies delineating the health risks of vaping yet. However, its many pitfalls are apparent. Some vaping devices contain nicotine increasing risks of passive smoking and introducing children to the habit."

Dr Lawati emphasised that while vaping is marketed as a 'healthy' alternative to conventional smoking, sufficient research on the subject is lacking.

Alarmingly, with nearly 20,000 flavours available to vapers, children are often lured to these enticing aromas.

"There's a misconception that vaping is a solution to curb smoking, but it's the young ones who are inadvertently introduced to this dangerous habit."

In 2015, Oman imposed a ban on vaping, with penalties reaching up to RO500 for selling. Despite this, smuggling from countries like the UAE and England remains a challenge.

Dr Laila Najeeb, pulmonologist at Badr al Samaa, Al Khoud is concerned about popularity of e-cigarettes, especially among young adults. She highlighted the fact that the majority of these devices contain nicotine - the same addictive substance found in traditional tobacco products. "When individuals become addicted, their bodies grow dependent on the substance. The absence of this substance can lead to unpleasant withdrawal symptoms."

According to Dr Laila, a current

trend also suggests a heightened risk for vapers to gravitate towards other tobacco products.

Additionally, certain flavouring agents present in e-liquids have been known to cause respiratory irritation. Cases of Vaping Associated Lung Injury (EVALI) have also been documented, further fueling health apprehensions.

"While some individuals argue that e-cigarettes aided them in quitting traditional smoking, research in this area remains divided. Notably, a single vape pod may contain as much nicotine as an entire pack of cigarettes, underscoring the risks associated with this alternative smoking method," said Dr Laila.

Sharing his perspective, a banker who is an avid vaper, said, "While vaping seems a harmless alternative to some, I am acutely aware of the dangers. Many e-cigarette liquids contain harmful levels of nicotine."

Highlighting the risks, in February 2020, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported 2,807 cases of vaping-associated lung injuries and 68 resultant deaths.

The CDC identified vitamin E acetate, commonly used in tetrahydrocannabinol vaping products, as a potential culprit behind these injuries.



MHT to hold road shows in GCC, starting from Kuwait

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) is set to conduct a road show in Kuwait on Sunday with the aim of spotlighting Oman's rich heritage and diverse tourism offerings.

Timed with the winter tourism season, which begins in October, MHT anticipates a significant uptick in tourist interest and engagement.

Haitham bin Mohammed al Ghassani, Director General of Promotion in MHT, highlighted the planned expansion of this promotional road show to other Gulf nations, including Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE.



The road shows aim to attract - especially during the winter season - both citizens and residents of various nationalities from the GCC states

HAITHAM AL GHASSANI

The events will witness participation of 15 local companies - travel agencies, tour operators, hotels and destination management companies of Oman.

More than 1.42mn tourists from the GCC states arrived in Oman in 2022 - and 637,000 in the first half of 2023 - underscoring the region's significance as a source market. The road shows will not only promote the diverse tourism experiences available across all governorates of Oman but also highlight investment opportunities in unique tourism segments such as historic tourist villages and beach adventure tourism, Ghassani informed.

The road shows will include meetings, visual presentations and bilateral discussions, all designed to enhance Oman's profile as a rich tourist destination.

"The goal is to present Oman as an ideal locale for tourism and target groups in regional and international markets, with its vibrant range of offered activities and experiences."

The road shows aim to attract - especially during the winter season - both citizens and residents of various nationalities from the GCC states, given the high percentage of the latter in these countries.

By introducing regional companies to key tourism components in Oman and providing updates on the latest developments and special promotions in the tourism sector, the road shows are set to play a vital role in bolstering tourism and enhancing Oman's reputation as a preferred tourist destination in the Gulf region.

MoE launches Renewable Energy Award for students

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In an effort to underline the critical role of renewable energy and its significance in daily life, the Ministry of Education (MoE), backed by Petroleum Development Oman, has announced the sixth iteration of the PDO Renewable Energy Award for the academic year 2023/2024.

This initiative, under the theme 'Zero Carbon Neutrality', is directed at students from Grades 7 to 12 across both public and private schools.



The award strives to bolster the understanding and adoption of renewable energy among students as a tangible alternative to traditional fossil fuels. It stands as a clarion call for innovative approaches to curtail carbon emissions, fostering technical skills and environmental awareness among the youth. 'This proactive approach directly contributes to the wider environmental goals of reducing the adverse impacts on our planet,' a press release said.

Coinciding with the award's announcement, a promotional film and bilingual posters were

unveiled, encouraging student participation.

A registration link is now accessible for prospective entrants on MoE's social media accounts, providing detailed information on the award's prerequisites. Additionally, to further support and guide participants, a series of remote training sessions and workshops will be conducted by seasoned experts.

The award's progression encompasses four stages: announcement, initial screening, evaluation of submissions and final evaluation. The culmination

will see the victorious teams announced at Oman Sustainability Week, scheduled from April 28 to May 2, 2024 at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Since its inception in 2017/2018, the award has consistently amplified the emphasis on renewable energy's practical applications in daily life. It champions real-world implementation and production of renewable energy solutions within and beyond school premises, reinforcing the award's enduring commitment to fostering a sustainable, energy-efficient future for all.

Oman to participate in Expo 2023 Doha

Doha, Qatar - Oman is participating in Expo 2023 in Doha under the slogan 'Green Desert, Better Environment'.

The exhibition is set to begin on Monday and will continue till March 28, 2024. It is the first 'Expo for Horticulture' to be organised in the dry desert climate of the Middle East and North Africa region with the aim of promoting sustainable innovations and combating desertification.

The exhibition will focus on several areas related to sustainability, environmental awareness, technology and innovation, as well as modern agriculture.

Oman is committed to achieving sustainable development, preserving the environ-



ment, and biodiversity for both current and future generations. It is one of the countries that has placed significant emphasis on modern agriculture within the priorities of Oman Vision 2040, which aims to achieve agricultural sustainability, food security and rural development in the country.

Oman also employs modern technologies and agricultural practices such as hydroponics, protected structure agriculture, organic farming and advanced irrigation techniques to increase productivity, improve the efficiency of water and energy resource utilisation, while developing infrastructure proj-

ects to support the agricultural sector. This includes improving rural roads and providing necessary logistics services for farmers.

Oman's participation in Expo 2023 Doha is represented by the Omani Pavilion spread over 900sqm. The pavilion will feature a majlis and a store for selling agricultural products, with the participation of a number of government agencies, including ministries, the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, and private agencies. The Omani pavilion includes a garden of authentic Omani trees, representing the richness and diversity of Omani nature.

INVITATION TO TENDER

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9 October 2023

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Oman's economy to grow by 2% on average during 2023-2026, S&P says

Our Correspondent
Muscat

S&P Global Ratings expects Oman's real GDP to grow by an average of approximately 2% per year during the 2023-2026 period.

However, the rating agency anticipates that OPEC+ related oil production cuts will slow the sultanate's economic growth to about 1% in 2023.

"Oman is a voluntary adherent to the OPEC+ agreement. We expect the hydrocarbon sector output to remain relatively stable, with the decline in oil production offset by an increase in condensate and gas production," S&P stated in its announcement while upgrading Oman's sovereign credit rating to 'BB+' from 'BB' on Friday.

S&P forecasts Oman's non-hydrocarbon economy to grow by around 2% this year. It added that a likely increase in hydrocarbon production should stimulate economic growth in 2024 and 2025.

According to the rating agency, Oman's economy heavily relies on the oil sector, accounting for approximately 30%



of GDP, 60% of goods exports, and 70% of government fiscal receipts.

"This dependency influences our assessment of Oman's fiscal and external resilience, and we factor this into the rating," S&P noted.

In S&P's perspective, Oman's monetary policy flexibility is limited due to the rial being pegged to the US dollar. Nevertheless, the peg has effectively anchored inflation expectations, particularly since oil contracts are typi-

cally priced in dollars. 'We expect the [currency] peg to continue being supported by Oman's relatively high foreign currency reserves and government external assets,' S&P noted.

The rating agency anticipates that the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) will continue to align with the interest rate policy of the US Federal Reserve, given the sultanate's currency peg.

Over the past one and a half years, Oman's central bank has

closely followed each rate hike by the US Fed as the US central bank pursued an aggressive tightening cycle to combat inflation, resulting in Oman raising its key policy rate to 6.00% in 11 successive rate revisions since March 2022.

Following the recent announcement by the Fed to maintain key interest rates unchanged, the CBO has also decided to keep its repo rate unchanged for local banks at 6.00%.

Rusail Industrial City gets RO766mn investment

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Rusail Industrial City, affiliated with the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), witnessed remarkable growth during the first half of 2023.

The cumulative investment volume in Rusail Industrial City reached RO766mn at the end of the first half of this year, with a growth rate of 1.62% compared to the same period last year, according to an Oman News Agency report.

Eng Mohsin bin Zahran al Hinai, CEO of Rusayl Industrial City, said that the industrial city currently accounts for 10.5% of the total cumulative investment volume in all industrial cities affiliated with Madayn.

He said the number of investment contracts in the industrial city reached 484 contracts, including 368 industrial, 23 commercial, 24 services, 46 logistics, six real estate, 16 basic service providers, and one development contract.

"These contracts were distributed among 396 productive projects in various sectors such as chemicals, electric batteries, building materials, fiber optic cables, foodstuffs, textiles and ready-made clothing, stationery, dyes, filters, furniture, and others," he added.

Hinai said that as many as 19,854 workers are working in



Eng Mohsin bin Zahran al Hinai

Rusail Industrial City, with an Omanization ratio of 34%. The total area of Rusail Industrial City is 10.866mn square meters.

He confirmed that Madayn continues to implement vital projects in Rusail Industrial City as part of its constant endeavour to provide more incentives and services that facilitate the process of local and foreign investment in its industrial cities and promote the growth of in-

dustries related to the sector.

In this regard, he pointed out that several vital projects were recently completed in the Rusayl Industrial City, most notably the second-phase expansion project with a total cost of RO33mn.

Hinai updated that the implementation of internal roads in Rusail Industrial City has been completed, which will enhance the flow of traffic and provide a link between the current industrial city and the main road between the governorates of Muscat and Al Dakhiliyah.

He added that within the second-phase expansion project, a sewage station with a capacity of 4,800 cubic meters per day was established, connected to a sewage network and a rainwater drainage network, in addition to a 15km-long water network for human use and fire extinguishing.

Saudi Aramco announces its first global LNG deal

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Sudi Aramco on Thursday announced its first global investment in liquefied natural gas (LNG), part of a broader bid by the energy giant to expand beyond oil.

The company seen as the jewel of the Saudi economy said it would acquire a minority stake worth \$500mn in MidOcean Energy, which is managed by the US investment firm EIG.

"We anticipate strong demand-led growth for LNG as the world continues on its energy transition journey, with gas being a vital fuel and feedstock in various industries," Aramco CEO Amin Nasser said in a statement.

"We believe that gas will be important in meeting the world's rising need for secure, accessible and more sustainable energy."

He noted that the deal "marks Aramco's first international investment in LNG".

Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest crude oil exporter, owns 90% of Aramco's shares and is depending on its revenue for Crown Prince Mohammed bin



Salman's sweeping economic and social reform programme known as Vision 2030, which aims to shift the economy away from fossil fuels.

Aramco wants to become "a leading global LNG player", the firm's upstream president Nasir al-Naimi said in Thursday's statement, adding that it sees "significant opportunities in this market, which is positioned for structural, long-term growth".

MidOcean Energy "is currently in the process of acquiring interests in four Australian LNG projects, with a growth strategy to create a diversified global LNG business," the

statement said. Aramco reported record profits totalling \$161.1bn last year, allowing the kingdom to notch up its first annual budget surplus in nearly a decade, though year-on-year performance fell during the first two quarters of 2023.

Aramco has pledged to achieve "operational net-zero" carbon emissions by 2050.

That applies to emissions that are produced directly by Aramco's industrial sites, but not the CO2 produced when clients burn Saudi oil in their cars, power plants and furnaces.

Oil prices rise 3% last week

Muscat - Global oil prices increased up to three per cent during the week ending September 29 amid tight global supply concerns coupled with increased demand expectations.

International benchmark Brent crude traded at \$94.03 per barrel on Friday, increasing by around 2.25% relative to the closing price of \$91.96 a barrel on Friday previous week.

The US benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) was trading at \$92.81 a barrel at the same time on Friday, up 3.08% from previous Friday's session, which closed at \$90.03 per barrel.

The world's two largest oil producers, Russia and Saudi Arabia, have cut back on production, raising supply fears that have driven prices to their highest point this year.

Both countries have agreed to cut output by around 1.3mn barrels per day (bpd) until the end of the year.

Exacerbating supply concerns further, the Russian government announced plans last week to limit the export of gasoline and diesel fuel until fuel supplies and prices stabilize on the domestic market.

Although Russia's diesel and gasoline exports are less than the country's crude oil shipments, the



export embargo before the winter and ongoing supply concerns have heightened market jitters.

The surge in demand in the US and China, the world's biggest oil consumers, also supported the upward price movement during the week.

The Energy Information Administration reported on Wednesday that US oil inventories decreased by about 2.2mn barrels compared to the American Petroleum Institute's expectation of an increase of about

1.6mn barrels.

The unexpected decline in inventories signals an upswing in demand in the US. Furthermore, robust economic data from China, the world's top oil importer, is signaling rising demand and bolstering prices.

China's week-long autumn festival holiday that begins Friday is anticipated to drive fuel demand with an anticipated rise in the number of travelers over the holiday.

Agencies

UK approves new North Sea oil production, angering green groups

London, UK - Britain has authorised oil and gas production in its largest undeveloped field to bolster its energy security, one week after the government diluted its net zero targets, triggering further condemnation by environmentalists.

Norwegian oil and gas producer Equinor and Ithaca Energy, a subsidiary of Israeli group Delek, will together invest \$3.8bn in developing the Rosebank field in the North Sea off the coast of Scotland.

The North Sea Transition Au-

thority, a UK oil and gas regulator, said it had "granted development and production consent for the Rosebank field, north-west of Shetland". Equinor has an 80% interest in the project and Ithaca the remainder.

"Rosebank stands as the largest undeveloped field in the UK," said Gilad Myerson, executive chairman at Ithaca Energy.

"The Rosebank project will create thousands of jobs and contribute significantly to securing the UK's energy needs for many years to come," he added.



Climate activists hold placards as they protest against the Rosebank oil field project in central London on Saturday (AFP)

The UK government maintains it must beef up energy security via continued production of fossil fuels following the invasion of Ukraine by key producer Russia, even if it means pushing back its target on net zero carbon emissions.

"As we make the transition to renewables, we will still need oil and gas - it makes sense to use our own supplies such as Rosebank," said Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"This is the right long-term

decision for the UK's energy security."

Asked about the controversial field, Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for UN chief Antonio Guterres, said that what "the Secretary-General believes is that we need accelerated climate ambition, we don't need backtracking".

"He has repeatedly also said that the world will not be able to use all of the oil and gas that we've already discovered," he added.

AFP

Moody's upgrades GIB ratings

Muscat - Moody's Investors Service on Friday upgraded Gulf International Bank's (GIB's) long-term foreign currency deposit rating to A3 from Baa1, the foreign currency senior unsecured debt rating to A3 from Baa1 and maintained a positive outlook on both ratings.

The rating upgrades were driven by Moody's upgrade of the bank's baseline credit assessment (BCA) and adjusted BCA to ba1 from ba2. Concurrently, the foreign currency provisional senior unsecured medium-term note (MTN) programme and subordinated MTN programme ratings have been upgraded to (P)A3 and (P)Baa2 from (P)Baa1 and (P)Baa3, respectively.

In a statement, Moody's said its upgrade of GIB's BCA to ba1 from ba2 reflects the bank's sustained improvement in asset risk and profitability indicators following years of balance sheet clean-up efforts as well as favourable asset diversification and supportive operating conditions in Saudi Arabia where bulk of its lending is conducted.

Although GIB's lending is concentrated in the GCC region - the bulk of it in Saudi Arabia (61.1% of total loans as of December 2022) - total loans only represented around 38% of total assets over the same period while the rest of the bank's asset base mainly comprises highly rated fixed-income securities from Europe, North America, and Asia.

This compares to regional peers that typically hold around 70% of assets in the form of loans. Moody's therefore expects GIB's overall asset risk profile to remain relatively resilient owing to the bank's more conservative asset composition.

According to Moody's, GIB's has solid capital adequacy, with tangible common equity ratio at 11.6% as of June 2023 (12.7% at December 2022).

US auto strike expands as more workers joining

Washington, US – Another 7,000 members of the biggest US automobile workers' union have joined its already major strike against the country's "Big Three" Detroit car manufacturers.

The latest walkouts leave a total of some 25,000 workers on strike in 21 states – or around 17% of the United Auto Workers' membership.

UAW president Shawn Fain said the latest members to join the strike were at two plants in Chicago and Michigan, who downed tools at 1600 GMT.

"Our courageous members at these two plants are the next wave of reinforcements in our fight for record contracts," Fain said.

The industrial action is the first-ever joint strike at the major automakers – Ford, GM and Chrysler producer Stellantis – in a push for higher salaries and other improvements.

Fain noted however that he would not call on additional members to suspend their activity at Stellantis due to "significant progress" on several points currently under discussion.

Fain mentioned a mechanism for adjusting salaries to the cost of living as well as the right to strike in the event of a site closure or relocation announcement by the manufacturer.

The union has asked for a 40% pay raise over the next



UAW members and supporters march along a picket line during a strike outside of the Stellantis Chrysler Los Angeles Parts Distribution Center in Ontario, California (AFP)

four-year contract, while the three companies have been offering raises of around 20%.

It's also been negotiating to represent workers at battery plants planned by Ford, which the auto giant has so far resisted.

UAW has used the targeted strike, which began on September 15, as a bargaining chip, ramping up the pressure on the three automakers in a bid to reach a deal.

'Holding the deal hostage'

Ford President Jim Farley, who

has remained relatively silent until now, came out strongly Friday against Fain's negotiating tactics.

"I believe we could have reached a compromise on pay and benefits, but so far the UAW is holding the deal hostage over battery plants," he told reporters.

Fain later hit back. "I don't know why Jim Farley is lying about the state of negotiations. It could be because he failed to show up for bargaining this week, as he has for most of the past ten weeks," he said.

"If he were there, he'd know

we gave Ford a comprehensive proposal on Monday and still haven't heard back."

Ford recently paused construction at one of its plants, and warned it may have to scale back its ambitions for the project.

Stellantis said in a statement it has been "intensely working with the UAW to find solutions to the issues that are of most concern to our employees while ensuring the company can remain competitive."

"We have made progress in our discussions, but gaps remain," it said, adding it was com-

mitted to reaching "a fair and responsible agreement that gets everyone back to work as soon as possible."

The strike has ramped up the significance of Michigan's swing state status in the 2024 presidential election.

Earlier this week, Joe Biden became the first sitting US president to stand on a picket line, joining UAW members in Michigan in a bold pitch for blue collar votes against likely election rival Donald Trump.

Wearing a UAW baseball cap, the Democrat used a bullhorn to tell red-shirted workers they deserved "a hell of a lot more than what you're getting."

Trump's Republican party is typically hostile toward unions, though is often able to pick up significant numbers of working class votes. Trump spoke at a non-union auto facility in the Detroit suburbs saying that he wants "a future that protects American labor, not foreign labor."

On Friday, Fain called Biden's visit a "historic day."

"The most powerful man in the world shows up for one reason only," he said. "Because our solidarity is the most powerful force in the world."

"When we stand together united in the cause of economic and social justice, there's nothing we can't do," he added.

AFP



Key US inflation measure ticks up in August

Washington, US – The key US inflation measure used by the Federal Reserve to set interest rates ticked up again in August, fueled by rising energy prices, according to government data published Friday.

But aside from volatile food and energy costs, which are still painning Americans at grocery stores and gas pumps, inflation actually slowed last month to reach its lowest annual rate since 2021. This is a welcome development for policymakers hoping to slow price increases without crashing the economy.

The Fed has raised interest rates 11 times since March 2022 in a bid to tame inflation and bring it firmly down to its long-term target of two percent.

Although inflation has come down sharply in the last 12 months, it remains stuck stubbornly above the Fed's target, even increasing slightly over the summer, which has kept up the pressure on the central bank.

The annual personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index rose 3.5% in August, up 0.1 percentage point from last

month, the Commerce Department announced in a statement.

Month-over-month, PCE inflation increased by 0.4%, in line with the median expectation of economists surveyed by Briefing.com.

The move was fueled by an increase in energy prices, which climbed 6.1% from July, while food prices also rose slightly.

However, once volatile food and energy prices are stripped from the inflation figures, the picture looks far brighter.

So-called core inflation slowed to an annual rate of 3.9% in August, down sharply from recent months – its lowest level for almost two years.

Policymakers received more positive news Friday as the Commerce Department data showed US citizens' personal incomes grew by 0.4%.

"Overall, spending remains positive and inflation is slowing, which will be welcome news to policymakers," High Frequency Economics Chief US Economist Rubeela Farooqi wrote in a note to clients.

AFP



A traffic barrier is seen in front of the US Capitol as a government shut down looms in Washington, DC (AFP)

What happens if US government enters shutdown?

Washington, US – The United States is heading toward a government shutdown this weekend with no foreseeable way out of a deadlock in Congress over hard-line Republican calls for deep spending cuts.

The new US fiscal year begins on October 1, but sharp disagreements in the Republican Party over the scale of federal debt has prevented passage of the bills needed to keep the government funded and open.

The credit ratings agency Moody's warned this week that a shutdown would be "credit negative" for US sovereign debt, threatening its top-tier rating and raising the prospect of higher borrowing costs.

Here's what is likely to happen beginning Sunday if the US government shuts down.

No pay for federal workers

Hundreds of thousands of federal employees would be furloughed without pay, while members of the military and other workers deemed to be essential would continue working without a paycheck.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) union estimates a full shutdown

would mean almost 1.8mn federal workers would not be paid for the duration.

Around 850,000 non-essential workers would be furloughed, according to the non-partisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

Once a funding deal is reached these restrictions would be lifted and all affected employees would be paid retroactively, according to the AFGE.

Operations classified as essential will continue to operate.

In past shutdowns, this has meant that benefits checks have continued to be paid, while air traffic controllers, border patrol agents and hospital staff have remained on the job.

However, many services would likely be affected, including new applications for Social Security and Medicare, food and environmental site inspections, and national parks.

The longer a shutdown continues, the greater the impact would be.

Goldman Sachs economists have estimated that a shutdown would impact economic growth in the fourth quarter by 0.2 percentage points for every week it continues.

AFP

Eurozone inflation falls to nearly 2-year low

Brussels, Belgium – Eurozone inflation fell to an almost two-year low in September, official data showed Friday, raising hopes that the European Central Bank will end its rate-hiking cycle.

The ECB has increased rates repeatedly to tame red-hot inflation, but the pain is being felt across the eurozone economy.

Consumer prices in the 20-nation single currency bloc rose by an annual rate of 4.3%, according to data published by Eurostat, down from 5.2% in August.

It is the lowest since October 2021.

The figure beat a consensus forecast by analysts compiled by financial data firm FactSet which said inflation would slow to 4.5% in September.

But inflation remains well above the ECB's two-per cent target.



Eurozone inflation still remains well above the ECB's 2% target

Friday's data will spur hopes among investors that the ECB will pause its rate-hiking cycle, as the eurozone economy weakens and concerns mount about the burden on households and businesses from higher borrowing costs.

Core inflation, which strips out volatile energy, food, alcohol

and tobacco prices, also slowed in September, to 4.5% from 5.3% in August.

Core inflation is the key signal for the ECB.

"September's sharp drop in eurozone inflation was largely due to base effects, but core inflation also came in below expectations. This reinforces our view

that the ECB has finished raising interest rates," said Jack Allen-Reynolds, deputy chief eurozone economist at Capital Economics.

But he predicted any rate cuts will likely not come until late 2024.

ECB chief Christine Lagarde said Monday that she recognised the "pain" of the aggressive rate hikes but insisted they were necessary to tame inflation.

European governments, including France, have raised opposition to any further rate rises.

France's central bank governor Francois Villeroy de Galhau said Friday that the drop in core inflation "confirms that our current benchmark rates are appropriate" for the inflation fight.

In a video posted on LinkedIn, Villeroy de Galhau said he was confident that eurozone inflation would return toward the ECB's two-percent target by 2025.

Little respite

Inflation has steadily fallen since it reached a peak of 10.6% in October 2022 following the devastating effects of Russia's war on Ukraine across Europe. Economists warned, however, against expecting inflation to fall further enough to hit the ECB's target.

"Higher energy and wage costs do keep the risk alive that inflation could remain above target for longer than hoped," said ING's senior eurozone economist, Bert Colijn.

He pointed to the recent advance in oil prices and said he expected that "this will mainly push eurozone inflation higher at the start of next year".

Energy prices in the eurozone, however, dipped further in September, falling by 4.7% on the back of a drop of 3.3% the previous month.

AFP

UK economy grew more than expected in first quarter

London, UK – Britain's economy grew more than expected in the first quarter, revised official data showed Friday, but remains at risk of recession as high inflation weighs on the country.

UK gross domestic product grew 0.3% in the January-March period, up from an initial estimate of 0.1% expansion, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement.

GDP grew by 0.2% in the second quarter which meant the economy slowed compared with the first three months of the year instead of picking up speed as initially thought.

Analysts said the data changed little for the UK outlook, as the nation grapples with high inflation and interest rates that risk tipping the economy



UK GDP grew 0.3% in the January-March period

into recession.

"The data leaves the economy still only 0.6% above its level a year ago," noted Ruth Gregory, deputy chief UK economist at Capital Economics research group.

"It does not change the big picture that the economy has lagged behind all other G7 countries aside from Germany and France since the pandemic."

It is now thought that the UK

economy grew by 1.8% between the final quarter of 2019 – or before the start of the Covid pandemic – and the second quarter of this year, the ONS added Friday.

It previously said the UK

economy had shrunk slightly over the period.

The revised reading puts the country's economy ahead of Germany, which had growth of only 0.2% between the eve of the pandemic and second quarter of this year. France grew 1.7% over the same period, the ONS said.

However, UK growth lags the 6.1% output in the United States and Japan's 3.0% expansion in that time, Friday's release showed.

"The UK economy's performance during and since the Covid-19 pandemic looks much better in the wake of revisions to the national accounts," said Samuel Tombs, chief UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics.

AFP



Sharakah empowers Musandam entrepreneurs

As part of its entrepreneurship development initiative, Sharakah recently organised a 'Calculate it Right' workshop at the Atana hotel in Musandam.

The workshop, which had a clear focus on the importance of skill development and entrepreneurship, drew participation from successful entrepreneurs from in and around Musandam governorate. Senior undergraduate students specialising in finance, accounting, economics, and business management from various educational institutions within the region attended the workshop, a press release said.

The workshop, conducted by Umaina al Ghadani, investment manager at Sharakah, focused on the basic and advanced approaches of entrepreneurial development and how it can be imbibed to the participants.

Umaina disclosed, "In the on-

going 'Calculate it Right' workshops, participants are empowered to grasp the fundamental pillars of business initiation and acquire a comprehensive understanding of practical sales forecasts, project expenses, operational costs, resource requirements, and capital investments. Throughout every stage of life, having an entrepreneurial mindset holds significant value and can greatly benefit participants. The workshop encompassed a blend of lectures, hands-on activities like brainstorming, real case studies, and the exchange of experiences between participants and resource persons."

Faris al Harthy, co-host, said, "We believe the attendees have gained a comprehensive understanding of challenges, prospects, concerns, opportunities, and procedural aspects."

New GLC Coupe combines elegance and performance

Stylish design and dynamic driving pleasure - where the new GLC Coupe comes into its own. As the sporty sibling of the GLC SUV, it rounds off the best-selling Mercedes-Benz series of vehicles.

Before the GLC Coupe starts its engine, the first impression is elegance, dynamism, and off-road adventure. Striking proportions, dramatic surfaces, and precisely moulded edges define an unmistakable look, complemented by a clearly laid-out and high-quality interior, a press release said.

The GLC Coupe combines sporty performance with high efficiency. All models are equipped with electric drive technology, as a mild hybrid with 48-volt technology and an integrated starter-generator for an extra boost and energy recuperation.

The new GLC Coupe is at home on almost any terrain. Whether on or off the road, it impresses with its comfort and agility. The sports suspension is standard. Off the road, the Coupe scores with numerous



features such as 4MATIC all-wheel drive. The off-road screen and the 'transparent bonnet' as an element of the 360° camera enhance the comfort of the driving experience.

The high standards of the new GLC Coupe are evident in every detail. The hardware and software of the latest generation of the MBUX (Mercedes-Benz User

Experience) infotainment system offer even better user-friendliness. Brilliant driver and central display images make it easy to control vehicle and comfort functions.

The two LCD screens present clear and structured information. The full-screen navigation gives the driver the best possible route guidance. MBUX Augmented

Reality for navigation is available as an option while a camera registers the surroundings in front of the vehicle.

The central display shows the moving images and superimposes virtual objects, information and markers. These include traffic signs, directional arrows, lane-change recommendations, and house numbers, making navigation

much easier, especially in urban areas. Meanwhile, the 'Hey Mercedes' intuitive voice assistant is increasingly effective in responding to natural language and user preferences.

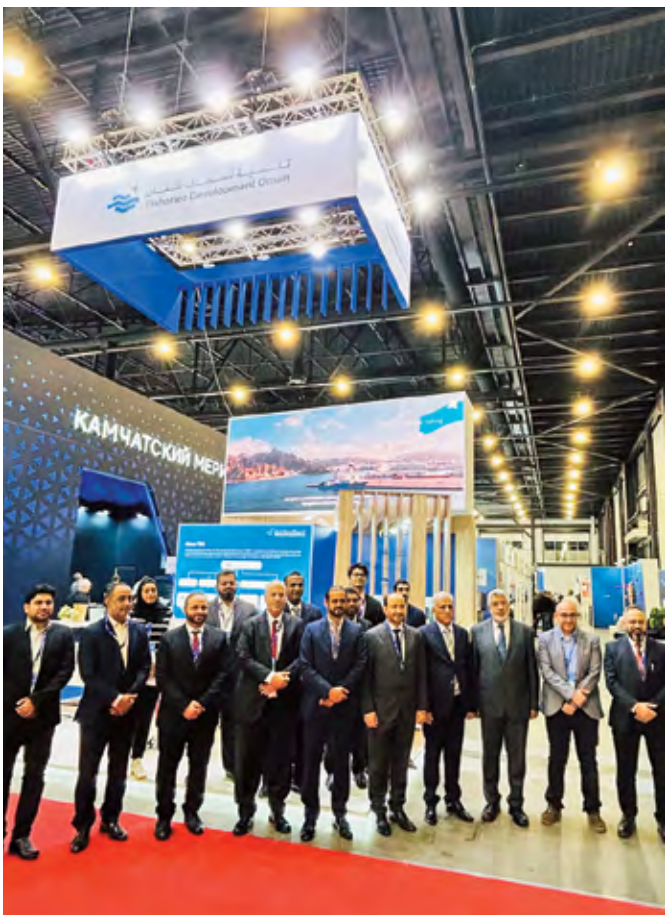
The dramatic surfaces continue to define the exterior design. It is enhanced with precisely moulded edges that accentuate the proportions.

FDO shines at Global Fishery Forum

Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), the force behind Oman's fisheries sector advancement, has just returned from its successful participation in the sixth Global Fishery Forum and Seafood Expo Russia 2023, held from September 27 to 29, in St Petersburg, Russia.

This event helped FDO, draw substantial attention from attendees who were enthralled by the diverse array of products and enticing investment prospects within Oman's thriving fisheries domain. FDO's presentation of its high-quality offerings reinforced its stature as a pivotal contributor to the global fisheries industry, a press release said.

This global powerhouse expo attracted over 100,000 visitors and witnessed active participation from more than 400 companies, alongside the contributions of 139 esteemed speakers, creating a convergence of industry luminaries, traders, and retailers.



Visitors to FDO's exhibition stand were impressed by the multifaceted investment avenues Oman's fisheries sector offers. FDO placed particular emphasis on its unwavering commitment to sustainable fishing practices, which underpin the long-term viability and preservation of Oman's abundant marine resources. The exhibition of cutting-edge aquaculture technologies and infrastructure further underscored FDO's dedication to enhancing productivity and maintaining exemplary standards along the value-added chain.

Juhaina al Kendi, Fisheries Development Oman spokesperson, said, "Our presence at the Global Fishery Forum & Seafood Expo Russia 2023 was a success. This platform allowed us to showcase Oman's fisheries sector potential to a global audience. We received overwhelming interest from attendees who recognised investment opportunities."

Alizz Islamic Bank partners with Engineering Village

With a strong belief in supporting Omani SMEs, Alizz Islamic Bank collaborated with Engineering Village to develop a unique journey for the children visiting Alizz Islamic Bank at the Oman Childhood Conference and Expo.

Alizz Islamic Bank's continuous efforts focuses on raising financial awareness across various initiatives because it is imperative that today's children and youth have a solid understanding of basic financial concepts and skills to navigate their way through a successful and sustainable future.

The idea of sharing knowledge in a fun and exciting approach was the key element while preparing for the exhibition. The aim of the concept was to empower children and have them

experience banking through a well-defined customer experience journey, a press release said.

Lina al Abdulsalaam, head of Marketing and Corporate Communications at Alizz Islamic Bank, said, "In the digital era, there is no better way for a child to learn than via interactive methods. We are honoured to have partnered with Engineering Village to give children a fun way to learn about the importance of saving. The child visiting the booth gets to earn digital points, open an account, deposits the points into a programmed ATM that will add the points onto their card and finally the child gets to decide how to spend the points at a store within the booth in order to purchase a savings box along with tips on savings."

Liva showcases health insurance solutions at OHEC

Liva Insurance participated in the 12th edition of Oman Health Exhibition and Conference (OHEC) 2023, organised by CONNECT and the Ministry of Health, between September 18 to 20 to showcase its latest innovative health insurance solutions that cater to the needs of both, individual and retail clientele.

Liva Insurance's participation in this prominent medical event comes to affirm its endeavours to spread awareness about the significance of having health insurance, a press release said.

Oman Health Exhibition and Conference is the largest and most prominent international event that seeks to spearhead advancements in the medical and healthcare field in the Sultanate of Oman. The event brought together several leading local and international medical and healthcare institutions. With the participation of over 160 entrepreneurs and medical entities from various countries, the event reflected the commitment of the Omani healthcare sector to exchanging knowledge and expertise, contributing to developing the nation's healthcare scene.

Samir al Balushi, head of Distribution- Life & Health, said, "Aspiring to become the region's leading multi-line insurer, Liva remains committed to offering innovative insurance products and services, particularly health insurance solutions to ensure meeting the needs of its client base. This time, Liva participated in the most prominent international health event to showcase the vital role of insurance companies in providing the latest innovative health insurance solutions. This event is an ideal platform that brings together experts, institutions, and relevant entities."



OMPay announces free international remittances

OMPay, one of the leading mobile payment service platforms in Oman, has launched an exciting offer featuring international remittance services at zero% fee for a period of around three weeks starting from September 24.

OMPay users can now seamlessly transfer funds to their home countries for free, using either the cash pickup option through designated agents or have the funds directly transferred to the recipient's digital wallet or bank account instantly, a press release said.

This one-of-a-kind limited period offer has been designed keeping in mind the fact that expats make up a significant percentage of Oman's population.

Bank Muscat appointed to manage OQGN IPO

Bank Muscat announced that it has been appointed as the Issue Manager for the Initial Public Offering (IPO) of OQ Gas Networks (OQGN), the exclusive owner and operator of the natural gas transportation network in the sultanate.

For this IPO, Bank Muscat is also acting as a Joint Global Coordinator with another regional and international financial institution. OQGN will be offering 49% of its total share capital for public subscription through this IPO, a press release said.

The offering is the first major equity transaction in Oman which is Shariah-compliant. It is part of Oman Investment Authority's privatisation programme aiming to enhance economic growth in addition to creating development and innovation opportunities in the energy sector in the sultanate.

Omani and non-Omani investors, encompassing individuals and institutional



investors, can participate in the offering. Category I applicants (Institutions) could subscribe to the offer at a subscription price between 131 baisa to 140 baisa per share, with the final price to be determined through a book building exercise.

Khalifa bin Abdullah al Hatmi, deputy general manager, Investment Banking and Capital Markets, Bank Muscat, said, "We are proud to partner with OQ Gas Networks, and we appreciate the Company's trust and confidence in choosing Bank Muscat as Issue Manager."



MoE holds training for trainers

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Department of Educational Studies and International Cooperation, implemented a training programme for trainers of the 'Generation Amazing' programme, in partnership with the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, represented by the Generation Amazing Foundation in the State of Qatar.

The two-day programme targeted 30 school sports teachers in the public and private schools

targeted for the programme from the governorates of Muscat, Dakhliyah, South al Batinah. The training programme took place at the lecture hall of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher, a press release said.

Hamad bin Abdulaziz al Mohammed, head coach at the Generation Amazing Foundation in the State of Qatar conducted the programme which included an introduction to Generation Amazing, an explanation of its concept, the concept of football

for development, an introduction to protection, child protection, and a football for development coach as a facilitator of critical thinking, besides the process of monitoring and evaluation tools.

The programme also included training sessions, in addition to a field visit to some of the schools participating in the programme. It aimed to provide participants with skills that contribute to the development of students personally and socially, such as communication, teamwork.



French PM Elisabeth Borne (AFP)

French PM comfortably survives censure vote

Paris, France - French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne avoided parliamentary censure in an early morning vote on Saturday after she forced the government's budget plan through the National Assembly without a vote.

The motion to censure Borne - the 18th levelled at her since she assumed the office - was brought by the left-wing Nupes alliance after the prime minister activated Article 49.3 to adopt the public finance bill without a vote. The motion received just 193 of the 289 votes needed to succeed, an unsurprising outcome in light of the lack of support from the centre-right.

Its rejection constitutes the adoption of the 2023-2027 budget programme, which now moves to the Senate, the upper house of the French parliament.

The speaker for Nupes, socialist Philippe Brun, accused the government of 'favouring with the greatest servility a very well-endowed minority of the French' despite 'an immense inflationary crisis'.

President Emmanuel Macron had 'tried to make parliament disappear with his repeated (use of) 49.3', Brun added.

The far right had supported the left's motion of censure, accusing Borne of the 'repeated and abusive use of 49.3'. Borne, for her part, hit back at both factions, saying 'demagoguery is your only budgetary course'.

AFP

Almost all ethnic Armenians flee Nagorno-Karabakh region

100,417 people from an estimated population of 120,000 had fled since sudden defeat

Kornidzor, Armenia - The flood of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh dwindled to a trickle on Saturday as Armenia said nearly the entire population of the breakaway territory had already fled after Azerbaijan seized back control.

An AFP journalist at the Kornidzor crossing into Armenia saw only several ambulances arrive as border guards said they were waiting for a final few buses.

In the nearest town of Goris, hundreds of exhausted refugees waited amongst their baggage in the central square for the government to offer accommodation.

Azerbaijan's lightning military takeover of the ethnic Armenian enclave last week sparked a sudden exodus that has rewritten the centuries-old ethnic makeup of the disputed region.

Armenia said on Saturday 100,417 people from an estimated population of 120,000 had fled since the breakaway region saw its decades-long fight against Azerbaijani rule end in sudden defeat.

Artak Beglaryan, a former separatist official, said that according to unofficial information 'the last groups' of Nagorno-Karabakh residents were on their way to



Armenian refugees wait in a square of Goris city centre on Friday before being evacuated to various Armenian cities (AFP)

Armenia on Saturday.

"At most a few hundred persons remain, most of whom are officials, emergency services employees, volunteers, some persons with special needs," he wrote on social media.

Yerevan has accused Azerbaijan of conducting a campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' to clear Nagorno-Karabakh of its Armenian population.

But Baku has denied the claim and has publicly called on the Armenian residents of the territory to stay and 'reintegrate' into Azerbaijan.

The United Nations has said it will send a mission to Nagorno-Karabakh this weekend, mainly to assess humanitarian needs, the first time the international body has had access to the region in about 30 years. France

lashed out at Azerbaijan for only allowing the mission in after most residents had already fled.

Armenia has asked the UN's highest court to take urgent measures to protect the enclave's inhabitants, the court announced on Friday.

Yerevan urged the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to ensure that Azerbaijan does not move to displace the remaining

ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh or prevent 'the safe and expeditious return' of those who have already fled.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on Friday announced an emergency appeal for 20mn Swiss Francs (US\$22mn) to help the refugees.

The Azerbaijani offensive was both the shortest and most deci-

sive of any conflict the predominantly Christian Armenian and Muslim Azerbaijani rivals have waged since the region's status became disputed with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The separatists agreed on Thursday to dissolve their government and become a formal part of Azerbaijan by the end of the year.

AFP

UK government to push back on 'anti-car measures'

London, UK - Britain's Conservative government on Friday announced new plans to 'support drivers' and push back on 'anti-car measures' as some opposition-led areas move to impose restrictions on the use of motor vehicles in the name of environmental protection.

"The clamp down on drivers is an attack on the day to day lives of most people across the UK who rely on cars to get to work or see their families," Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in a statement announcing the new plans.

"This week the UK govern-



Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (AFP)

New plans were announced as some opposition-led areas moved to impose restrictions on use of motor vehicles in the name of environmental protection

ment will set out a long-term plan to back drivers, slamming the brakes on anti-car measures across England. We are taking the necessary decision to back the motorists who keep our country moving."

Among the measures announced on Friday - two days ahead of the annual Conservative

Party conference - were plans to review guidance on 20-mile-per-hour (32kph) speed limits and 'prevent their blanket use in areas where it's not appropriate', according to the statement.

The document also takes aim at '15-minute cities', an urban planning concept that advocates putting essential services within

walking or biking distance of residents to reduce pollution.

"The plans also aim to stop councils implementing so called '15-minute cities', by consulting on ways to prevent schemes which aggressively restrict where people can drive," the statement says. The announcement comes after the Welsh government, led by Labour First Minister Mark Drakeford, lowered the maximum driving speed in some residential areas from 30mph to 20mph, a decision denounced by Conservatives.

And since the end of August, a

tax on the most polluting vehicles has been extended to the whole of Greater London at the initiative of Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

The move was seen as causing a Labour candidate to lose to his Conservative opponent in a by-election this summer in a west London constituency.

Within the Conservative party, which is lagging in the polls ahead of an expected general election, the measure has awakened support for a slowdown in efforts to fight climate change in the name of defending the British economy.

AFP

Hamas fighter killed by troops in West Bank

Jerusalem - A member of the Palestinian Islamist Hamas movement was killed on Friday evening during a clash with Israeli soldiers in the occupied West Bank, according to multiple sources.

"Mohammad Jibril Roummaneh died as a result of serious injuries caused by bullets fired by the occupying forces in El-Bireh' northeast of Ramallah, wrote the Palestinian ministry of health in a statement. It reported that a second Palestinian had been injured but gave no details. Hamas issued a statement describing Roummaneh as one of its members who fell as a 'heroic martyr' while 'defending the freedom of (his) people' near the Israeli settlement of Psagot.

The statement was accom-

panied by an image of a very young man. 'Assailants hurled Molotov cocktails at a military post adjacent to the (settlement) of Psagot', next to El-Bireh, the Israeli army said.

"Soldiers... identified the suspects and responded with live fire," the statement added. "Two assailants were neutralised and transferred to receive medical treatment."

When questioned by AFP, an army spokeswoman would not confirm that one of the two had died, as announced by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. At least 242 Palestinians, 32 Israelis, a Ukrainian and an Italian have been killed since the beginning of the year in violence linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

AFP

US warns of Serbian military build-up near Kosovo

Washington, US - The United States urged Belgrade to pull its forces back from the border with Kosovo on Friday after detecting what it called an 'unprecedented' Serbian military build-up.

Serbia deployed sophisticated tanks and artillery on the frontier after deadly clashes erupted at a monastery in northern Kosovo last week, the White House warned. The violence - in which a Kosovo police officer and three Serb gunmen were killed - marked one of the gravest escalations for years in Kosovo, a former Serbian breakaway province.

"We are monitoring a large Serbian military deployment along the border with Kosovo," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters. "That includes an unprecedented staging of advanced Serbian artillery, tanks, mechanised infantry units. We believe that this is a very desta-



Kosovo police officers search a restaurant and building in northern Serb-dominated part of ethnically divided town of Mitrovica on Friday (AFP)

bilising development."

He added: "We are calling on Serbia to withdraw those forces

from the border."

The build-up took place within the last week but its purpose was

not yet clear, Kirby said. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had telephoned Serbian Presi-

dent Aleksandar Vucic to urge 'immediate deescalation and a return to dialogue', he added.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also spoke with Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and 'expressed concern about Serbian military mobilisations', according to a readout of the call.

The pair also 'discussed the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which Mr. Sullivan underscored was the only long-term solution to ensuring stability throughout Kosovo', the readout said.

Serbia's leader Vucic did not directly deny there had been a recent build-up but rejected claims that his country's forces were on alert. "I have denied untruths where they talk about the highest level of combat readiness of our forces, because I simply did not sign that and it is not accurate," Vucic told reporters.

AFP

Slovaks vote in polls key for foreign policy

The tight election is seen as key to whether the country will keep supporting neighbouring Ukraine

Bratislava, Slovakia - Slovaks voted on Saturday in a tight early election seen as key to whether the country will keep supporting neighbouring Ukraine after a campaign marked by disinformation.

Polling stations across the EU and NATO member of 5.4mn people will close at 2000 GMT, with exit polls expected shortly afterwards and the final results due on Sunday morning.

Pensioner Emilia Divilekova, voting in the capital Bratislava, said her son had left Slovakia dismayed with the 'gang of mafia, thieves and murderers' ruling the country.

"He now lives 900km away from home and I would like him to be able to come back."

Two parties were neck-and-neck in the final opinion polls - the left-wing Smer-SD of populist former premier Robert Fico and the centrist Progressive Slovakia of European Parliament vice-speaker Michal Simecka.

Both parties scored around 20 per cent backing, which means the likely election winner will need help from smaller parties to form a majority coalition in the 150-seat parliament.

The new government will replace a wobbly centre-right coalition in power since 2020, which has seen three cabinets installed over the period and provided hefty military and humanitarian aid to war-stricken Ukraine.

Independent political analyst Grigorij Meseznikov told AFP the vote would determine Slovakia's focus 'in foreign policy, defence and security policy, but also... the future of democracy'.



Voters arrive to cast their ballots into an urn at a polling station during the Slovak parliamentary election in downtown Bratislava, Slovakia on Saturday (AFP)

Two parties were neck-and-neck in the final opinion polls - the left-wing Smer-SD of populist former premier Robert Fico and the centrist Progressive Slovakia of Michal Simecka

In the heated election campaign involving several brawls between candidates, Fico took aim at the EU, NATO and the

LGBTQ+ minority.

He has also rejected providing any further military aid to Ukraine.

Fico cast his ballot in a village northeast of Bratislava, accompanied by his mother.

'Best schnitzel'

"In talking to mum I find an awful lot of experience and common sense, and of course she makes the best schnitzel," Fico said in a video on Facebook after declining to tell journalists when and where he will vote.

He added he wanted Slovakia

led without 'amateurs and fumbler' with no experience who would drag us into adventures such as immigration and the war'. "And I would like the schnitzel in Slovakia to be bigger and bigger and not smaller and smaller," he said, playing to his constituents' comforts of home.

Simecka has urged Slovaks to 'elect the future' and vowed to rid Slovakia of 'the past', referring to Fico's three terms as prime min-

ister.

Voting at a Bratislava school, he said he expected a tight vote in which 'each ballot will count'.

"I hope that... whatever government comes out of this election will continue to support Ukraine."

Slovakia emerged as an independent country in 1993, following a peaceful split with the Czech Republic after Czechoslovakia shed a totalitarian commu-

nist rule of four decades in 1989.

Although many Slovak voters have experience with the Moscow-steered communist regime, many will vote for populists like Fico who are vowing to stop military aid to Ukraine.

Analyses have shown half of the Slovak population is prone to believing disinformation, largely spread by the Kremlin.

"Some think peace can be achieved by stopping any aid to Ukraine, and that's where I disagree," Slovak President Zuzana Caputova told AFP.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky meanwhile thanked Slovakia 'for standing with Ukraine' on Telegram after meeting the Slovak defence minister for talks in Kyiv.

Caputova said she would tap the election winner to form the next cabinet.

The choice of coalition partners is fairly broad, with 11 parties expected to win parliamentary seats.

Fico is likely to woo Smer-SD's spin-off Hlas-SD, led by former Smer-SD vice-chairman Peter Pellegrini, as a coalition partner.

Pellegrini became premier in 2018 after Fico had to step down amid nationwide protests following the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée.

Kuciak uncovered links between the Italian mafia and Fico's government in his last article published posthumously.

Fico's other potential partners are the newly formed far-right Republic and the Slovak National Party (SNS), with whom he had already ruled twice.

AFP

Ex-gang leader charged with rapper Tupac Shakur's murder

Los Angeles, US - A quarter of a century after Tupac Shakur was gunned down in a gang feud in Las Vegas, a man was charged on Friday with his murder, a killing that came to symbolise the violence of gangsta rap as it surged into the mainstream.

Duane 'Keffe D' Davis, 60, had long acknowledged his involvement in the slaying, boasting he was the 'on-site commander' in the effort to kill Shakur and Death Row Records boss Marion 'Suge' Knight in revenge for his nephew's assault.

Davis' early morning arrest on Friday followed 27 years of investigations by police, who had been frustrated by an apparent lack of useable evidence, and came two months after they raided his home in Henderson, just outside Las Vegas.

"The presumption is great that he is responsible for the murder of Tupac Shakur, and he will be found guilty of murder with use of a deadly weapon," prosecutor Marc DiGiacomo told a court in Nevada.

Shakur, the best-selling hip-hop artist behind hits such as 'California Love', 'Changes', and 'Dear Mama', was already a huge star in the world of rap when he was gunned down in Las Vegas on September 7, 1996. He was just 25.

He was signed to Death Row Records, an outfit associated at the time with Los Angeles street gang Mob Piru, which had a long-standing beef with the Southside Compton Crips.

DiGiacomo said on the day of the murder, Shakur and Death



Duane 'Keffe D' Davis (AFP)

Row Records co-founder Knight were in Las Vegas to watch Mike Tyson fight.

In a hotel elevator lobby they set upon Crips member Orlando Anderson, the nephew of Davis.

'(Davis) formulated a plan to exact revenge upon Mr Knight and Mr Shakur' for this beating, DiGiacomo said.

'He acquired a 40-caliber Glock firearm from a drug associate. He gets into (a light-colored) Cadillac and he provides the 40-caliber Glock firearm to one of the two individuals in the back seat', and the group set off to find their intended victims.

The two rap moguls were spotted in a car on a Las Vegas street.

"They pulled up next to the vehicle and the rear passenger fired a number of rounds out of that vehicle striking Mr Knight in the head and Mr Shakur several times," DiGiacomo said.

Shakur died in a hospital several days later. Knight survived.

AFP

Philippine security guards adopt cats

Manila, Philippines - A cat wearing a black-and-yellow security vest strolls nonchalantly past security guards lined outside a Philippine office building waiting to receive instructions for their shift.

Conan, a six-month-old stray, joined the security team of the Worldwide Corporate Center in the capital Manila several months ago. He is one of the lucky moggies unofficially adopted by security guards across the city, where thousands of cats live on the street.

While the cats lack the security skills of dogs - and have a tendency to sleep on the job - their cuteness and company have endeared them to bored security guards working 12-hour shifts.

Conan was rescued when he was a few weeks old by a housekeeper who found him wailing in



Conan the cat walking past security guards in formation outside an office building in Mandaluyong, Metro Manila on September 27 (AFP)

the building's car park.

He accidentally landed the role of security cat after his predecessor, Mingming, died -

reportedly from gum disease, not in the line of duty.

Grieving guards wanting another furry friend to liven up their

shifts decided to appoint Conan as Mingming's replacement. "If Conan isn't around then I'm not motivated," security guard Aljon Aquino, 30, told AFP. "He takes away my stress."

Photos of Conan wearing his vest emblazoned with 'security' and lying on a desk next to a life-size cardboard picture of Mingming have been shared thousands of times on Facebook. He is among more than a dozen strays living in the commercial and corporate building, where they are allowed to roam.

Employees pitch in to buy food for them.

Despite living his best life, Conan shows little interest in helping his human colleagues perform their security duties, such as searching bags of shoppers and workers as they enter the building.

AFP

3 killed in Zimbabwe gold mine collapse

Harare, Zimbabwe - Three miners were killed and 18 feared buried after a shaft in an informal Zimbabwean gold mine collapsed, state television said on Saturday.

The accident occurred on Friday in Chegutu, about 120km (75 miles) west of the capital Harare, ZBC said. "Three bodies have been retrieved from the collapsed Bay Horse Mine in Chegutu," it said.

"The bodies were found underneath some rocks in a search operation being undertaken by government with the assistance of some artisanal miners."

AFP

Indonesians face grief year after stadium crush

Malang, Indonesia - Holding buckets of water, Cholifatul Nur sprinkles flowers planted at her young son's grave and wipes clean the stone slab where a scarf of his favourite team is draped a year after his death at an Indonesian football stadium.

Fifteen-year-old Jovan Farellino was one of 135 people killed after a match in the East Javan city of Malang, with many dying from suffocation or being trampled in one of the deadliest disasters in the sport's history.

Wearing all black, Nur speaks of the grief and intimidation she has faced in her fight for justice alongside other relatives of the dead. They blame police who fired tear gas into stands packed with Arema FC fans, causing a panicked rush for small exits.



Cholifatul Noor crying as she prays at the grave of her only child Jovan Farellino in Malang, East Java (AFP)

"Jovan was everything for me. He was my only child," she told AFP.

She rushed to the stadium just before midnight after hearing about the unfolding tragedy, knowing her son had attended,

only the third time he had done so. When she arrived, she found his lifeless body at the VIP gate where his friends had moved him.

"Suddenly he perished in that way. I can't accept that," she said.

The tear gas shot into stands after a post-match pitch invasion was deemed the official cause of the deaths, but families say authorities have not been held appropriately responsible for their actions at Kanjuruhan Stadium.

Several prison sentences have been handed to three police officers for negligence, ranging from one to two-and-a-half years.

Two of them were acquitted earlier this year, to families' dismay, but the Supreme Court has since overturned that decision.

A judge also earlier ruled police had not shot tear gas into stands - rather it was carried by the wind. But that account was disputed by witnesses and challenged by video footage. FIFA, football's world governing body, bans the use of tear gas in stadi-

ums. Seven families, including Nur's, pursued legal action seeking compensation of around 62bn rupiah (US\$4mn), according to Imam Hidayat, a lawyer representing them. But a local court rejected that bid.

The tragedy stoked the ire of Indonesians against the country's police, who critics have long accused of using excessive violence to quell unrest as well as intimidation to silence detractors.

After criticising authorities during police questioning, Nur says men in black clothing nearly hit her on a motorbike. She also caught people taking photographs of her home.

Nur says police officers even told her they could help her nephew join the force.

AFP



Passengers board the first flight from Tripoli to Rome on Saturday after the Italian government lifted its 10-year-old air ban on Libyan civil aviation (AFP)

Libya flights to Italy resume after 10 years

Tripoli, Libya - A Rome-bound aircraft departed on Saturday from Libya's capital, restarting flights to Italy after a nearly decade-long suspension due to an EU ban, authorities in Tripoli said.

The European Union in 2014 halted flights operated by Libyan airlines and banned them from entering member states' airspace, as the war-torn North African country was mired in intense fighting.

Saturday's flight took off from Tripoli's Mitiga airport. It was operated by Libya-based Medsky Airways, which offers a twice-weekly direct connection to the Italian capital.

Restarting flights is 'part of intensive government efforts to lift the European ban on Libyan civil aviation', said Libya's UN-recognised government on Facebook.

Medsky Airways was launched in 2022, the year after EU member Malta announced it

would allow flights to and from Libya.

It was unclear how the airline was able to circumvent the EU ban, which remains in place.

The European ban was imposed after a coalition of mostly Islamist militias called 'Fajr Libya' seized Tripoli following weeks of fighting that caused massive damage to the city's international airport.

Successive Libyan governments have since pushed for the ban to be lifted.

Abdelhamid Dbeibah, the prime minister of the Tripoli-based government, said in early July that 'the Italian government has informed us of its decision to lift the air embargo imposed on Libyan civil aviation for 10 years'.

Italy, Libya's former colonial power, and the Mediterranean island nation of Malta are now the only European countries to have resumed flights with Libya.

AFP

Pope appoints 21 new cardinals to fill highest ranks of Church

Vatican City, Holy See - Pope Francis on Saturday elevated 21 clergymen from distant corners of the world to the rank of cardinal, saying diversity was indispensable to the future of the Catholic Church.

Under sunny skies and with a crowd that filled half of Vatican City's grandiose, colonnaded St Peter's Square, the 86-year-old pope welcomed the new, so-called 'Princes of the Church' - one of whom could one day become the successor to the current pontiff.

"The College of Cardinals is called to resemble a symphony orchestra, representing the harmony and synodality of the Church," said Francis, seated under a canopy before the gathered cardinals on the steps of St Peter's Basilica.

"Diversity is necessary; it is indispensable. However, each sound must contribute to the common design," said the Argentine Jesuit.

The choice of the new cardinals, who include diplomats, close advisers and administrators, is closely watched as an indication of the priorities and position of the Church.

One of them could also one day be elected by his peers to succeed Francis, who has left the door open to stepping down in the future should his health warrant it.

Saturday's ceremony, known as a consistory, is the ninth since Francis in 2013 was named head of the world's 1.3bn Catholics.

One by one, the scarlet-clad



Archbishop from Tanzania Potras Rugambwa is elevated cardinal by Pope Francis at St. Peter's square in The Vatican on Saturday (AFP)

The College of Cardinals is called to resemble a symphony orchestra, representing the harmony and synodality of the Church

POPE FRANCIS

cardinals knelt before the pope, who bestowed on them the two symbols of their high office: a scarlet four-cornered cap known as a biretta, and a cardinal's ring.

To some, a grinning Francis uttered an encouraging 'Bravo!' or 'Courage!' as he shook their

hand. Eighteen of the 21 newly made cardinals are under the age of 80 and thus currently eligible to vote as 'cardinal electors' in the next conclave, when Francis' successor will be decided.

They are among 99 cardinal-electors created by Francis, rep-

resenting about three-quarters of the total

That has given rise to speculation that the Church's future spiritual leader will be cast in the same mould as Francis, preaching a more tolerant Church with a greater focus on the poor and marginalised.

Throughout his papacy, Francis has sought to create a more inclusive, universal Church, looking past Europe to clergy in Africa, Asia and Latin America to fill the Church's highest ranks.

With his latest roster of cardi-

nals, Francis has again looked to the world's 'peripheries' - where Catholicism is growing - while breaking with the practice of promoting archbishops of large, powerful dioceses.

"He is looking for cardinals who correspond to the times. These are people who have all taken a step away from the Church of the past, who positively ensure a break," an informed observer of the Holy See who asked to remain nameless told AFP ahead of the ceremony.

AFP

CLOWN-TASTIC



Men dressed as clowns perform on stage at the International Clown Festival in Chennai, India, on Saturday (AFP)

Africa interested in making Ukrainian weapons: Kyiv

Kyiv, Ukraine - African countries are interested in not just buying weapons from Kyiv but manufacturing them, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said at the first International Defence Industries Forum in Kyiv.

Officials from over 30 countries and 250 defence firms gathered for the forum, which was held as Ukraine seeks to attract weapons manufacturers to bolster its domestic arms industry.

"Africa was one of the largest markets for Ukrainian military products before the outbreak of full-scale war," Kuleba said in a panel discussion held behind closed doors on Friday.

He said that while Ukraine was not currently able to sell any weapons to Africa, African countries were interested in producing Ukrainian weapons and ammunition on their own territory. "This stems from the



Ukrainian servicemen ride on a T-64 tank during military training exercise in Kyiv region on September 27 (AFP)

African partner's understanding that Ukrainian weapons will be of extremely high quality, and they understand us as partners," Kuleba said.

Kyiv has depended heavily on Western aid since Russia invaded last year, but is increasingly seeking to bolster its own

arms industry amid fears support from its allies may waver.

It launched its push to regain occupied territory in June but has acknowledged slow progress as its troops encounter lines of heavily fortified Russian defences.

AFP

Maldives to elect next president in shadow of India-China power play

Malé, Maldives - The Maldives voted on Saturday to decide its next president in an election seen as a referendum on whether to hitch its fortunes to China or India, both vying for influence in the tropical paradise.

President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih faces an uphill battle to secure a second mandate after working to improve strained relations with New Delhi, the archipelago nation's traditional benefactor.

Frontrunner Mohamed Muizzu helps a party that presided over an influx of Chinese investment money when it last held power and has signalled a return to Beijing's orbit if he wins.

Muizzu won the election's first round earlier this month, taking 46 per cent of the vote but finishing ahead of Solih by barely 15,000 ballots and short of the absolute majority needed to win outright.

Election Commission officials expected final turnout to top the 80 per cent recorded during the earlier vote, leaving the contest on a knife edge.

"Queues formed long before polling opened," one official told AFP, requesting anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Solih and Muizzu voted at separate polling booths in the capital Male, with both telling reporters they were confident of



Voters gather to cast their vote at a polling station in Male on Saturday, during the second round of Maldives' presidential election (AFP)

victory.

Polling closed at 5pm local time (1200 GMT), with results expected late on Saturday or early Sunday.

Watchdog Transparency Maldives said there had been some incidents of 'electoral violence' without specifying further details.

Police reported arresting 14 people, mostly for taking photographs of their marked ballot papers and sharing them on social media.

Geopolitical hotspot

The Maldives sits in a strategically vital position in the middle of the Indian Ocean, astride one of the world's busiest east-west

shipping lanes.

Muizzu's party was an eager recipient of financial largesse from China's Belt and Road infrastructure programme.

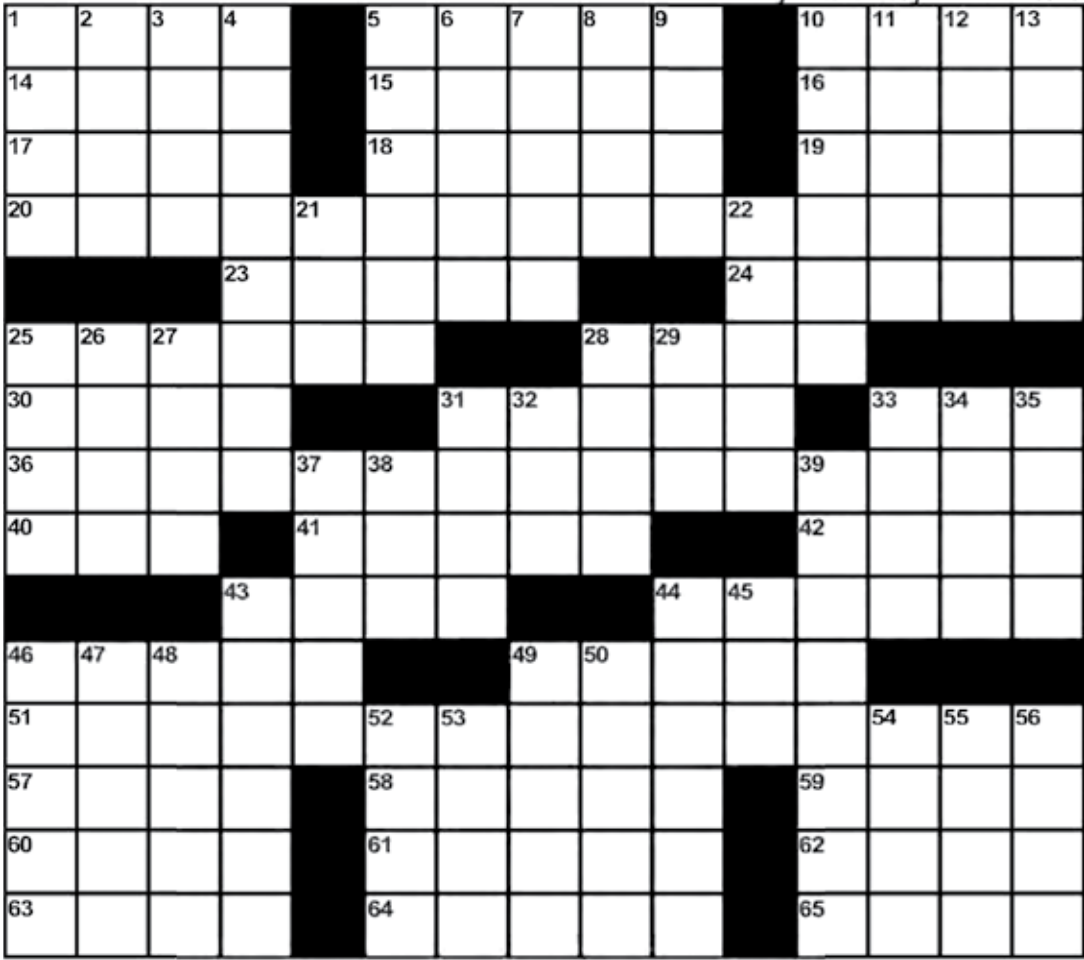
His mentor, former president Abdulla Yameen, borrowed heavily from China for construction projects and spurned India.

Solih was elected in 2018 on the back of discontent with Yameen's increasingly autocratic rule, accusing him of pushing the country into a Chinese debt trap.

Yameen's turn towards Beijing had also alarmed New Delhi, which shares concerns with the United States and its allies at China's growing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Be of assistance
- 5) Spherical hairdos
- 10) Price tag info
- 14) Type of rug
- 15) Not even a mouse
- 16) "Do_ others ... "
- 17) Treat rudely, in slang
- 18) Circle, as planets
- 19) Abel's assassin
- 20) Fool
- 23) Cook, as chestnuts
- 24) Large blood vessel
- 25) Protect from floods
- 28) Joan of art
- 30) Clean, as a pipe
- 31) "Mac" attachment
- 33) Informal relative
- 36) Fool
- 40) Hog home
- 41) Can't tolerate
- 42) Kunis of Hollywood
- 43) Lens covers
- 44) Baltimore's Yards
- 46) Like immature fruit
- 49) Insect after metamorphosis
- 51) Fool

57) Masculine

- 58) Drift from a script
- 59) Inventor's inspiration
- 60) "Don't delay"
- 61) Animal catcher
- 62) Farm soil
- 63) Butterfly hazards
- 64) Big Top performer
- 65) Airborne fish-eaters

DOWN

- 1) Pilgrimage, for some
- 2) Lake, city or canal
- 3) "Make do" amount
- 4) Deli offering
- 5) Polar jacket
- 6) McHenry and Dix
- 7) "Lost in Space" figure
- 8) "Don't count_!"
- 9) Macfarlane of TV and film
- 10) Bird in a clock
- 11) Kind of personality
- 12) Limited work assignment
- 13) Island kingdom near Fiji
- 21) Long time, geologically
- 22) Acquires through work

25) Flubs one

- 26) Pork, for one
- 27) New arrival
- 28) Hardness-measuring scale
- 29) "Bill me later" note
- 31) Carpenter, army and fire
- 32) Highway, for short
- 33) "You_ a mouthfull!"
- 34) Global speck
- 35) "The Man" Musial
- 37) Abu_ UAE
- 38) "The Raven" author's initials
- 39) Not going anywhere
- 43) Heebie-jeebies
- 44) Curve upward in the middle
- 45) Pack on the years
- 46) Pitcher in a suit?
- 47) Come to an end
- 48) Acclaim
- 49) Certain faith
- 50) Silk fabric with a wavy pattern
- 52) Humongous in area
- 53) Krabappel on "The

Simpsons"

54) Bad smell

55) Head of a college

56) Thanksgiving side dish

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Today, you need to tidy up your free time. Your extra hours are spaced here and there throughout the day. But if you take a few minutes to rearrange them, you'll be able to get yourself a nice big chunk of hours that you can fill up with a big dose of fun. Try to avoid canceling on too many people, though. If you flake out on social plans at the last minute, you could do a lot of harm to your hard-won reputation.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Time is pressing right now, and you don't have the luxury of being able to wait for other people to discover what wonderful ideas you have. It's time for some self-promotion. When you see an influential person today, walk right up to them and make them hear you, in the nicest, most charming way, of course. You can't see the task as you trying to convince them of something. See it as you helping them find the answer they need.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

At times, being blunt can be charming. People can appreciate a person who cuts to the chase and doesn't waste their time with empty compliments or wishy-washy sentiments. So dust off your direct manner of speaking and don't be afraid to tell it like it is. You'll know just how to use the right amount of diplomacy without diluting your message. You can make people understand that they're in the wrong without making them feel like you're accusing them of anything.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Timing is everything right now. Act too soon and you'll move forward before you're absolutely ready. Act too late and you'll miss a very important opportunity. You'll have a deep understanding of when the time is right if you can just slow down enough. You need to be able to pay attention to the changes in the attitudes of people around you in order to understand when to make your move. Listen more than you talk and stand still more than you march forward.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Doing research might not be your idea of fun, but how much fun would it be if you ended up making the wrong decision, very expensive wrong decision? Take time today to get a better understanding of your options and situation. Read more and see what you can find out. Sure, you could make an educated guess and feel pretty confident about it, but why take that chance? There's too much at stake, so don't do any guessing now.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Let your sense of humor guide you through any sticky situations that might come up today. Celebrate the fact that you have a sharper wit than most people and use it every chance you get. With one quip you'll be able to get the upper hand without anyone even realizing it, and this will enable you to win an argument without breaking a sweat. The key is to be flexible and patient. You'll have to wait for your perfect moment to strike.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

It's fun to always have plans, but you may be running the risk of losing yourself in all the noise of socializing. Are you putting as much energy into yourself as you put into your friendships? This is a hard question to contemplate because it brings up issues of selfishness. But you need to be honest with yourself and the people who care about you. And if you need to do things for yourself, without considering their needs, they will understand.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You're smart enough to know your limits, so when you recognize that you're rapidly approaching one of them, stop. Look around and ask for help. If you push on and tell yourself that you'll just deal with it, you're playing a dangerous game. You could easily get in over your head before you can stop. Act cautiously today. It's great that you're excited and eager to keep going, but it just isn't wise to go too far too fast.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Today, a friend's emotional turmoil could really get in your way. You value the relationship you have with them by supporting them through tough times, but you also need to be honest with them if their drama is getting to be too much for you. Get to the heart of the matter and be direct in what you say. You need to make sure your words have impact. While your announcement might make them more upset initially, they'll eventually be thankful for your honesty.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your creativity is on fire today, leading you to make different choices than usual. Friends who are expecting you to act one way might have a hard time believing it when you want to act another, but they're definitely going to like what they see. Today should be all about letting the deepest sides of your personality out into the world. Let your personality be seen in all its unique and kooky glory. You'll be loved, celebrated, and empowered.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your willpower could be tested today, but you'll have no problem passing the test with flying colors. You have a good handle on what's going on, and you know how high the stakes are, so there's no way you're going to succumb to temptation now. Short-term gains are nothing compared to what could be coming for you down the road. Keep your eyes on the prize and say thanks, but no thanks to the distractions coming your way.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

People aren't listening very carefully today. There are a lot of distractions, so be forewarned that what you say could be misinterpreted. When you speak the truth in a direct manner, some folks might think you're coming off as pushy or pompous. It's unfortunate that you have to exert extra energy to make sure they don't read you wrong, but you do. The good news is that by putting forth the extra effort to make things clear your efforts will be rewarded.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. What is the stage name of Londoner Susan Janet Ballion, who fronted the group "The Banshees" between 1976 and 1996?

- A. Alison Apache
- B. Siouxsie Sioux
- C. Karen Komanche
- D. Marjorie Mohawk

02. Which city in the Zou Department of The People's Republic of Benin was formerly the capital of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey?

- A. Ouagadougou
- B. Mogadishu
- C. Abomey
- D. Kampala

03. What was the medal count for the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in the last Olympic Games in which it took part as a country, and before the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) was formed and stepped up drug-testing at the Games?

- A. 39 gold and 113 total medals
- B. 55 gold and 132 total medals
- C. 48 gold and 100 total medals
- D. 46 gold and 121 total medals

Answers: 1. B 2. C 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

L	A	D	A
E	P	O	F
E	O	R	R
S	O	C	B

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

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

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

'If you believe in yourself, you can reach wherever you want'

Rashid spin holds key for Afghanistan at World Cup

Karachi, Pakistan - As a boy growing up in Bati Kot, an arid village in rural Afghanistan, Rashid Khan dreamt of becoming the family's first doctor.

But as one of 11 boys - a cricket team - in a typically extended Afghan family, he was soon put to work bowling against his brothers.

When the weather stopped them from playing outdoors, they played pick-up games in the corridors of the family home.

The narrow confines helped Khan develop his trademark whirling action that has turned him into the world's top Twenty20 bowler and one to watch at the World Cup in India this month.

"My speed, my quick wrong 'uns all developed playing at home," 25-year-old leg-spinner Rashid said in a recent interview.

"If I bowled like a normal wrist spinner it would turn slowly - my brothers would defend easily. I had to do something different, so I developed variations."

Rashid first caught the eye of selectors as a hard-hitting batsman who could also bowl - like his idol, former Pakistan all-rounder Shahid Afridi. "Afridi is one player who has fans all over the world," said Rashid. "Check



Rashid Khan

My speed, my quick wrong 'uns all developed playing at home. If I bowled like a normal wrist spinner it would turn slowly - my brothers would defend easily

RASHID KHAN

his record, he doesn't have many centuries, but whenever he arrived he would hit four, five, six sixes... entertain and leave."

Nawroz Mangal,

Afghanistan's first international captain, spotted Rashid's talent in domestic competition.

"Pakistan great Inzamam-ul-Haq was our coach in 2015 and

when he saw Rashid he was like 'What a player he is', and got him selected on the tour of Zimbabwe," recalled Mangal.

Aged just 17 Rashid took one wicket in Bulawayo on his debut but his action, guile, and economy were quickly noticed.

Two years later he was signed for the lucrative Indian Premier League, catapulting him into stardom and turning him into one of world cricket's leading franchise players.

He won the International Cricket Council's award for best player from an associate nation in 2017. The next year Rashid became the fastest bowler to 100 ODI wickets, taking just 44 matches, before being bettered by Nepal's Sandeep Lamichhane by two games.

For all his success, Rashid's first World Cup in 2019 was a disappointment with just six wickets on unresponsive British pitches in nine games - all of

which Afghanistan lost.

He was belted for 110 runs in nine overs by England at Old Trafford - including 11 sixes, the most off a bowler in an ODI.

But Rashid believes the more spin-friendly Indian wickets at this World Cup will give him the stage to shine and he hopes he can inspire the next generation of Afghan cricketers. "If you work hard and believe in yourself, you can reach wherever you want to," said Rashid.

India-England World Cup warm up washed out

Guwahati, India - Rain on Saturday played spoilsport in a high-profile World Cup warm-up between hosts India and defending champions England with the match abandoned without a ball being bowled.

India skipper Rohit Sharma won the toss and elected to bat first but rain delayed the start and it kept pouring in the north-eastern Indian city of Guwahati.

England, led by Jos Buttler, will hope that weather improves before their second warm-up against Bangladesh at the same venue on Monday. India will play the Netherlands in their second warm-up in Thiruvananthapuram, which has also witnessed rain and a washout, on Tuesday.

Bangladesh down Sri Lanka

Liton Das, Tanzid Hasan and Mehidy Hasan Miraz struck half-centuries to guide Bangladesh to a seven-wicket win over Sri Lanka in their World Cup warmup match in Guwahati on Friday.

Chasing Sri Lanka's 263, Bangladesh knocked off the runs with eight overs to spare. to give themselves a timely booster before the tournament which gets underway next week.

Sri Lanka battle World Cup 'curse'

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka will make yet another attempt to end the "curse" of their only previous World Cup victory in next month's tournament, but go into it on the back of a humiliating defeat.

The Indian Ocean island nation were the surprise winners of the 1996 World Cup they co-hosted, but their only subsequent major tournament victory has been the 2014 T20 World Cup.

And many believe the victory 27 years ago - they beat Australia by seven wickets in the final in Lahore - itself sowed the seeds of decline.

"The 1996 win was a curse in

disguise," Arjuna Ranatunga, who captained the winning team, told AFP.

"As money poured in after our win, we also saw corrupt individuals getting onto the board," he said. "That was the beginning of the end."

Cricket is by far the most popular sport on the island of 22 million people, but is plagued with allegations of match fixing and other graft involving both players and officials.

The country's own sports minister lamented in 2019 that the International Cricket Council ranked it among the most corrupt cricketing nations.

A law was brought in the

same year making corruption in sport a criminal offence, but only one player has been prosecuted under it.

Sri Lanka's cricket board says it is willing to investigate any allegations and cooperate with local authorities and the ICC.

But secretary Mohan de Silva blamed players themselves for the team's plight.

"The lack of quality players coming through from school level - the cradle of Sri Lanka's cricket - is having a direct impact at senior level," he told AFP.

Top cricket commentator Damintha Wijesuriya of the mass-circulation Lankadeepa daily said the national team had suffered

from political tampering. "We are unable to maintain a long-term strategy and a clear vision," he said. "There is interference. Some players get political backing to secure places in the team."

The 1996 side had been in the making for four years, he said, but there had not been a long-term squad-building strategy in place for two decades.

"My fear is that we may end up being the whipping boys at this year's World Cup," he added.

"If we win four out of the nine matches, I will be happy. If we win seven or eight games and get to the semi-finals, it will be damn good. Winning the cup is a bonus."



Sri Lanka defeated Australia in the final in Lahore to win the 1996 World Cup

Williamson fires on return as New Zealand beat Pakistan in warm-up

Hyderabad, India - Rachin Ravindra and returning Kane Williamson played key knocks as New Zealand chased down 345 to thrash Pakistan by five wickets in a World Cup warm-up match on Friday.

Chasing 346 for victory, New Zealand lost an early wicket before Ravindra (97) and Williamson (54) put on 137 to put their team on course and they achieved the target with 6.2 overs to spare in Hyderabad.

Mohammed Rizwan hit 103 and Babar Azam made 80 in Pakistan's 345-5 after electing to bat first but the Kiwi batsmen made the total look easy against an attack missing pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi.

Williamson, who returned from a six-month lay-off due to his knee injury and played the match only as a batsman, looked impressive in his 50-ball stay before he retired out.

"It held up pretty good," Williamson, who will miss the



New Zealand's Kane Williamson (R) and Rachin Ravindra run between the wickets during their warm-up match against Pakistan in Hyderabad

tournament opener against England on October 5, said about his knee after the win.

Ravindra smashed the opposition bowlers to all parts of the ground as he hit 16 fours and one six but was denied a century by Agha Salman.

Pakistan spinner Usama Mir struck twice in the space of his

two overs but Daryl Mitchell made 59 to keep the chase on track. Left-hand batsmen Mark Chapman, who hit the winning six in his unbeaten 65, and James Neesham, who made 33, put on a partnership of 68 as New Zealand reached the target in 43.4 overs.

AFP

World Cup swansong for Bangladesh's Shakib, Mushfiquir and Mahmudullah

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Three cricketers, considered the backbone of Bangladesh's golden generation, are expected to make their swansong at the World Cup, after dragging their side up from whipping-boy status over 15 years.

When Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiquir Rahim and Mahmudullah, along with the retired Mashrafe Mortaza and the axed Tamim Iqbal, first played together in a Twenty20 international against Sri Lanka in



Shakib Al Hasan (L) and Mushfiquir Rahim

Johannesburg in 2007.

Only a few of those victories had come against higher-ranked teams.

But over the next 15 years they won nearly 40 percent of their games, including at least five

wins against each Test-playing country.

And the 3-0 Twenty20 series win against world champions England this year ticked another box - at least one series win against all Test-playing coun-

tries, in one format or another.

But the series victories were never capped with a trophy from a major competition.

Aside from a tri-series in Ireland, involving the hosts and the West Indies ahead of the 2019 World Cup, Bangladesh have never won a tournament involving more than two teams.

They reached three Asia Cup finals, in 2012, 2016, and 2018, but lost them all.

The team reached the semi-finals of the 2017 Champions Trophy in England, only to lose against India at Edgbaston.

"They certainly deserved better as a group," said Habibul Bashar, who led Bangladesh at the 2007 World Cup.

"Those players did something for Bangladesh cricket that had never happened in the past. They achieved a lot, definitely.

"But it is a matter of regret that they could not win a big trophy yet," he said.

DANCE OF THE WOLVES

Man City shocked by Wolves, Man Utd beaten by Crystal Palace

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester City's perfect start to the Premier League season came undone in a shock 2-1 loss to Wolves, as Manchester United slumped to a 1-0 home defeat to Crystal Palace on Saturday.

Arsenal closed to within a point of the lead by cruising to a 4-0 win at Bournemouth, while Aston Villa thrashed Brighton 6-1 to move into the top four.

City had won the opening six games of their title defence as they aim to become the first side to ever claim four consecutive English top-flight titles.

By contrast, Wolves had taken just four points from their first six games but stunned the champions at Molineux.

Ruben Dias' own goal put the home side in front, but City responded after the break through Julian Alvarez's free-kick.

Wolves, though, were a constant threat on the counter-attack and got their reward when Hwang Hee-Chan swept home at the second attempt 25 minutes from time.

Man City's defeat means Liverpool can go top should they end Tottenham's unbeaten Premier League start under Austalcoach Ange Postecoglou in the



Hwang Hee-chan of Wolves celebrates after scoring against Manchester City in their English Premier League match on Saturday (AFP)

1615GMT kick off.

United have now lost four of their opening seven league games of the season to pile more pressure on Erik ten Hag.

Joachim Andersen's stunning

first-half volley separated the sides at Old Trafford.

United had won a League Cup meeting between the sides 3-0 in midweek.

But with Palace restored to full

strength, the Red Devils suffered from a familiar lack of cutting edge up front as they laboured to get back into the game.

Defeat sees United slip to 10th in the table.

Easy for Arsenal

Arsenal moved up to second as Mikel Arteta's men eased to victory at Bournemouth.

Bukayo Saka had been an injury doubt, but headed into an

empty net to open the scoring on his 87th consecutive Premier League appearance. Saka could have had more had he not then handed over penalty duties.

Martin Odegaard has shared

responsibility from the spot with Saka this season and the Norwegian slotted home Arsenal's second before the break.

Both Saka and Odegaard then stood aside to give Kai Havertz the confidence boost of his first goal for the club when the Gunners were awarded a second spot-kick on 53 minutes.

Ben White rounded off the scoring in stoppage time.

Newcastle's recovery from a slow start to the season continues as the Magpies overcame Burnley 2-0.

Miguel Almiron fired into the top corner to open the scoring and Alexander Isak's penalty secured the points 14 minutes from

City had won the opening six games of their title defence as they aim to become the first side to ever claim four consecutive English top-flight titles. By contrast, Wolves had taken four points from their first six games

time. Ollie Watkins bagged a hat-trick in Villa's stunning demolition of Brighton.

Two goals from the England striker and a Pervis Estupinan own goal put Villa 3-0 up inside 26 minutes.

Ansu Fati reduced the deficit with his first Brighton goal.

But the day belonged to Watkins and he became the first Villa player in 47 years to score two hat-tricks in one season.

Jacob Ramsey and Douglas Luiz piled on the pain for Brighton in the closing stages.

AFP



Barcelona's Lamine Yamal celebrates Sevilla's Sergio Ramos' own goal during their Spanish league match on Friday (AFP)

‘Unlucky’ Ramos own goal helps Barca beat Sevilla

Barcelona, Spain - Real Madrid legend Sergio Ramos's own goal handed his old enemy Barcelona a narrow 1-0 win over Sevilla on Friday in La Liga, taking the Catalans top of the table.

Veteran centre-back Ramos deflected Lamine Yamal's header into his own net in the 76th minute to break the deadlock in a tight clash.

The 37-year-old said this week he had planned a special goal celebration if he scored against Barca after his summer return to Spain from Paris Saint-Germain, but putting through his own net was not part of the plan.

"Ramos is a spectacular defender, today he had the misfortune of scoring an own goal but he had a good game," Barcelona coach Xavi told reporters.

"It was unlucky for him but for us it was good." He continued: "Sergio grows in these atmospheres, it's an unfortunate goal, it hits him and bounces in."

Barcelona's victory helped the Catalans overtake Girona at the top of the table, with their neighbours hosting third-place Real Madrid on Saturday.

Xavi's side were leapfrogged by Girona and Madrid after they drew at Mallorca on Tuesday.

"Tomorrow I have a birthday party, I can't watch the game, imagine that. I'll follow it but I can't watch, it's a pity - may the best team win," said Xavi.

"The only thing that we can control was today, we feel good about it, we deserved more goals and we had a great game against a great team."

Before the game Sevilla caused a stir by announcing their directors would not attend the traditional lunch or sit in the presidential box in protest at Barcelona's involvement in the refereeing corruption scandal. The Catalan club and some of their former directors were charged with bribery.

Xavi started winger Raphinha in attacking midfield with Lamine Yamal on the flank, looking for more dynamism behind striker Robert Lewandowski.

Joao Felix crashed a shot off the crossbar after a fine run by Joao Cancelo as Barcelona made the early running, but Sevilla were sharp on the counter-attack.

Botswana's Galaxy stun Pirates in CAF Champions League

Johannesburg, South Africa - Botswana club Jwaneng Galaxy snatched a stunning victory, while Egyptian sides Al Ahly and Pyramids went on goal sprees in CAF Champions League qualifying on Friday.

Galaxy defeated South African outfit and former African champions Orlando Pirates 5-4 on penalties after losing the second leg of a last-32 tie 1-0.

In Cairo, title-holders Al Ahly hammered Saint George of Ethiopia 4-0 and Mostafa Fathy scored four goals as Pyramids trounced APR of Rwanda 6-1 for convincing aggregate victories.

Defender Benson Mangolo was the match-winner for Galaxy, converting the fifth penalty for the visitors after teammate Goitseone Phoko had earlier saved from 18-year-old Relebohile Mofokeng.

Fuellkrug, Reus special help 10-man Dortmund beat Hoffenheim to go top

Berlin, Germany - Borussia Dortmund will spend the night atop the Bundesliga table for the first time since the penultimate round of last season, winning 3-1 at Hoffenheim on Friday despite finishing with 10 men.

Taking the lead early through Niclas Fuellkrug's first goal for the club, Dortmund conceded almost immediately, Mats Hummels giving away a clumsy penalty to allow Andrej Kramaric to equalise from the spot.

Marco Reus scored with a spectacular, acrobatic attempt to edge Dortmund ahead again in first half injury time, the former captain's third goal in three games.

With Dortmund withstanding waves of Hoffenheim attacks, wing-back Ramy Bensebaini picked up two yellow cards in four second-half minutes and was sent off. Defender Julian Ry-



Borussia Dortmund's Marco Reus (2nd R) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Hoffenheim

erson added the third goal, scoring on the counter in the fifth minute of injury time.

"It was an important win for us" said Dortmund coach Edin Terzic, "but there's room to improve."

Captain Gregor Kobel said the

win "wasn't as dominant as we wanted" but credited his teammates for doing "those small things, which maybe aren't so spectacular" to secure the win.

Despite an unbeaten start to the league, Dortmund came into the match under pressure, with

Terzic's side failing to impress.

Hoffenheim defender John Brooks gifted Dortmund the early lead, allowing the ball to slip to on-rushing Julian Brandt, who let the ball roll into the path of Fuellkrug, the striker blasting home.

AFP

Fourteen-try New Zealand trounce Italy at Rugby World Cup

Décines-Charpieu, France - Scrum-half Aaron Smith scored a hat-trick of tries as New Zealand laid down a statement of intent with a 96-17 blitzing of a hapless Italy at the Rugby World Cup on Friday.

Captain Ardie Savea, wing Will Jordan and replacement hooker Dane Coles scored two each in the 14-try Pool A rout in Lyon as New Zealand, for whom Sam Whitelock earned a record 149th cap, stayed on course for a likely quarter-final against Ireland.

Mark Telea, Brodie Retallick, Dalton Papali'i, Damian McKenzie and Anton Lienert-Brown scored the other tries while Richie Mo'unga kicked nine conversions and McKenzie an-

other four.

"We have got talent across the board, we played some free rugby and that is how I want my boys to play. We put a lot into this week and we got the reward tonight," said Savea.

Outclassed Italy crossed the whitewash twice through wingers Ange Capuozzo and Monty Ioane but this was a one-way demolition job.

"It did not go our way, sometimes you have to focus on your basics and we did not perform in the scrums or line-outs," said Italy captain Michele Lamaro. "It is a big lesson for us."

It was New Zealand's second largest win over Italy after a 101-3 pummelling in the 1999 World Cup.



New Zealand's Aaron Smith (R) evade Italy's Monty Ioane during their Rugby World Cup Pool A match on Friday (AFP)

Having lost to France in their opening Pool A match, New Zealand have now racked up 25

tries and 167 points in victories over Namibia and Italy, with Uruguay to come next week.

It was clear which way the wind was blowing from each side's first passage of possession. Italy crept forward before they were turned over.

New Zealand gobbled up metres, pinned Italy back and took the lead after a sublime cross-field kick from Jordie Barrett picked out Jordan to dive over acrobatically in the corner.

Italy full-back Tommaso Allan cut the deficit with a penalty but any suspense was soon crushed by a rampant All Blacks.

First, their pack drove over a maul from short range with Smith dotting down at the back and then they scored one of the tries of the tournament, going almost the full length of the field.

AFP

VAULT OF GLORY

Obiena wins pole vault gold, Xie and Ge give China 100M sprint double

Hangzhou, China - Philippines pole vaulter EJ Obiena cruised to gold in an Asian Games record on Saturday - and then said he missed not having record-breaker Armand Duplantis to compete against.

Obiena has been one of Swedish world record-holder Duplantis's closest rivals this year, finishing second behind him at last month's world championships in Budapest.

And no one could come close to Obiena in Hangzhou as he took gold in 5.90m - 25cm clear of his nearest challengers.

Duplantis has dominated pole vault in recent years and improved his world record to 6.23m earlier this month at the Diamond League finals.

Obiena said competing against him "brings out the best in me". "It doesn't mean it's easier to win - it's easier to compete when he's there," he said.

"It doesn't make it easier when he's not here, it's just different." Obiena said being able to dominate like Duplantis gave him a taste of "what he feels most of the time".

But he also said he felt like "a villain" for beating home favourite Huang Bokai to the gold. Huang instead earned silver.

China still had plenty to celebrate on the second night of athletics action, with Xie Zhenye and Ge Manqi giving the country a 100m sprint double.

Xie powered home to take the

men's title in 9.97sec, ahead of Thailand's Puripol Boonson on 10.02 and Malaysia's Muhammad Azeem Mohd Fahmi on 10.11.

The 30-year-old Xie claimed the first Asian Games individual gold of his career, having been part of China's title-winning 4x100m relay team in 2014.

He was also part of the China team that won bronze at the Tokyo Olympics two years ago.

China's Su Bingtian, who reached the 100m final at the Tokyo Games, skipped the Asian

but she was slapped with a two-year ban for missing doping tests in 2021.

She returned to competition earlier this year but she could not overhaul Adekoya in a furious battle down the home straight, finishing 0.26sec behind.

"It was not easy with Salwa," said Nigeria-born Adekoya, who won the 400m and 400m hurdles at the 2014 Asian Games.

In the men's 400m, Saudi Arabia's Yousef Masrahi came through a titanic battle to take gold ahead of Japan's Kentaro

It doesn't mean it's easier to win - it's easier to compete when he's (Armand Duplantis) there.

It doesn't make it easier when he's not here, it's just different

EJ OBIENA

Games to focus on his preparations for next year's Paris Olympics.

Furious battle

Ge came home in 11.23sec to take the women's title ahead of Singapore's Shanti Pereira (11.27) and Bahrain's Hajar Alkhalidi (11.35).

In the women's 400m, Bahrain's Kemi Adekoya held off countrywoman and 2019 world champion Salwa Eid Naser to win gold in a time of 50.66sec.

Eid Naser ran the third-fastest time in history when she won the world title four years ago in Doha

Sato and Bahrain's Yusuf Ali Abbas.

Masrahi took gold in a time of 45.55sec despite a desperate lunge for the line by Sato, who finished just 0.02sec behind.

Bahrain's Birhanu Balew won the men's 10,000m in a time of 28min 13.62sec, ahead of Indian pair Kartik Kumar and Gulveer Singh.

In the men's hammer throw final, China's Wang Qi won with a best of 72.97m, ahead of Qatar's Ashraf Amgad Elseify and Uzbekistan's Sukhrob Khodjaev. AFP



Philippines' EJ Obiena celebrates after winning gold in pole vault at the Asian Games in Hangzhou on Saturday (AFP)



India's Aditi Ashok competes in women's golf

India's Ashok slams super 61 to put one hand on gold

Hangzhou, China - India's Aditi Ashok has one hand on a women's golf Asian Games gold after a blistering round of 11-under 61 on Saturday as world number two Yin Ruoning fell out of contention with a 74.

In the men's tournament in Hangzhou, Hong Kong's Taichi Kho, who was 18-under par after opening rounds of 62 and 60, saw his six-shot lead whittled back to three after a 70.

Ashok moved to 22-under for the tournament and has a seven-shot cushion over Thailand's Arpichaya Yubol, who is 15-under after a third-round 69.

The world number 47 Ashok, who agonisingly missed a medal at the Tokyo Olympics by one stroke, carded nine birdies and an eagle two, spectacularly holding her approach shot at the par-four ninth. But the top-ranked player in the field, China's Yin, slumped to a two-over par round and gold looks a forlorn hope for the US PGA Champion.

She tumbled down the leaderboard into a tie for ninth, a massive 13 shots behind runaway leader Ashok.

North Koreans smash weightlifting world records after four-year absence

Hangzhou, China - North Korean weightlifters shattered a slew of world records at the Asian Games on Saturday on their return to international competition after four years, surprising one Chinese rival whose mark was obliterated by their exploits.

Ri Song Gum broke two world records in the women's 49kg, the first weightlifting event of the Hangzhou Games, having not competed outside North Korea since 2019 because of the pandemic.

Then Kang Hyong Yong, a 24-year-old with no international pedigree, set a hat-trick of world records in snatch, clean and jerk, and combined on her way to gold in the women's 55kg class.

Ri, a 140cm tall (4ft 7in) pocket-rocket, secured gold on her second attempt in the clean and jerk at 122kg.

She drew gasps from the crowd as she raised the bar to 124kg, four kilos greater than had ever been lifted in that discipline before this competition.

She hoisted it aloft to set a new world record total of 216kg, then leapt for joy, before bursting



North Korea's Kang Hyong Yong celebrates winning gold in the women's 55kg weightlifting on Saturday (AFP)

into tears as she was hugged by her coaches.

It was the 25-year-old's second consecutive Asian Games gold, having taken the now-defunct 48kg category five years ago with a much smaller 199kg total.

China's world champion Jiang Huihua, who held the previous

world record at 215kg, was relegated to silver and said she was "surprised" at Ri's success after such a long absence.

When North Koreans were scheduled to appear at a competition in Cuba in June - what would have been their return to action - rival lifters strongly objected, saying they had not been

dope-tested since 2019.

In the end, the North Koreans failed to show.

"Ri is very impressive," Jiang said after taking silver. "Back in 2019 I could see she was already making a lot of improvements."

"But the result today, yes, I am surprised."

AFP



Yemeni athletes at the Asian Games opening ceremony

Yemenis at Games divided by war, united by sport

Hangzhou, China - One delivered gas cylinders in government-run Aden for a living and the other cooked meals in rebel-held Sanaa. Now the two athletes from war-torn Yemen find themselves on the same team at the Asian Games.

Yemen has been in the grip of a war since 2014 pitting forces loyal to the internationally recognised government against the Iran-backed Huthi rebels. The conflict has cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

The Yemeni team at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, China is the only sign of the country's unity, according to delegation chief Abdel Sattar al-Hamadani.

"We marched behind a single

banner at the opening of the Games," Hamadani told AFP.

"Sport has paid a heavy price for the war," added Hamadani, who heads the Yemeni Basketball Association, pointing out the absence of any material support, apart from that provided by the International Olympic Committee and Asian bodies.

Said al-Khodr, a judo fighter from Aden, worked in the morning and trained in the afternoon to make the Games team.

"The love of sport runs through my veins and I toil from dawn until 3:00 pm carrying gas cylinders on my back to deliver across the city," he said. "Then I take a shower and go to my judo training session."



Viktor Hovland (L) and Ludvig Aberg

Record breakers Hovland and Aberg help Europe turn Ryder Cup screw

Rome, Italy - Viktor Hovland and Ludvig Aberg led Europe's charge towards Ryder Cup glory on Saturday as the event's biggest ever foursomes win contributed to a 9.5-2.5 third-session lead over the shellshocked USA in Rome.

Captain Luke Donald said on Friday he wants a "historic week" from Europe, gunning to reclaim the Ryder Cup lost in a record 19-9 thrashing two years ago at the

hands of the USA, who are trying to win on this side of the Atlantic for the first time since 1993.

And his team have already delivered that at the Marco Simone course in Rome with Hovland and Aberg's 9 and 7 destruction of Scottie Scheffler and Brooks Koepka, the only player in the field from the Saudi Arabia-backed rebel LIV Golf circuit.

The Scandinavian pair steam-

rolled Scheffler and Koepka in the sort of display which Donald would have been dreaming of before his team arrived for work with the Eternal city still enveloped in darkness. It handily eclipsed the previous biggest Ryder Cup foursomes win 44 years ago, when Americans Tom Kite and Hale Irwin thumped Ken Brown and Des Smyth 7 and 6.

Scheffler and Koepka's games

broke down in the face of an unprecedented onslaught and the former was left with his head in his hands after conceding the match at the 11th, a series of duffed shots over the green leaving him and his partner no option but to admit defeat.

"I don't think we could have done a whole lot better," said Hovland, possibly the world's most in-form golfer.

JABEUR CHAMPION

Tunisian wins fifth WTA title with Shnaider demolition in Ningbo final

Shanghai, China - Ons Jabeur won the fifth WTA title of her career with an emphatic victory over surprise-package Diana Shnaider in the final of the Ningbo Open in China on Saturday.

The seventh-ranked Tunisian demolished the unseeded Shnaider 6-2, 6-1 for her first hardcourt title.

Top seed Jabeur took a last-minute wildcard into the tournament and it took her all the way to the final.

The Moscow-born 19-year-old Shnaider, who is 85th in the world, had enjoyed a dream run to her first WTA final.

She defeated two-times Grand Slam champion Petra Kvitová on the way to the champi-



Tunisia's Ons Jabeur hits a return against Russia's Diana Shnaider in the final of Ningbo Open on Saturday (AFP)

onship match.

But Shnaider wilted in the face of Jabeur's superior power and precision, and her title dream was snuffed out in just 78 minutes.

Pegula, Kudermetova in Pan Pacific final

World number four Jessica Pegula and Russia's Veronika Kudermetova on Saturday advanced to the final of the Pan Pacific Open

in Tokyo. Pegula of the United States cruised past Greek star Maria Sakkari, ranked sixth in the world, 6-2, 6-3.

Pegula said she was "super happy" with the win, adding: "I'm

proud of the way I competed today."

In Sunday's final, she will face the 19th-ranked Kudermetova, who beat the American in Madrid this year.

"I will try to learn from the last time I played her," said Pegula, who is aiming for her second title of the season following victory last month in Montreal.

Kudermetova had a tough semi-final, needing three hours and 25 minutes to defeat Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 7-6 (8/6), 6-7 (2/7), 6-3.

But Pegula said this will give Kudermetova "a lot of confidence going into tomorrow".

Sakkari said she "felt a bit tired" in the semi-final.

"Last week's (tournament), travelling, the last matches, jetlag and everything didn't help today," she said. "Jessica played really well on this court. It's low-bounce, it's fast. It's great for her."

Sakkari had ended her four-year wait for a second WTA title at the Guadalajara Open last week.



Iga Swiatek

Swiatek feels free of No. 1 'baggage' ahead of China Open

Beijing, China - World number two Iga Swiatek said Saturday she felt relieved of the "baggage" of defending the top ranking and was looking to switch up her game ahead of the China Open in Beijing.

The Polish star spent 75 weeks at the summit of women's tennis until a surprise early exit at the US Open this month saw her deposed by Aryna Sabalenka.

Swiatek said at a press briefing in Beijing that she had come to terms with the demotion, adding that she had "stopped thinking about rankings at all".

"I felt like there was some baggage off my shoulders and I could focus more on... getting back to the more peaceful and normal rhythm of practising," she said in response to a question by AFP.

"It's a little bit easier to come back to the mindset of chasing somebody because that's what we've been doing our whole lives," the 22-year-old said.

"My main goal (in China) is to

try and do some stuff differently on court in terms of technique and tactics to develop as a player and not chase rankings."

The women's singles tournament gets under way on Saturday, with the final on October 8.

At a press conference on Friday, Sabalenka said she was "super motivated" to see out the year at the top of the rankings table. "It's also about finishing the year as world number one and staying there as long as (I) can," the Belarusian said.

Sabalenka faces a tricky first-round tie against former Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin of the US. Swiatek takes on Spain's Sara Sorribes Tormo while world number three Coco Gauff is up against Ekaterina Alexandrova of Russia.

The China Open is taking place for the first time since the pandemic and since the global governing body for women's tennis ended a boycott of the country.

Pole-position 'Martinator' cuts MotoGP gap with sprint win

Motegi, Japan - Jorge Martin cut the gap with championship leader Francesco Bagnaia to just eight points at the Japan MotoGP on Saturday with his third straight sprint victory.

After cutting the gap to 13 points last weekend in India, the Spaniard from Ducati satellite team Pramac also secured pole position for Sunday with a record

lap at Motegi.

"I felt super strong for today's race," the smiling 25-year-old, nicknamed "Martinator", said after the sprint victory ahead of Brad Binder (KTM) in second and Bagnaia (Ducati) in third.

"I think we found a great base... Tomorrow I can be having more calm. With more laps, we need to manage the tyres. I feel

really happy overall and yeah, let's go for another victory tomorrow," Martin said.

Defending world champion Bagnaia, 26, will be second on the grid on Sunday, when he could in theory be replaced at the top of the standings with just six more races to go after Japan.

"We have to be happy with what we had, so the position is

ok. Jorge is in his best moment," said the Italian, now on 299 points compared with Martin's 291.

"But we have to remain calm and work for tomorrow. That will be another story," Bagnaia said.

South Africa's Binder is fourth in the overall table on 201 points behind Marco Bezzecchi on 252.

AFP



Jorge Martin

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GUENTER BRUS



Work by Austrian artist Guenter Brus on display at an exhibition at the W&K Palais Schoenborn-Batthyany in Vienna, Austria

ACTIONIST ARTIST

AUSTRIA CELEBRATES ITS LAST SURVIVING SHOCK 'ACTIONIST' ARTIST WHOSE LIFE WAS OFTEN MARKED BY OBJECTIONABLE BEHAVIOUR UNDER THE PRETEXT OF PRESENTING ART IN ACTION

Several shows are recognising Guenter Brus, the last surviving key member of Vienna's famed 'actionists', who turned 85 this week and whose radical movement broke new ground using the body to make art.

Brus, together with three others, founded the 'Vienna Actionism' movement which emerged in the 1960s. The actionists did not shy away from using blood, urine and excrement as they defied the confines of traditional painting.

Of the group, only Brus is still alive, with retrospectives in Vienna and the city of Graz showing prints from his key performances, his pictorial poems and other important pieces to mark his 85th birthday.

"From an Austrian perspective, Guenter Brus is certainly one of the few who have outstanding international significance. It is impossible to imagine art history without him," said Roman Grabner, who runs a museum dedicated to Brus in Graz, where the artist now lives.

Born on September 27, 1938, in the village of Ardnig in central Austria, Brus studied art in Graz before moving to Vienna where he worked with Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler - the other actionists.

One of Brus's most notable and first performances was in 1965 when he crisscrossed Vienna with his body painted white and bisected by a jagged black line before being arrested by police.

Grabner said the legendary act demonstrated 'the rift in Austrian post-war society, including of course that of the individual who suffered from this situation'.

Contaminated by Nazis

Austria - the birthplace of Adolf Hitler - was annexed by Nazi Ger-

many in 1938 and long cast itself as a victim before, in the 1980s, beginning to face up to its role in the Holocaust.

Brus openly spoke up about the country's dark past, saying in a 2018 interview with the Belvedere Museum that 'Vienna, as all of Austria, was contaminated by aging Nazis'. The movement, at times, took a heavy toll on the artist.

Brus, along with his wife Anna and their young daughter, fled



In Austria, nothing more would have been possible. We were shadowed by the judiciary as rioters, and rebels... We were stared at on the tramway
GUENTER BRUS

Vienna in 1969 after he was sentenced to six months in jail for degrading Austrian state symbols. He had taken part in a performance that involved obscene and objectionable behaviour while chanting the national anthem.

"In Austria, nothing more would have been possible. We were shadowed by the judiciary as rioters, and rebels... We were stared at on the tramway," said Brus, who settled in Berlin with his family before event-

ually moving back.

Brus held his last live performance in Munich, in 1970, in which he appeared nude and cut himself with a razor blade. According to Anna Brus, who also featured in some of his acts, his performances had become life-threatening.

"I couldn't continue with the performances... I had to realise that I couldn't continue like this," he said in 2018.

AFP

BRITAIN'S
BEATBOXERS

PERCUSSION



BEATBOXERS
BATTLE IN
BRITAIN AS
GLOBAL
COMMUNITY
GROWS



Beatboxers
Conundrum (L) and
Frosty compete in the
solo semi final during
the New Urban Era
Beatbox Battles
competition, at the
ATIK nightclub in
Tamworth, central
England

PEOPLE

Beatboxers from Britain and beyond have been showcasing their skills at a nightclub near Birmingham, central England, with an influx of newcomers meeting each other for the first time since the pandemic.

"A lot of people started battling online and... now we're out of lockdown, they've come into the beatbox scene and started enjoying the community," explained Vic Brown, of New Urban Era, which organised last weekend's event in the town of Tamworth.

Many who are new to the scene had never met face to face, he said, and now "they can see these people in person who they've only seen online."

"People are coming from different countries. It's bringing the beatbox community together again," added Brown.

Beatboxing - which sees a performer simulate the sounds and rhythms of percussion instruments or a drum machine with their voice - dates back centuries in various cultures and guises.

It has become more widespread in mainstream culture, even as a stand-

alone art form, after emerging as part of the hip-hop explosion in New York in the 1970s and 80s. Today, France is a leading home for beatboxing, while Britain brings its own musical pedigree to the technique.

"France is absolutely killing the scene, and the UK scene, it's just huge as well," said Alex Hackett, 30, who hosted the Tamworth event and performs under the artist name Abh.



Beatboxer Jack Hobbs
aka 'Hobbit'



Meanwhile, Londoner Tommy Lewis, 22 - beatbox name Tmy - praised the musical technique for allowing performers to "let all the creative energy within you just come out without the need of anything external."

"I truly believe there's no limit to what you can do with beatboxing and it will continue to grow," he added.

The scene is currently overwhelmingly male, but that gender imbalance is something the UK community will keep trying to improve, according to Brown, of New Urban Era.

"The female beatbox community is small and maybe feel intimidated in such a male-dominated community," he noted. "However, there are some very good UK female beatboxers, but due to such low numbers, they are in high demand and so difficult to book."

AFP

"I think it's really inspirational for anybody who comes out of the country."

Creative energy

Luke Chong - beatbox name Handfx - hails from Singapore and said performing in the UK event so far from home had been enlightening.

"Singaporean beatboxers never really have the opportunity to really go overseas to visit other communities and other battles so, to me, this is an eye-opening experience," he told AFP.

"I got to meet a lot of people, a lot of new faces, and I learnt a lot of techniques and skills," he said.

WHAT IS
BEATBOXING?

Beatbox is a style of vocal percussion that has taken the music world by storm in recent years. It involves creating rhythms and sound effects using only the human voice, often imitating the sounds of drums, bass, and other instruments.

There are many different words that can be used to describe this unique style of music-making. Some call it vocal percussion, mouth drumming, human beatboxing, and vocal beatboxing. Also, well-controlled breathing is the solid foundation required for efficient human beatboxing.

There is no denying that beatbox is one of the coolest and most impressive forms of musical expression among the youth today globally.