



ANTIGUA & BARBUDA POINT EXPRESS

TRUSTED NEWS AND RESPECTED VIEWS

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CARNIVAL 2024 IN FULL SWING



Story on page 2. Photo credit: Wayne Marriette

Local News



Carnival 2024 launched; Minister applauds women in calypso

Dubbed the Caribbean's greatest summer festival, Antigua's Carnival 2024 was launched last evening under the theme "Ah Love It Here" following a parade and opening ceremony.

Hundreds of people thronged the streets in the city centre to witness the parade as it wended its way from the Ministry of Agriculture to Antigua Recreation Ground, now transformed into Carnival City.

Ivena, Singing Althea, Lady Falcon, Gee Bee and Thalia, all former Calypso



Daryll Matthew Queens, served as yesterday's Grand Marshalls, a first in the history of the opening parade.

Declaring Carnival 2024 open, Minister of Education, Sports and



Creative Industries, Daryll Matthew paid tribute to women in calypso, who have contributed to the preservation of the art-

form. "These women have done a lot to raise the standard of calypso in Antigua *cont'd on pg 3*

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cont'd from pg 2

and Barbuda and I believe it's only right that we show them some respect and some love," Minister Matthew told those in attendance. He also boldly predicted that based on a review of the finalists in this year's calypso competition, a woman may likely claim the title.

"The number of women who are participating in calypso, the number of women who are participating in our carnival keeping our culture alive, is absolutely phenomenal. It makes me feel proud to be here as the minister with responsibility for carnival, celebrating all of our women."



Minister Daryll Matthews also paid tribute to the late soca artiste, Ricardo Drue, who passed away in December, 2023.

This year's carnival theme "Ah Love It Here" pays tribute to Ricardo Drue's contribution to Antigua and Barbuda's cul-

tural artform. The festivals minister said it was the right thing to do.

"A lot of times, persons don't get the recognition they deserve when they're alive. But I'm happy that Ricardo was able to feel the love that Antiguan and Barbudans have for

him, before his untimely passing."

Carnival 2024 will run from 20th July to 6th August, 2024. Minister Matthew is appealing to citizens and residents, in particular carnival patrons, to be safe at all times during this period of heightened merriment.

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REQUIREMENTS

- At least 5 CXC subjects including Math and English
- Associates Degree in Marketing or Business would be a plus
- Proficiency in Microsoft Excel
- Excellent written and verbal communication skills
- Must hold a valid "C1" driver's licence; a "D" would be a plus
- Minimum three years sales experience

Please send your cover letter and resume to hr@autoartanu.com.
Deadline for submission: July 26th, 2024.
 Only suitable applications will be acknowledged.

Alfa Nero's new owner protected from potential lawsuits

Government has revealed that one of the offers made to the buyer of the Alfa Nero Superyacht was protection from legal action by those claiming to be owners of the vessel.

One week ago today, the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Governance announced the sale of the superyacht, formerly owned by Russian Oligarch Andrey Guryev, for US \$40 million after a previous attempt to sell the Alfa Nero

in November, 2023, failed. Former Google executive, Eric Schmidt, who won the bid, later withdrew his offer of US\$67 due to legal challenges that were being drawn out.

With legal issues still ongoing, Chief of Staff in the Office of the Prime Minister, Ambassador Lionel 'Max' Hurst was asked during yesterday's Post-Cabinet Press Briefing what assurances were given to the buyer that



helped finalised the sale.

He said the government will shield the buyer from lawsuits that may arise in the future on the ownership of the Alfa Nero and the proceeds from its sale.

Ambassador Hurst also addressed questions surrounding the sale of the vessel for US\$ 27 million less than what was offered by Eric Schmidt.

Already, those claiming ownership of the Alfa Nero, specifically Yulia Guryeva-Motlokhov, the daughter of the Russian oligarch, have filed a lawsuit for the US\$40 million, the proceeds from the sale of the vessel.

However, government has scoffed at the legal maneuver, writing in the Cabinet Notes, "That frivolous lawsuit, the Cabinet agreed, will not prevent the government from making good on the obligations incurred while the vessel was under its ownership; and, will not deter the administration..."

Yulia Guryeva-Motlok-

hov claims to be the sole shareholder in a Guernsey-based trust that is the only shareholder in the Flying Dutchman Limited that owns the superyacht.

Ambassador Hurst also addressed questions surrounding the sale of the vessel for US\$ 27 million less compared to what was offered by Eric Schmidt.

He pointed to market forces as the reason for the final offer, explaining that after the first sale fell through, there were other potential buyers whose offers were lower than the US\$67 million.

However, this time, the unknown buyer was forthright in the arrangement, making a non-refundable deposit and following up several days later with the outstanding amount.

According to reports, the vessel's new owner had indicated his eagerness to move it from Falmouth Harbour. However, as of yesterday, for reasons unknown, it remained moored there.

WE ARE HIRING



Sales Representatives

With 25 years of operational excellence, The AKHIMO Group Inc is seeking experienced, skilled and driven individuals to join our dynamic team.

The ideal candidate will be responsible for achieving specific sales targets and must have:

- Strong organizational and time management skills.
- Good work ethics and exceptional attention to detail
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills.
- At least a high school diploma with proficiency in English and Math.
- Own transportation, mobile phone and laptop computer
- Previous sales experience is a plus

Suitably qualified applicants are invited to email their applications to: humanresources.ntw@gmail.com on or before July 29, 2024.

Only shortlisted candidates will be contacted.

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Local News



Murder case against former cop thrown out

Murder accused and former Police Constable Kasroy Simon is a free man after the High Court of Justice upheld a no-case submission filed by his attorney Andrew O’Kola.

Kasroy Simon was charged with murder in February, 2020, in the death of Nicoma McFarlane, a Jamaican woman who, in the initial stages of the police investigation into her death, was believed to have committed suicide.

However, her cause of death was listed as strangulation.

In November, 2020, Magistrate Ngaio Emmanuel, in the All Saints Magistrate Court, ruled during a committal hearing there was enough evidence for the case against Kasroy Simon to be tried in the High Court.

He plead not guilty and his attorney was determined to prove his innocence.

In his no-case submission, O’Kola



Kasroy Simon

argued there was insufficient evidence to pin the crime on his client, stating that the prosecution failed in their efforts to provide any “direct or substantial circumstantial evidence linking our client to the alleged crime”. In the end, the High Court agreed and the case was thrown out.

In a statement last evening, Attor-

ney Andrew O’Kola wrote, “The High Court’s decision highlights the fundamental principle that individuals should only face charges when there is substantial evidence against them and that suspicions, speculations and conjectures, without more, are not evidence of guilt.

“This decision not only restores, hopefully, Mr. Simon’s reputation but also underscores the importance of a fair and rigorous judicial process”.

Nicoma McFarlane’s body was discovered by her mother in their Freemans Village home on 7th February, 2019 after arriving home from work.

Her wrist was slit and a bottle of bleach was found beside her. She was in the country to assist her mother who was scheduled to undergo surgery and had allegedly struck up a friendship with Simon before her arrival in Antigua and Barbuda.

Heartiest congratulations Arian!



EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

We have created history at CAL as we welcome our 1st Female Line Check Airman – ATR Captain Arian Blanchard

We are pleased to formally announce the appointment of **Captain Arian Blanchard as our first female Line Check Airman – ATR with effect from June 27th 2024**.

Captain Blanchard who hails from St. John’s Antigua has always had a curiosity and passion for flying, as her childhood home was located close to final approach at the V.C Bird Airport Antigua. She attended the Florida Institute of Technology where she studied her undergraduate in Aviation Management and completed her Masters Degree in Airport Development and Management. After her studies Captain Blanchard returned home and began her flying career where she was quickly promoted to Technical Ground Instructor, Captain ATR and finally Check Airman at her previous employ.

In her new portfolio, Captain Blanchard will be responsible for carrying out Line Flight training and conducting proficiency checks on (ATR Flight Personnel) ensuring high standards are maintained.

Please join me in congratulating Captain Blanchard and wishing her all the best in her new role!



UPGRADES

Roger N.C. Berkeley
Vice President – Human Resources

VACANCY - SALES CONTROLLER

The Antigua Public Utilities Authority is now seeking applications from suitably qualified persons for the position of Sales Controller:

The Sales Controller is responsible for leading the Corporate and Retail sales teams and functions in the Telecommunications Business Unit. This includes setting sales quotas, creating sales plans, analyzing data, managing the relationships with key corporate customers, monitoring sales zones and building the sales teams through training, mentoring and implementing performance interventions to maximize their potential for success.

Key tasks include, but are not limited to the following:

- Meeting marketing and sales financial objectives by forecasting requirements, preparing budgets & scheduling expenditures, analyzing variances and initiating corrective actions;
- Developing sales plans by forecasting and developing sales quotas, projecting sales volumes and profit for existing and new products, analyzing trends, establishing pricing strategies while monitoring costs, competition, supply and demand;
- Completing sales audits, identifying trends, determining improvements and recommending changes;
- Achieving marketing and sales objectives by planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating advertising, merchandising, and trade promotion programs including developing field sales action plans;
- Developing and sustaining rapport with key accounts by creating and maintaining a portfolio of corporate customers; exploring their specific usage patterns to recommend service plans that best fit their needs while anticipating new opportunities for business;
- Managing the relationships with outside vendors and re-sellers of our products and services;
- Managing the remuneration schemes and performance of sales teams including setting & monitoring of targets, issuing assignments & sales calls, formally assessing performance of teams and individuals routinely;
- Preparing comprehensive monthly reports to include growth trends, customer churn & receivables by product line.

Minimum Qualifications:

- Bachelor's Degree in Marketing, Business Management (or related field) from a reputable tertiary institution;
- Three (3) to five (5) years work experience in a senior sales role;
- Demonstrated ability to successfully lead a sales team.

Knowledge, Skills & Abilities:

- Experience in planning and implementing sales strategies and customer relationship management;
- Proven leadership experience managing and directing a sales team with the ability to inspire and motivate them to achieve targets;
- Dedication to providing outstanding customer experiences;
- Excellent oral and written communication skills;
- A high degree of flexibility; the ability to work under pressure and to deadlines; the ability to work additional hours and/or perform additional duties in the event of planned/unplanned outages, storms and emergencies.

Interested persons are asked to apply in writing to:

The Human Resources Manager
Antigua Public Utilities Authority
P.O. Box 416
Cnr. High Street & Independence Avenue
St. Johns, Antigua
OR Email: hr@apua.ag

Deadline for application is Wednesday 7th August, 2024

** Only suitable applicants will be acknowledged **
"APUA is an equal opportunity Employer"



Marked increase in CIP in first half of 2024

The recent decision among five countries within the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, including Antigua and Barbuda on a new minimum price for Citizenship by Investment options is believed to have contributed to the high performance of the CIP nationally over the last six months.

This week’s Cabinet Notes detailed that Minister of Finance and Corporate Governance, Prime Minister Gaston Browne said the programme has done “significantly well” between January to June, 2024.

It was noted that the US\$200,000 minimum price, likely spurred interest in Antigua and Barbuda’s Programme, ahead its 1st July, 2024 implementation.



In March this year, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Saint Lucia agreed via a Memorandum of Understanding, to collaborate in order to strengthen their CBIs by exchanging best practices, due diligence processes and intelligence related to potential security or compliance risks. The territories also agreed that the minimum sum that will be paid into any government fund, government project or private development project of, or in participating

countries shall be US\$200,000 and that discounting of the agreed minimum price is illegal.

Ambassador Lionel Max Hurst added that the country’s robust CIP has also contributed to the heightened interest that was experienced earlier this year.

“Antigua and Barbuda has become a favoured nation for its CIP, because it is so well run, thanks to the people at Citizenship by Investment Unit, led by Ms. Quinland. So, when you look at some of the underlying reasons for the increase, one of them is undoubtedly the high value, which is placed on the Antigua and Barbuda travel document, which is issued to those persons who become citizens of Antigua and Barbuda,” Ambassador Hurst said.

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CHILDREN'S CARNIVAL

"AH LOVE IT HERE"

ASSEMBLY POINT: OLD HOUSE OF CULTURE AT 1:30 PM.

28 JUL | **DEPARTURE**
2:30PM
ST. JOHN'S

ROUTE:

Turn **RIGHT** onto Queen Elizabeth Highway, **RIGHT** onto Independence Avenue, **LEFT** on Redcliffe Street, **RIGHT** onto Market Street, **RIGHT** onto High Street, **LEFT** on Independence Ave, **RIGHT** at the roundabout onto Old Parham Road, **RIGHT** onto Coronation Road into Carnival City. Water breaks between (Corner Alley & Redcliffe Street) and (between corner ACB & Magistrate Court).





(from L to R): Dr José Hernandez Luis, SLBMC Nephrologist, Salma Crump (SLBMC Marketing & Communications Manager), Arthur Thomas (Worship Master Antigua Samaritan Lodge), Dr. Ian Thomas (SLBMC Nephrologist), Ato Kentish (Charity Steward Antigua Samaritan Lodge) and Hordley Forbes (Treasurer Antigua Samaritan Lodge).

Antigua Samaritan Lodge donates ultrasound machine to SLBMC Dialysis Unit

Members of the Antigua Samaritan Lodge No. 10029 have bolstered the life-saving services provided in Sir Lester Bird Medical Centre's Dialysis Unit, raising funds to donate a portable ultrasound machine worth \$86,700.

This donation ensures that the Dialysis Unit can maintain access to quality point of care ultrasound (POCUS) services close to the bedside.

Point-of-Care Ultrasound (POCUS) refers to the use of portable ultrasound systems by clinicians at a patient's bedside for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes.

Having ease of access to this service means shorter wait times and better care for patients. Depending on the results, patients can be referred to a radiologist for image review and



SIR LESTER BIRD
MEDICAL CENTRE

further investigation if needed.

"Updated technology enables us to provide more accurate diagnoses, perform procedures with greater precision and ultimately improve patient outcomes," shares Dr. Ian Thomas,

SLBMC's Nephrologist.

"Having access to this service at the bedside not only enhances our ability to provide high-quality medical care — as it allows for increased safety by reducing complications which can occur during performance of life saving procedures but also increases patient satisfaction and overall experience."

"It's difficult to calculate how many lives will be positively impacted by this overwhelming donation from Antigua Samaritans," continued Dr. Thomas.

"But I do know that lives will be saved and healthcare will be improved for many of our patients and families."

Worship Master Arthur Thom-
cont'd on pg 12



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
FIVE ISLANDS CAMPUS

JUNIOR CALYPSO MONARCH

"AH LOVE IT HERE"

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Local News



AUCTION NOTICE

<u>REGISTRATION SECTION</u>	<u>BLOCK</u>	<u>PARCELS</u>
GOLDEN GROVE	612 1790C	26 AND 108

Instructed by **ACB MORTGAGE AND TRUST COMPANY LIMITED**, we shall sell by **PUBLIC AUCTION** on Thursday the 08th day of August 2024 at 11:00am the above residential properties at Golden Grove.

The properties are under the ownership of **DION WAYNE PRYCE AND SANDRA ELIZABETH JAMES**. Parcel 26 is a 4,356 sq. ft. plot with a two storey residential building with 2-bedrooms. Parcel 108 is a 2,178 sq. ft. plot with a partially completed residential building.

The Auction shall be held on site.

Details of the Auction may be obtained from **Trevor Teddy Santos Inc., Public Auctioneer** at telephone numbers: 562-7653 and 464-7653.

Dated this the 18th day of July 2024

Trevor Teddy Santos Inc.
Licensed Auctioneer

cont'd from pg 10

as said: “The brethren of Antigua Samaritan Lodge No. 10029 are delighted that this effort in support of the Sir Lester Bird Medical Centre has borne fruit.

“This impressive piece of equipment will certainly help to diagnose life threatening and health debilitating illnesses at the hospital for many in our community.

“We thank all who have supported this effort and look forward to similar enthusiasm as we enter into our second round of fundraising”.

Salma Crump, SLBMC Marketing & Communications Manager, said the staff at SLBMC recognis-

es the need to stay current as technology is rapidly changing.

“Raising this amount of funds is no easy task, especially with so many worthwhile organisations vying for the same dollar.

“We continue to be amazed by the support we get from the community — and I think it’s a testament to the good we do.

“Our thanks to the Antigua Samaritans Lodge, as having organisations that want to support improvements to patient care in our hospital is only something we can be grateful for.

“This donation ensures our patients and families receive the quality care they expect,” said Crump.

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KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

To provide efficient, professional service to customers through the use of colour matching equipment, reference material and procedures. Also responsible for providing customers with technical advice on products, mixing ratios, application techniques and selling of ancillary paint products.

REQUIREMENTS

- At least 5 CXC subjects including Math and English
- Good written and verbal communication skills
- Computer literate
- Must hold a valid "C1" driver's licence; a "D" would be a plus
- Minimum one year's experience

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Deadline for submission: July 26th, 2024.
 Only suitable applications will be acknowledged.



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ChatGPT reveals search feature in Google challenge

By **Natalie Sherman**

OpenAI is working on adding new powers to its artificial intelligence (AI) bot, as it seeks to edge out Google as the go-to search engine.

The company said it was trialling a search feature that incorporates real-time information into its ChatGPT product, allowing the bot to respond to user questions with up-to-date information and links.

The tool is currently available to a limited number of users in the US.

But it is expected to eventually be incorporated into the company's ChatGPT bot, which launched the wave of excitement about AI when it burst on the scene in 2022.

OpenAI, which is backed by Microsoft, has since introduced numerous tools, including for coding, making videos, data analysis and creating images.

It said its users would also be able to ask the new search tool follow-up questions to their original queries.

“Getting answers on the web can

take a lot of effort, often requiring multiple attempts to get relevant results,” the company said in its announcement.

“We believe that by enhancing the conversational capabilities of our models with real-time information from the web, finding what you're looking for can be faster and easier.”

Analysts have long argued that AI chatbots are the future of search.

That is currently a very lucrative business for Google, which has been racing to add AI-powered tools of its own.

Shares in its parent company, Alphabet, ended the day down nearly 3% following the announcement.

Other AI companies are also pursuing search products, but Google remains by far the dominant player, claiming more than 90% of the market globally.

The expansion of AI has raised environmental concerns, however, because of how much energy the systems use.

The changes to how search engines respond to queries - offering conversa-

tional paragraphs instead of directing users to links - have also raised alarm among news companies, many of which rely on search traffic for audiences and revenue.

OpenAI said it was working with publishers, including the Atlantic and News Corp, on its new search feature.

“We are committed to a thriving ecosystem of publishers and creators,” the company said.

“In addition to launching the SearchGPT prototype, we are also launching a way for publishers to manage how they appear in SearchGPT, so publishers have more choices.”

The company has previously been sued by for allegedly “stealing” content to train its systems, including by the New York Times.

It has also announced partnerships with some outlets, including the Associated Press. OpenAI said media companies could still be featured in their results, even if they have declined to supply their material to train its model.

Southwest Airlines scraps unassigned seating after 50 years

By Natalie Sherman

Southwest Airlines is to allow customers to reserve seats, scrapping the free-for-all of unassigned seating it has operated for 50 years.

The company said it also planned to charge for «premium» seats with more leg room, add red-eye flights, and redesign its boarding system.

The announcements came as the firm reported that profits plunged in the April-June period to \$367m, down 46% compared with last year.

Chief executive Bob Jordan said the seating changes would “unlock new sources of revenue”.

The company currently assigns passengers to boarding groups based on when they check in, a system intended to help planes turn around quickly. Travellers can also pay extra to board earlier.

But it said its research had found that 80% of customers preferred assigned seats.

The airline said it would provide more detail about the changes in September.

The new red-eye flights will launch next year on five routes, including between Las Vegas and Baltimore and Los Angeles and Nashville.

Premium seats are ex-



pected to account for about one third of space, it said.

Southwest started in the 1970s gaining popularity with lower fares and good customer service.

It had been known as a holdout in the industry for not hitting customers with extra fees for items such as checked baggage.

But its share price has dropped sharply over the last few years, as its profitability lags others in the industry.

Last month, Elliott Investment Management, which is known for its aggressive and public show-downs with firms it sees as underperforming, said it had taken an 11% stake in the firm and would push

for major changes, including the removal of Mr Jordan.

“Southwest’s rigid commitment to a decades-old approach has inhibited its ability to compete in the modern airline industry,” Elliott said, adding that the airline “outdated software, a dated monetisation strategy and antiquated operational processes”.

Mr Jordan said he knew that the firm’s performance this spring had fallen short.

The company has been affected by issues such as delayed plane deliveries from Boeing.

The airline, like others in the industry, is also fac-

ing pressure on fares, after overestimating demand for domestic travel.

The firm said it was cutting back capacity in the months ahead and the seating changes, in the works for months, would also drive improvements. It said the seating changes could generate more than \$1bn in revenue.

“Although our unique open seating model has been a part of Southwest Airlines since our inception... this is the right choice - at the right time - for our customers, our people, and our shareholders,” Mr Jordan said.

Shares in the firm rose more than 6% after the announcement.

Sint Maarten cancels public meetings in lead up to snap election

By Melissa Wong

Prime Minister of Sint Maarten Dr Luc Mercelina has announced a number of measures aimed at maintaining the safety of the Dutch Caribbean Island which is preparing for a snap election on August 19, 2024.

Dr Mercelina announced public meetings which require a permit are cancelled as the country heads toward election day.

In addition, on election day, the selling of alcohol will not be permitted, and supporters representing the different political parties will not be allowed to gather by polling stations.

The Sint Maarten Police Force will be enhanced with 25 extra members from Curacao (10 officers), Aruba (10 officers), St Eustatius (3 officers) and Saba (2 officers).

The prime minister also revealed a SWAT team from Curacao is on island assisting the Police Force of Sint Maarten.

Dr Mercelina stated that as election day approaches on August 19, Sint Maarten will not succumb to the threat of violence, and has requested military assistance from the Kingdom to come to the island.

The security enhancements come after recent gun crimes, the most shocking, the July 17 shooting that left Oualichi Movement for



Prime Minister of Sint Maarten, Dr Luc Mercelina.

Change (OMC) leader Olivier Arrindell injured and his wife Sabine dead. Last week, the prime minister said, ‘there was no indication the shooting was politically motivated.’

During a Council of Ministers meeting conference on Wednesday, he explained the reason for not permitting groups to congregate.

“We do not want the gathering of people that we feel unsafe with, that there is a threat for agglomeration of people in our society where we cannot guarantee the safety of each individual person that wants to be present or assist one of these public meetings.”

The prime minister said because it is snap election and there is some tension in

the community, he decided to make radical decisions to guarantee the safety of the public.

“At this particular moment we have a threat for the safety of our nation. Why it’s a threat? Because traditionally, historically, we have never been exposed to this type of violence in our community.

“I do believe I have to take all measures necessary to bring back the mindset of my people in a way of how we used to live with each other.

“I’m not going to tolerate this in the society and that is the reason that I took these measures.”

Dr Mercelina also issued a call for citizens to stop the sensational exposure of messages on social

media as he said it’s contributing to ‘melee’ and causing a lot of restlessness in the community.

Sint Maarten held its 2024 parliamentary election on January 11.

The coalition government led by Prime Minister Mercelina was formed by the political parties United Resilient St Maarten Movement (URSM), Democratic Party (DP), Nation Opportunity Wealth (NOW) and Party for Progress (PFP).

However, a snap election was triggered in Sint Maarten after the coalition government led by Prime Minister Dr Luc Mercelina lost its majority in Parliament.

Dr Mercelina has been prime minister for eight weeks.



The Capitol of Puerto Rico in San Juan. Photo: iStock/dennisvdw

Puerto Rico finalises details for referendum on political status

Plans to hold a nonbinding referendum on Puerto Rico's political status came under scrutiny Wednesday for its multimillion-dollar cost as election officials announced the order and description of choices on the upcoming ballot.

The \$1.3 million referendum that critics have described as "inconsequential" will feature three choices in the following order: independence with free association; statehood and independence. Under the free association option, issues like foreign affairs, US citizenship and use of the US dollar would be negotiated.

The order of options was set following a televised drawing held Wednesday that was supervised by judges at Puerto Rico's elections commission.

Regardless of the outcome of the referendum scheduled for the November 5 general elections, the island's status will not change. That would require approval from the US Congress and the US president.

Jessika Padilla, the elections commission's alternate president, said the agency had an original budget of \$6.2

million for the upcoming elections but was awarded \$7.5 million, with the additional funds going toward the referendum.

Critics note that Puerto Rico is emerging from the biggest public debt restructuring in US history after announcing in 2015 that it was unable to pay a more than \$70 billion debt load following decades of mismanagement, corruption and excessive borrowing.

Jesús Manuel Ortiz, leader of the main opposition Popular Democratic Party, said in recent days that the referendum is "a totally unjustified expense at a time when the (island) is experiencing a real crisis in the cost of living."

Meanwhile, leaders of the Puerto Rican Independence Party have gone to court to challenge the referendum. The island's Supreme Court issued a resolution last week stating it would hear the case.

Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Pierluisi of the pro-statehood Progressive New Party had announced on July 1 that he would hold a referendum and has defended his decision. He has repeatedly said the island's 3.2 million

US citizens lack equality and noted they are not allowed to vote in US general elections.

The referendum was announced a month after Pierluisi, a Democrat, lost in his party's primary to Jenniffer González, a Republican who is Puerto Rico's representative in Congress. The two ran together in 2020.

Politics in Puerto Rico are defined by the island's political status, so it's common to find both Democrats and Republicans in the same party.

González is a supporter of former President Donald Trump, who has said he doesn't support statehood for Puerto Rico. González, however, has pledged to push for statehood if she wins in November.

Puerto Rico already has held six referendums, the most recent one in 2020, when voters were asked a single question: "Should Puerto Rico be admitted immediately into the Union as a State?"

Nearly 53 per cent voted in favour of statehood, with only about half of registered voters participating in that year's general elections.

'Monster' wildfire may have destroyed half of Canadian town

By Ana Faguy

A huge wildfire may have destroyed up to half of the Canadian town of Jasper, officials have.

The fires in Jasper National Park, which were sparked earlier this week, forced about 25,000 people to flee the area earlier this week, officials said on Thursday.

Some 400 firefighters from around the world are on their way to Canada to help battle the flames.

Officials warned that there are only limited details currently available on which structures were damaged, and that the focus is on containing the flames and preventing further destruction.

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith said during an emotional press conference that the township of Jasper would require a "significant rebuild".

She said Jasper and the surrounding area had been a "source of pride with some of the most beautiful scenery in the world" and promised residents "we will recover from this".

Jasper's mayor, Richard Ireland, said that the wildfire has "ravaged our small, tight-knit mountain community".

He said his town was still coming to terms with the wildfire.

Jasper National Park is the largest in the Canadian Rockies. The resort town bearing its name has about 5,000 residents, but the park had almost 2.5m visitors last year.

Hundreds of firefighters are flying in to help with the efforts, including 100 from Jalisco, Mexico, 200 from South Africa and 100 from Australia and New Zealand.

Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime minister, thanked first responders for their response to the wildfires.



Smoke seen in the distance in Jasper.

"As the heartbreaking images from Jasper emerge, I want to thank the brave first responders who are in Alberta right now, fighting to save every home and every community they can," he said on social media.

Pierre Martel, director for the national fire management programme at Parks Canada, said the fire was started by a lightning storm and escalated on Wednesday, fanned by powerful wind gusts.

"It [was] just a monster at that point," Mr Martel said. "There are no tools we have in our tool box to deal with it."

The fire reached 100m (328ft) high, covering "an inordinate amount of space in a very little amount of time," one official said.

Mike Ellis, Alberta's minister for public safety, said the fire was 5km (three miles) outside of Jasper when it was pushed by powerful gusts to the town in "less than 30 minutes".

"Any firefighter will tell you there is little to nothing you can do when you have a wall of flames coming at you like that," he said.

"Nobody anticipated that fire to come so fast, so large and so quickly."

Karyn Decore, the owner of the Maligne Lodge in Jasper, was on holiday when she learned the hotel had burned down.

She said staff received an evacuation order and had gone door-to-door until 02:00 local time to ensure all visitors and staff were notified and ready to leave.

Managers helped around 100 staff - many of whom are foreign and without transport - get out of the city towards the nearby province of British Columbia.

On Wednesday night, she received a photograph of the lodge in flames.

"I was horrified and devastated when I saw that photo," she told the BBC. "I think it's going to take a couple of days for the shock to wear down."

"It's our intention to rebuild," she added.

BBC journalist Wendy Hurrell was in Jasper National Park when the fires began to burn on Monday.

She, her husband and daughter drove through the night in a rush to

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Ten-year-old boy killed in Colombia's first drone death

By Cat McGowan

A 10-year-old boy has been killed in a drone attack, becoming the first person to die in such an attack in Colombia, according to the nation's defence ministry.

Colombia's army commander said a grenade had fallen from the drone onto a football field in the town of El Plateado, leaving 12 other people injured.

The ministry said Wednesday's attack was targeting soldiers and blamed the Carlos Patiño Front, a group of dissident guerrillas who broke away from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) when the Farc signed a peace deal with the Colombian government in 2016.

A leader of the Carlos Patiño Front, Kevin Arcos, denied responsibility when contacted by AFP and blamed Colombia's army.

Defence minister Iván



Colombia's defence ministry and a rebel group blame each other for the attack.

Velásquez expressed solidarity with the boy's family in a post on X, saying there would be a military offensive to "capture those responsible".

The incident in the southern Cauca region highlights the ongoing violence in the South American country.

Dissident guerrilla

groups are increasingly using commercially available drones to drop explosives.

In June, the Colombian army reported 17 drone attacks over six weeks, with no resulting deaths.

Drones have also been used by Colombia's government to increase surveillance.

Colombia's left-wing

President Gustavo Petro is a former guerrilla fighter and has promised to bring peace by negotiating with remaining rebel groups.

The 2016 peace deal between the government and Farc aimed to end five decades of armed conflict, in which more than 260,000 people were killed and millions internally displaced.

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leave town.

"The storm was ferocious - the skies went dark red and there were whipping winds, fierce rain and lightning," she said.

"We are some of the last travellers to see Jasper in its full beauty - it will be a very long time before it will recover. It's utterly devastating for them all and my heart is breaking."

Environment Canada said there might soon be some reprieve from the hot and dry weather, which allowed the fire to grow, as 1cm to 2cm of rain was

expected on Thursday.

Firefighters, support personnel, water trucks, a dozer group, helicopters and airtankers have all been sent to help fight the blaze.

There are more than 170 active wildfires in Alberta, triggering air quality alerts in multiple areas.

This marks another year of difficult fire conditions for the province. Last year, a record 2.2 million hectares burned in Alberta between 1 March and 31 October.

Outside Alberta, there are more than 45 active blazes in British Colum-

bia and fires are burning in California, Oregon, Montana and Utah in the US.

In California, one man was arrested for allegedly pushing a burning car into a ravine, which sparked a fire that has so far burned some 70,000 acres near the city of Chico, authorities said on Thursday.

In Oregon, the Durkee Fire, the largest currently in the US, is burning near Idaho border.

Scientists have long pointed to human-led climate change as the cause of worsening natural disasters including wildfires.

England name unchanged team and seek series sweep in third Test

England have named an unchanged team as they target a series whitewash in the third Test versus West Indies, starting at Edgbaston on Friday.

Ben Stokes' side maintain the same XI which beat the West Indies by 241 runs in the second Test at Trent Bridge.

England have opted to stick with the same XI from that match, which means fast bowler Mark Wood continues after his return to the Test side in Nottingham, as they seek to secure a series sweep against West Indies in Birmingham.

"We're 2-0 up and we've had some very good all-round team performances, so it's a pretty easy decision to stick with the same XI," said Stokes.

"We want to wrap up the series and hopefully take it 3-0. You always check in with your bowlers after every Test and go with what they say and what they feel, and (Mark Wood) is ready, firing, and good to go again."

Wood's return to the team at Trent Bridge saw him send down a barrage of 90mph-plus deliveries, including bowling the fastest over recorded in England since records began being



England's Shoaib Bashir, second right, celebrates with teammates after dismissing after West Indies' Jason Holder during day four of the second Test between England and the West Indies at Trent Bridge cricket ground, Nottingham, England, Sunday, July 21, 2024. (AP)

collected in 2006.

He was forced to leave the field for treatment at one point though and there had been talk he might be rested for the third Test, with either Matthew Potts or the uncapped Dillon Pennington being included instead.

But while neither of them will feature in the final match of the West Indies tour, Stokes expects there to be opportunities for them in the upcoming Test series against Sri Lanka.

Despite facing a challenging situation heading

into the third Test against England, West Indies captain Kraigg Brathwaite remains resolute that his team can end the failed three-match series on a high note.

"We have five Tests remaining for the year and there are ICC Test Championship points still at stake. So we have a lot to play for and that's my thing to the boys. You know, we are still in the Test Championship running and, you know, obviously we're looking for points as well," Brathwaite declared during a pre-game press conference.

"It's very important that we fight. I mean, this is all about fighting, and I think once we continue to create that kind of attitude around this Test team, there will be growth and that's what we're after," he added.

Reflecting on the first two Tests, Brathwaite pointed to the positives that West Indies had some standout performances, particularly in the first innings of the second encounter in Trent Bridge, but in the same breath, he also highlighted the fact that his team has struggled to find

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South Africa lose Coetzee for Test series in West Indies



Gerald Coetzee

JOHANNESBURG (Reuters) - Fast bowler Gerald Coetzee has been ruled out of next month's two-test series in the West Indies due to a left side strain suffered playing Twenty20 cricket in the United States, Cricket South Africa said on Thursday.

He sustained the injury earlier this month and returned to South Africa for medical tests, which have ruled him out of the trip to the Caribbean.

Uncapped Migael Pretorius has

been named as his replacement. The 29-year-old, who took 23 wickets for Somerset in the County Championship this year, was previously called up to the test squad in December 2020 against Sri Lanka but did not play.

South Africa will meet West Indies in the first Test at Queen's Park Oval in Trinidad and Tobago from Aug. 7-11 and then travel to Guyana for the second test in Georgetown from Aug. 15-19.

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consistency in all departments, including dropping several catches in both matches.

"I think all around we haven't put it (a decent performance) together as yet. Obviously, we batted well at Trent Bridge; we didn't bat well in the second inning, and we bowled well in pieces.

"Obviously, drop chances would happen, but I think collectively, as a bowling unit, we didn't perform as we should. I think once we get that percentage up, we'll be able to create more chances and at least be able to, you know, stop the flow of runs on both sides of the wicket," Brathwaite reasoned.

West Indies spinner Kevin Sinclair is out of the Edgbaston Test with a fractured forearm, an injury he sustained after being struck by a searing short ball from Wood at Trent Bridge. The delivery dismissed Sinclair as he was caught by Zak Crawley at slip.

Fellow spinner Gudakesh Motie, who was replaced by Sinclair for the second Test after coming down with flu, has replaced his injured teammate in a 12-player squad.

Fast bowler Akeem Jordan is also in that group as cover for Shamar Jo-

seph, who has been battling illness.

England squad: Ben Stokes (captain), Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Ollie Pope (vice-captain), Joe Root, Harry Brook, Jamie Smith (wicket-keeper), Chris Woakes, Gus Atkinson, Shoaib Bashir, and Mark Wood.

West Indies squad: Kraigg Brathwaite (captain), Mikyle Louis, Kirk McKenzie, Alick Athanaze, Kavem Hodge, Jason Holder, Joshua Da Silva, Gudakesh Motie, Jayden Seales, Alzarri Joseph, Shamar Joseph, and Akeem Jordan.



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Paris aims to reset the Olympics with audacious games and “wow” opening

PARIS (AP) - Paris has long been a city of dreamers: Just look at the Eiffel Tower, for decades the world's loftiest structure. Audacity also underpins the French capital's plans for its first Olympic Games in a century, which open Friday with an opening ceremony for the ages.

The most sprawling and elaborate Olympic opening ever — a gala spectacular Friday evening on the River Seine that even French President Emmanuel Macron says initially felt like “a crazy and not very serious idea” — kicks off 16 days of competition that promise to be ground-breaking, with nearly every corner of the city hosting some aspect of competition.

After two toned-down, pandemic-hampered Olympics, expect a bold celebration. The heady marriage of sports and France's world-renowned capital of fashion, gastronomy and culture could also help secure the Olympics' longer-term future.

Olympic organizers were struggling to find suitable host cities for their flagship Summer Games when they settled on Paris in 2017, enticed by its promise of innovations and the potential for the city of romance to rekindle love for the Olympics, especially with younger audiences that have so many other entertainment options.

But Paris' challenges are huge, too. The city that has been repeatedly struck by deadly extremist attacks has to safeguard 10,500 athletes and millions of visitors.

The international context of wars in Ukraine and Gaza add layers of complication for the gargantuan security effort. French elite special forces are part of the security detail for Israel's delegation. Still, if all goes well, Paris hopes to be remembered as a before-and-after Olympic watershed.



The opening ceremony is being billed as the most sprawling and elaborate Olympic opening ever, a gala spectacular Friday evening on the River Seine that even French President Emmanuel Macron says initially felt like ‘a crazy and not very serious idea,’ kicks off 16 days of competition that promise to be ground-breaking, with nearly every corner of the city hosting some aspect of competition. (AP)

The first Games with nearly equal numbers of men and women, an advance that's been a long time coming since 22 women first got accepted as Olympians 124 years ago, also in Paris, will take another step toward aligning the Olympics with the post-#Me-Too world.

Paris also hopes to reassure climate-conscious Generations Z and beyond by staging Games that are less polluting, more sustainable and more socially virtuous than their predecessors. Many of the sports venues are temporary, because Paris didn't want to repeat the mistake of previous Olympic host cities that built new arenas and then had no use for them.

With iconic Paris monuments as backdrops — beach volleyball in the Eiffel Tower's shadow — and break-dancing added to a growing list of Olympic sports that target young audiences, expect plenty of viral moments on Instagram, TikTok and elsewhere.

Crowds will be back for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic

forced Tokyo to push back its Games to 2021 and keep spectators away, and the Beijing Winter Games in 2022, when China was locked down.

Prize-winning French theater director Thomas Jolly is turning central Paris into an open-air stage for the opening ceremony that will run through sunset and showcase France, its people and their history.

The 330-meter-tall (1,083-foot-tall) Eiffel Tower will surely feature prominently.

Hundreds of thousands of people, including 320,000 paying and invited ticket-holders, are expected to line the Seine's banks as athletes are paraded along the river on boats.

During the extravaganza, a no-fly zone extending for 150 kilometers (93 miles) around the capital will close Paris' skies, policed by fighter jets, airspace-monitoring AWACS surveillance flights, surveillance drones, helicopters that can carry sharpshooters and drone-disabling equipment.

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Bolans Revellers and Dominatrixx lead ABNDA's three-hand contest

The A team of the Bolans Revellers and Dominatrixx are joint leaders after the third round of matches of the Antigua and Barbuda National Domino Association's (ABNDA) second team three-hand competition of the domestic season.

Both teams are tied at the top of the standings with eight points each in the three-hand competition, which is being conducted using the accumulated point format, with each match winner awarded three points, two for second place, and one point for third place.

Closely following on seven points are the A team of the Willikies Super Stars, Legacy Thunder Bolt, Double Six Ice, Ramplers, Bravo, and S.K. Eagles.

The A team of the Bolans Revellers and Dominatrixx won their respective encounters during the third round of matches at the ABNDA's headquarters in Ot-



tos.

The A team of the Bolans Revellers won their encounter against Highly Favoured (second place) and the A team of the Full Clip (third place).

Dominatrixx were successful in their third-round match, beating the B team of the Bolans Revellers in

second place and De Unstoppables in third place.

In the other third-round matches, the A team of the Willikies Super Stars prevailed against the Rising Stars and Fire Police.

Double Six Ice beat the Ramplers and Legacy Thunder Bolt; Parham Strikers defeated Double Six Dia-

mond and Triple Dynamite; and S.K. Eagles won their encounter against Bravo and the B team of the Willikies Super Stars.

Double Six and the Ramplers are joint leaders of the team four-hand contest after the third round of matches.

Both teams are currently tied at the top of the standings with five points each after recording wins in their third-round matches.

Double Six snatched a narrow 32-31 victory against the S.K. Eagles, and the Ramplers prevailed 48-32 against Dominatrixx.

The Willikies Super Stars recorded a 38-21 victory against the Bolans Revellers to occupy third place with four points in the six-team round-robin four-hand competition.

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Showcasing and celebrating Paris could be joyously cathartic for the city that was plunged into mourning by extremist attacks in 2015.

Guesses about the identity of the person or people who might get the honor of lighting the Olympic cauldron include soccer icon Zinedine Zidane and other French sporting heroes, but also survivors of Islamic State-group gunmen and suicide bombers who killed 130 people on Nov. 13, 2015.

Paris is also taking gambles in hopes of leaving an indelible impression on the

Olympics' global audience of billions.

The decision not to stage the opening ceremony in the traditional setting of France's biggest stadium — the Stade de France that was among the 2015 attackers' targets and is now the venue for Olympic track and field and rugby sevens — and to host skateboarding, archery and other sports in temporary arenas in the heart of Paris have made safeguarding the Games more complex.

Rights campaigners and Games critics worry about the broad scope and scale of Olympic security, including the use of AI-equipped surveillance technology.

Cutting Edge crowned winner of U-17 Youth Premier League

Cutting Edge FC was crowned the winner of the Cool and Smooth Antigua and Barbuda Football Association's (ABFA) Under-17 Youth Premier League on Wednesday night.

Cutting Edge FC celebrated their title success after completing an unbeaten run in the 10-team round-robin competition, winning all 12 matches that culminated with a 3-0 victory against Old Road FC in their final outing at the ABFA Technical Center.

The only unbeaten team in the competition finished with 36 points at the top of the standings to lift the title.

Aston Villa Lions clinched the runner-up spot ahead of the Libertas Blackhawks by virtue of a superior goal difference after both teams finished the competition tied with 30 points and 10 wins apiece.

The Blackhawks finished in third place after romping to a 4-1 victory against the Villa Lions in their final encounter on Wednesday.

Old Road FC claimed fourth place on goal difference ahead of CPTSA Wings Sports Club and SAP FC after all three teams fin-



Coach Vincent 'Nabbu' Samuel, left in back row, joins the players of the Cutting Edge team with the trophy after winning the Cool and Smooth Antigua and Barbuda Football Association's Under-17 Youth Premier League at the ABFA Technical Center on Wednesday, July 24, 2024. (Photos courtesy of the ABFA)

ished tied on 18 points from their quota of 12 matches.

The CPTSA Wings wrapped up their campaign with a 3-0 victory against the Antigua Barracudas FC.

Players of champion Cutting Edge FC won all four Most Valuable Player (MVP) awards at the end of the competition.

Brandon Satchel claimed the MVP Midfielder Award, and Marlon Peters Francis captured the MVP Defender Award.

Erick Morata won the MVP Goalkeeper Award, and Greg Williams captured the MVP Forward (striker) Award.

Twenty-four hours earlier, the Aston Villa Lions captured the title in the Cool and Smooth Antigua and Barbuda Football Association's Under-19 Youth Premier League.

The Villa Lions snatched the title from the grasp of All Saints United by virtue of a superior goal difference

after both sides finished the 14-team round-robin competition with 45 points from their quota of 16 matches.

Garden Stars FC clinched third place by virtue of a superior goal difference after ending the competition tied on 33 points with Green City FC and Soccer Academy.

Green City FC claimed fourth place, and Soccer Academy just missed out on a top-four spot by finishing in fifth place.