Uzbekistan Chess Olympiad Reflections (3) by Dr Lyndon Bouah

Greetings family, friends, colleagues and the broader chess community from Uzbekistan.

The 2026 Chess Olympiad is being held in Samarkand in Uzbekistan. 200 countries from across the world have gathered to play in this prestigious event. Uzbekistan is in Central Asia, in the heart of the ancient Silk Road region.



I had an occasion to visit the State Museum of the History of Culture of Uzbekistan. It houses the Afrasiab chessmen, a rare set of seven tiny ivory carvings. Unearthed in 1977 at the nearby Afrasaib archaeological site and dated around 700-712 BC, they are among the oldest and most recognisable chess pieces ever found. They are truly magnificent t to behold.



Among the monuments of the Kushan Empire period, (1st -4th centuries Ad, the ancient settlement of Dalverzintepa holds a special place. It is located about 60km from Termez, in the Shorchi district of the Surhandarya region. The detailed study of the site began in 1967 by historians. In 1972, while studying the streets of the ancient settlements, historians found 36kg of gold underneath a house. Various objects made of Ivory were discovered. Among these were the oldest chess pieces in the world (1st and 2nd centuries AD), jewellery made of precious stones, coins and delicate ceramic artefacts from the Greco-Bactrian period.





The history of chess in the territory of modern Uzbekistan began more than one thousand years ago. The game reached the region through the Great Silk Road from India through Persia in the form of shatranj, an early version of chess. As early as the 9th - 10th centuries, archaeologists found chess pieces made of bone and clay in major cultural centres in Mawaranhar, Bukhara and Khiva. During the period of the Samanids (9th-10th centuries) and later under the Karakhanids, chess became an important part of intellectual culture. The game was popular among theologians, poets and scholars. It was considered a way to develop strategic thinking and wisdom. Chess occupied a special place during the reign of Amir Temur (Tamerlane) in the 14th century. According to historical sources, he was interested in more complex versions of the game, such as “great chess” with an expanded board. During this period, chess became an essential part of court culture.

I have always been fascinated by museums. At primary school in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), we were often taken to the Port Elizabeth museum complex which consisted of the Oceanarium and the museum. The dinosaurs and other artefacts were very interesting to behold.



Years later I have been a frequent traveller internationally for sport, work and leisure. One of the first stops in my visits is always the museums. I started travelling internationally in

1992 and one of my first memories of museums overseas was the ones in Moscow which I visited in 1994. The museums were exquisite and it was clear to me that the Russian people took great pride in their history. I will now concentrate on recent visits.

In 2008 I attended a two-week course in London and was fortunate to be booked into a hotel in central London. On my way to the course, I had to pass the British Museum every day. After the first day I made a point of it that I would visit the museum. The museum is huge and of course very interesting, and I had to choose which sections to visit. I visited many interesting sections and ended off at the Rosetta Stone which I will visit again upon my return to London one day.



In November 2012, I visited Siberia and then Moscow again. In Siberia the weather was too cold to go out much but in Moscow I again visited some of my favourite places. One of those places was the Vodka Museum. I had paid a visit to it in 1994 and was hoping it would still be there. A fascinating story about the origins of vodka and its importance to Russian society was revealed in the museum. In the interest of scientific research, I, of course, had to partake in the products at the museum!



In July 2013 I visited China on an exchange visit to the Chinese province of Shandong. We travelled via Beijing and I decided that a visit to the Chinese National Museum would be

appropriate. There are several floors built below ground level as the museum is housing 5000 years of Chinese history. Due to time pressure, I could not complete the entire tour, but I decided to end in the year 1421 when the Chinese sailed around the Cape of Good Hope! So, whenever I am next in Beijing I will start again in 1421.



In August 2014 I visited Tromso, Norway one of the northern most cities in Europe and the world, as I was captain of the South African Protea chess team. I visited the Polar Museum in Tromso. The polar museum was officially opened on 18 June 1978. This was the fiftieth anniversary of Roald Amundsen fateful flight aboard the Latham. The building dates to 1830 and was used a warehouse by customs officials.



The museum has permanent exhibitions as well as temporary ones. The first room depicted winter trapping in the Arctic. Norwegians started very early in their history hunting for walruses, seals and reindeer. The Arctic life was hard as the cold temperature was harsh, but it seems that many enjoyed nature and did not hesitate to go on these hunting expeditions.

The second room in the museum showcased the geographical area. The area depicted is Svalbard which literally means the land with the cold coast. It appears for the first time in Icelandic writings in 1194. In the early 17th and 18th century Englishman and Dutchmen started an intense hunt for walruses and bowhead whales. Large land-based stations were built where the whale blubber was boiled and barrelled.

The third room depicts how sealing was carried out in the Arctic. Each boat had a crew of three or more. The rower sat aft, (seamen language). The rifleman sat in the bow, in the middle was the man who pushed the ice away and the one who did the actual killing of the seal.

There are 32 species of seal, seven of which occur in Norwegian waters, they are: the walrus and the grey, harbour, harp, hooded, bearded and ringed seals. Skins and stuffed animals of all seven species are shown in the museum. Seals often find their food at great depth. Some species can dive to 200 metres.



My favourite room was room six which belonged to probably the most famous Norwegian at that time Roald Amundsen. He was the first man to reach the South Pole. The room

chronicles his life. He was indeed a man's man as he was constantly on the lookout for new things to explore and do.



Figure 1: Roald Amundsen

The museum is a three-level building and houses the achievements of other great explorers and particularly those that explored the North Pole. I was in awe as these guys literally spent months researching the fauna and flora as they had to stay there when it was winter and temperatures plummeted.

I then decided to visit the Tromso City museum. The first excitement was seeing a display of the various board games including chess that was played in Norway throughout the ages. It seems the sea-faring folk invented many games to while away the winter and the sea journeys.



Then the next wonderful surprise was seeing the Anatoly Karpov stamp collection on display. Many countries around the world have issued chess stamps. In Africa the following

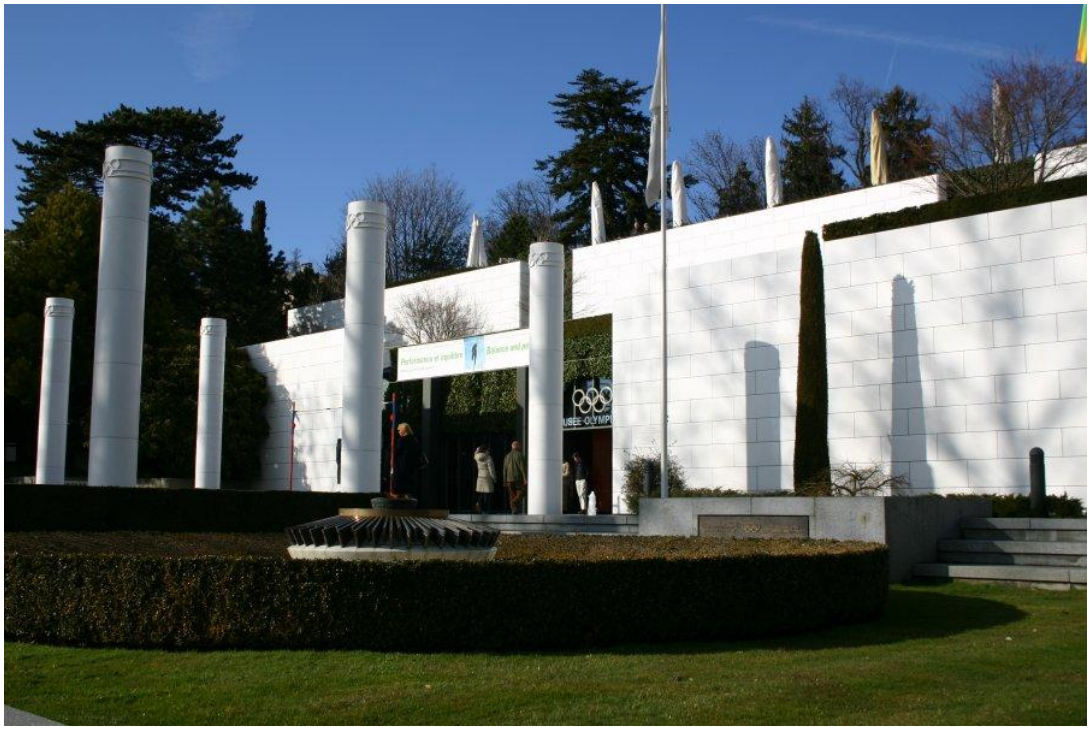
countries have issued chess stamps, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mali, Gambia, Congo and a few others but nothing from South Africa.

In September 2016 I visited Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The country is located on the Caspian Sea and was part of the former Soviet Union. It has a rich history as the land of fire. I visited one of their museums which is called the Museum of Miniature Books. The books are replicas of normal books but for some reason these books have been popular in Soviet times. The Baku Museum of Miniature Books is the only museum of miniature books in the world and started its operations on 2 April 2002. In 2015 the museum was presented the certificate of the Guinness Book of Records as the largest private museum of miniature books.



In November 2016 I travelled to Switzerland to address the International Olympic Committee. I took the opportunity to visit the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. They had many fascinating tales of Olympism that showed the Olympic cities and the modern-day Olympics in particular. There were South African artefacts in the museum as well which I was very happy to see.





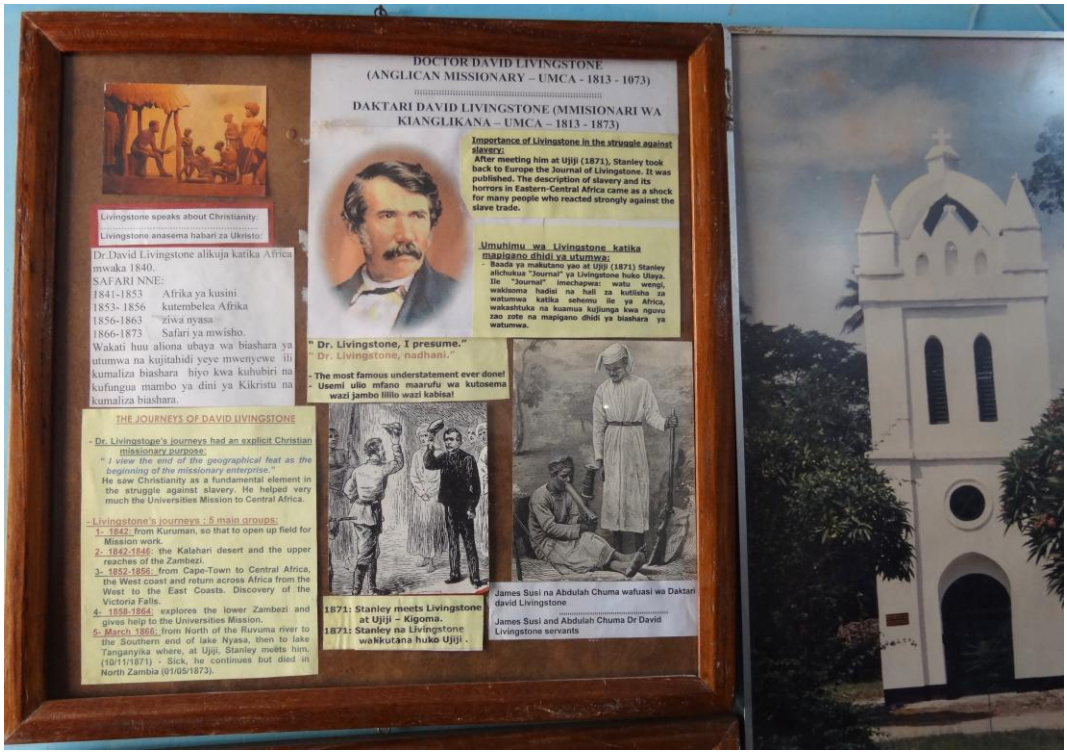
In June 2017 I visited Livingstone in Zambia. I, of course, had to visit the Livingstone museum in Livingstone. It was nice seeing references to South Africa and other parts of Southern Africa as well. We saw how important fauna and flora are to Zambians and that they should be respected. In the olden days it was believed that an elephant is composed of different meats (snake, dog, lion, chameleon, owl, baboon, mouse, etc) and therefore was not eaten by all for the fear that one may end up eating one of the above animals. In this way elephants were protected but occasionally the chief gave permission to kill an elephant for special ceremonies or rituals and only the elders could eat such meat.



I found the David Livingstone segment of the museum very interesting. He was an explorer, missionary, doctor, and an anti-slavery advocate. He was born on 19 March 1813 and died

on 1 May 1873 in Zambia. He was also the first European to explore Zambezi and to see Lake Malawi. He spoke several African languages and suggested that there is a link between malaria and mosquitoes. He was outspoken against slavery and his letters, journals and books stirred up public support for the abolition of slavery. Livingstone lost contact with the outside world for six years and when journalist Henry Stanley located him in late 1871, he uttered the famous words" Dr Livingstone, I presume?" According to Google the phrase may be a fabrication because neither Stanley nor Livingstone confirmed it. The words are famous because of their tongue-in-cheek humour: Dr Livingstone was the only white person for hundreds of miles! His heart is buried in Africa, but his remains are buried at Westminster Abbey.

The Livingstone room shows his journeys throughout South and Central Africa. It shows Port Elizabeth and Cape Town with both leading to Kuruman. He had three journeys: the first the missionary and Trans Africa journey from 1841 to 1856 and then the Zambezi expedition from 1858 to 1864 and then the search for the Nile from 1866 to 1873. After visiting the museum, I now understand the role that Livingstone played throughout the missionary and exploratory period.



I was glad to see that he was an anti-slavery advocate, and the museum does a good job depicting this stance. It also shows him as a real person of religion. It has his hymn book that was captured during one of the Anglo Boer Wars. So now I have come to appreciate Dr David Livingstone. I was born in David Livingstone hospital in Gqerbha (Port Elizabeth). There are of course many schools named after him both in Gqerbha (Port Elizabeth) and Cape Town. The Cape Town one is known as of the most progressive schools in South Africa

with a very rich history and many outstanding leaders in our society and many notable chessplayers over the years.

In May 2018 I visited Venice, Italy with my wife, Denise. While we were meandering through the streets of Venice we came upon the newly established Casanova museum. Everyone of course has this notion of Casanova being very fond of women. Casanova was born in Venice on 2 April 1725. The museum pamphlet describes Giacomo Casanova in the following manner "bold and dissolute, hungry for culture, beauty and all that life could offer." From his childhood Giacomo's life was a succession of adventures and misadventures, in changing moments of his life, how to adapt to luxury and indulgence, with thieves and crooks and with aristocrats and courtiers and men of culture.



The museum chronicles his life and numerous amorous adventures and explores fashion and his writings. The Casanova Museum made use of interactive audio in ten languages and made use of VR 360 (it has a Samsung cellular phone and a virtual reality headset) to enjoy a glimpse of the life Casanova enjoyed. The museum certainly had many modern features that we could learn from.

While in Europe we also visited Austria. In a little town called Murau we visited the Wood Museum. The area is famous for its trees and wood. The town has decided to dedicate part of its area to a wood museum that chronicles the importance of wood in its area. The museum has been opened since 1988. It has over 10 000 square metres of area. The museum presents wood through the ages and has many interesting exhibitions.



We travelled to Vienna where we of course had to visit the famous Museum Quarter. The quarter has many different museums, and you really need to have time to explore all the interesting museums. We decided to visit the Museum of Natural History. It has over 30 million objects that catalogue history and life. I was not at first impressed with it as I didn't realise that it was dedicated to science but then suddenly it started having artefacts relating to Africa and South Africa in particular. I now had a huge interest in the museum and took several pictures that illustrated South Africa. One of the intriguing questions that I have is the following: the first picture states that the dinosaur bones were found in Tamboerfontein, Western Cape. Do we know more about it?



In November 2018 I visited Singapore as part of the team bidding for the Netball World Cup 2023! (We won the bid!!) After our presentation I stayed on for a few more days and visited some of the museums in Singapore. On the foreshore next to the statue of Sir Raffles the

Asian Civilisations Museum is located at 1 Empress Place. I decided to visit the museum because I wanted to know more about Asia. As I had time, I decided to wait for the guided tour. We started the tour by looking at different religions in Singapore. All the world's major religions have found resonance in Singapore through the ages. Fascinating statues and paintings adorn the various rooms of the museum.



The most fascinating discovery however was the Tang Shipwreck which was discovered in 1998 just off the Beitung Island on the edge of the Java Sea. It contained a remarkable cargo of more than 60 000 ceramics produced in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) as well as luxurious objects of gold and silver. The ship was bound for Iraq and Iran and provides early proof of the strong commercial links between China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

The guide explained to us the ceramics and porcelain and what it meant at that time. One of the important discoveries for me was that there existed a maritime Silk Route as well as an overland one. We always associate the overland Silk Route with China and Central Asia. Now the Tang shipwreck provides evidence of the important role of the sea route as early as the 9th century. The map in the museum showed the importance of the sea routes. The sheer scale of the cargo aboard the shipwreck shows the great popularity of Chinese ceramics in foreign lands in the 9th century, the ability to mass produce thousands of nearly identical ceramics, an internal shipping network that gathered products from all over China at one port, and a financial system that invested and shared profits from the cargo.

The guide then showed that the cups had a straw like feature which was used to drink wine. The wine was not drunk conventionally but was drunk through the straw like feature through the nose! Chinese poets and writers wrote about this and I quote,

“Su, oh Su

Sing me the Song of the Willow Branch,

And I will pour you wine in that golden cup,

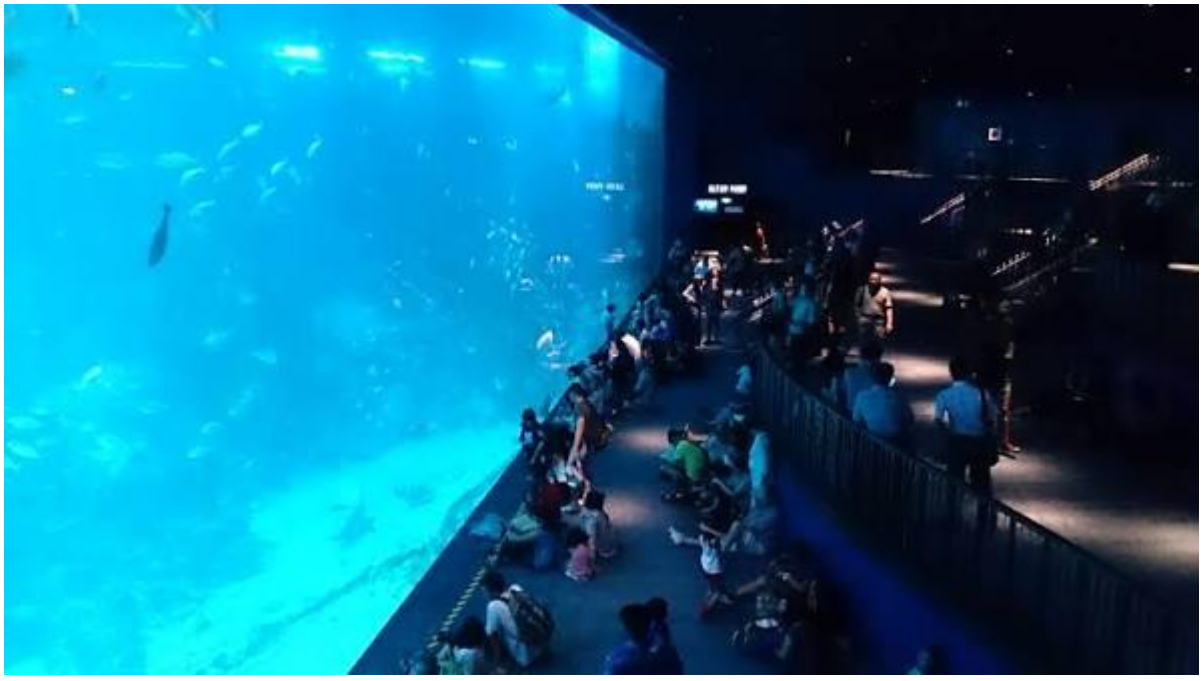
And take you with me to the Land of Drunkenness.

-Bai Juyi, “Song of Past Feelings” (around 840)

The museum showed all the various countries in Southeast Asia. It also has a brief history of the Dutch East India Company who also played a significant role in South Africa. The museum notes “that the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) flourished for nearly two centuries (1602-1795). A commercial venture, given free reign by the Dutch government, the VOC developed into one of the biggest and most powerful trading and shipping firms of the 17th and 18th century.”

My last day in Singapore left quite an impression on me. I decided to make the early journey to Sentosa Island. On Sentosa Island there is a myriad of activities from Universal studio replicas to the maritime museum. I decided to dispense with Universal Studios and rather go to the Maritime Experiential Museum and S.E.A Aquarium. When I entered the museum, I was greeted by four larger than life characters, Ibn Battuta from Morocco, Zheng He from China, Marco Polo from Italy and Sang Nila Utama from Indonesia. Now I was very excited because almost everyone knows Marco Polo, but the other three characters are largely unknown.





The museum stated that it believes that “Maritime history refers to the study of human activities at sea from past to present. These activities include fishing, designing and building sea vessels, developing tools and methodologies in the fields of navigation, oceanography, cartography and hydrography; naval engagements, sea explorations and the development of trade and sea related communities. By knowing maritime history, one learns about the progress of humankind, the rise and fall of civilisations, how different cultures and people interacted with one another, and the origins of many of the things, we eat and use today. Most of all maritime history tells us more about who we are as a species.”

The museum starts off with holograms where the four explorers tell us about their journeys. San Nila Utama (ruler from 1299-1347) was a Srivijayan prince from Palembang who is said to have founded Singapura in 1299, Marco Polo (1254 to 1324), a merchant of Venice released a book about his travels and life in China, Ibn Battutua (1304-1369) is an African Berber Muslim Sea farer, scholar and explorer who travelled widely in the medieval world. Over a period of thirty years, Ibn Battuta visited most of the Islamic world and many non-Muslim countries including Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China. The fourth explorer Zheng He (1371 to 1433) tells us about his journeys, and I was intrigued when I explored the maps in the surrounding rooms. He was a Chinese mariner, explorer, diplomat and fleet admiral during China's early Ming Dynasty. The map shows Zheng He travelling to Mogadishu (Somalia) and no other journeys.

I knew this couldn't be correct because I have a copy of the book 1421 by Gavin Menzies (2002). Let's have a look at Menzies book. He states "On 8 March 1421, the largest fleet the world had ever seen set sail from China. The ships, some nearly five hundred feet long, were under the command of Emperor's Zhu Di's loyal eunuch admirals. Their orders were to 'proceed all the way to the end of the earth'. Admiral Zheng, He sailed on this day as well. Menzies found a map drawn in 1459 by Fra Mauro that showed the Cape of Good Hope (Cap de Diab). The author goes on to show that Admiral Zheng. He travelled all the way to the Cape Verde Islands. This is of course astounding because of course we only learnt about Diaz and Vasco Da Gama at school and yet in 2021 the 600th anniversary of China rounding the Cape of Good Hope was upon us! I enjoyed the museum because it showcased the Maritime Silk Roads of the oceans and they had many references to Africa. The Chinese National Museum in Beijing also has references to Zheng He is rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1421.



Museums are indeed an important reflection of humanity. It does not matter where you travel to, museums allow one a glimpse into the life of a country and community. People have established museums for everything from wood to maritime matters to natural history. We need to protect and nurture our history, traditions and customs. Humanity is reflected in museums whether you are in Beijing, Venice or Livingstone. We are all connected to one another. The maritime museum in Singapore showed that they are connected to the Diaz museum in Mossel Bay as that museum also speaks about the trade route to the east that was so important as well. Thank you to the museum community for protecting our treasures!

In recent years I have visited museums in various European countries and in Turkey. I will write about them on another occasion.

Alex la Guma and his friend Ramz Babjan strolled though Tashkent and when they had an opportunity to chat Alex la Guma told him that, “stars were made in South Africa you know. A young African girl who sat warming herself by wood fire one night and played with the ashes, taking them in her hands and flinging them up to see how pretty they were when they floated in the air. As they floated away, she put more wood on the fire and stirred it with a stick, and the bright sparks flew everywhere and wafted high into the night. They hung in the air and made a bright road across the sky, a road of silver and diamonds. They called it the Stars Road or the Milky Way; a road of stars in the darkness. Anyway, if we invented the stars, it must have been your (Uzbek) people who invented the sun. It’s been powerful today said Alex La Guma to his friend Ramz Babjan

According to Professor Frankopan, the paintings, which were executed around the time of Xuanzang visit, reveal a world that was confident, wealthy and with expansive links to other places and peoples. the panel on the wall shows Varkhuman, the ruler of Samarkand, travelling to the shrine of his ancestors, alongside consorts, guards, high ranking officials and Zoroastrian priests. Varkhuman is depicted on the west wall receiving envoys from Sogdian and Tokharistani principalities as well as Tang China (carrying raw silk and cocoons) from the Tibetan Empire, from the Korean Pensinsula and the Eurasian steppes.

Results from round three:

The Grenada Open team played against its neighbours St Lucia. The games were hard fought as both teams had lost their previous two rounds. The Open team scored its first half point when board four Vladimir Mendez held his opponent to a draw.

Bo.	198	Grenada (GRN)	Rtg -	169	Saint Lucia (LCA)	Rtg	½ :3½
		(c) Lyndon Bouah			(c) Marian Petrov		
96.1	□	Renniel, Gilbert	1848 -	CM	■ Elizee, Kaieem	1862	0 - 1
96.2	■	Pope, Omario	1431 -		□ James, Justin	1905	0 - 1
96.3	□	Jaedyn, C	0 -		■ Gabriel, Sixtus	1865	0 - 1
96.4	■	Mendez, Vladimir	1651 -		□ Nunez, Daniel	1633	½ - ½

In the Women section Grenada played Mauritius. The Women's team was outplayed by Mauritius. The captain of Mauritius is my friend Patrick Li Ying. He played his first Olympiad in 1990 and represented Mauritius in more than ten Olympiads as a player and played over 100 games for Mauritius. He also visited SA in 2003 with his teammates some of whom are still playing today. The Open team captain of Mauritius is the son of the President Mr Bhowany. I have great respect for Mauritius for all the hard work they do there to promote chess.

Bo. 148		Mauritius (MRI)	Rtg - 172		Grenada (GRN)	Rtg	4 : 0
		(c) Patrick Li Ying			(c) Denise Bouah		
79.1	WCM	☐ Andhin, Chethanah	1562	-	■ Rhonda, J Lambert	1577	1 - 0
79.2	WCM	■ Acham, Meritza	1660	-	☐ Naziyah, S.A.James	0	1 - 0
79.3	WCM	☐ Beekhy, Aamirah	1539	-	■ Senthilkumar, Abiramy	0	1 - 0
79.4		■ Andhin, Tehja	1450	-	☐ Tehalyani, Kenishka	0	1 - 0



Figure 2: Patrick li Ying (left) together with Bhowany Junior (Middle) from Mauritius and Dr Lyndon Bouah(Right)

In the Open Section SA played the Ivory Coast and scored a good victory.

Round 3 on 2026/09/18 at 15:00

Bo. 77		South Africa (RSA)	Rtg - 134		Cote d'Ivoire (CIV)	Rtg	4 : 0
		(c) Henry Robert Steel			(c) Lobognon Anderson Olivier Mambe		
55.1	IM	☐ Karsten, Jan	2386	FM	■ De Gondo, Simplice Armel	2071	1 - 0
55.2	IM	■ Levitan, Caleb Levi	2316	CM	☐ Manan, Yoboue Hermann	2061	1 - 0
55.3		☐ Mnyasta, Charlton	2236	-	■ Tanoe, Yao Aubin Maximilien	2002	1 - 0
55.4		■ Dinham, James	2124	CM	☐ Nean, Franck Anderson	1993	1 - 0

In the Women section SA beat Ethiopia.

Bo.	134	Ethiopia (ETH)	Rtg -	86	South Africa (RSA)	Rtg	1½:2½
		(c) Teklay Teshager			(c) Kenneth Terence Solomon		
52.1	□	Bantiwalu, Aster Melake	1684 -	WFM	■ Badenhorst, Chloe	1997	0 - 1
52.2	■	Negi, Sina Tadesse	1447 -	WIM	□ Laubscher, Anzel	1817	1 - 0
52.3	□	Ayele, Hana Mulugeta	1615 -	WCM	■ Nel, Hayley	1864	0 - 1
52.4	■	Melebo, Netsanet Lukas	1617 -		□ Masango, Sizakele	1880	½ - ½

Regards

Dr Lyndon Bouah

Reporting live from Uzbekistan