

EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

CARROTS AND STICKS

Will the new appraisal system for public sector employees introduced by the Ministry of Labour improve government services?

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Sultan al Rawahi
Private sector employee

The move is a welcome one because it will speed up the process of government services. It will lead to accountability and more transparency in government employees.



Abdulaziz al Zadjal
Government employee

It will improve the quality of services provided to citizens and enhance the community's confidence in the government's capabilities because employees will be evaluated on tasks assigned and delivery of service. Everyone will be particular about their work making sure things are done quickly and correctly.



Dr Sanjay Dalal
Family physician

Appraisal alone won't improve any kind of service. Dedication, work ethics and commitment are needed from employees to improve services. Appraisals linked to reward and recognition with raise in salary plus position will definitely improve services. That will be a great motivation factor.



Mohan Anandan
Banking sector employee

The new appraisal system will certainly improve the quality of services. Employees will work harder to complete the given task within set time frame. This will lead to accountability and more transparency since grading will depend on actual performance of the employee concerned against the goals set.



Jayatee Choudhury
Student

The new appraisal system will surely improve government services as it will give employees a boost to complete the work well and in time. Moreover, it will be a great motivation, as there will be no backlog.



Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

Yes, it will definitely improve the government mechanism. The appraisal system is linked to input and output and focused on end results. We can welcome this system as it will help implement and achieve the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.



? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

With the COVID-19 daily count rising again, how can the situation be brought back under control?

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by *Muscat Daily*. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om Log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue

OPINION

SALEH MIRI, MUSCAT DAILY COLUMNIST, IS AN ARCHITECT WHO CAME TO OMAN IN THE EARLY 1980S

They were empires that had conquered their region and were installed for centuries. Then something happened and they almost disappeared. Egypt with its Pharaohs six millenniums ago, the Greeks who invented Philosophy, 25 centuries ago, the Persians who created the first basis of human rights, or the Chinese with their 40 millennium long history. During these periods there was hardly any development in Europe or in America. It is only after the Renaissance period that the West started to become a political entity. What happened to these empires that were influencing the populations of many countries? In most of the cases, they stopped growing when their leaders became greedy or distanced themselves from their population, or they were defeated by another leader. Centuries later, these old empires try to regain notoriety, but the world has changed and the parameters which assess their powers have drastically changed.

Somehow it is sad to see that all these empires that had created new ideas

which changed the world, and which allowed the world's populations to live in better environments, did not manage to survive. Unfortunately these creations and novelties are only visible in museums these days. See the works of Tutankhamen's funeral mummies, the writings of Socrates, Plato or Aristotle and read the conquests of Alexander the great, or read the wordings of Cyrus's cylinder in the French Museum. What has remained from those glorious days today? Hardly anything. China is trying and has almost achieved a leadership position as the most important superpower today with its largest world population. Egypt has tried to survive, but

internal political issues have not allowed any proper development. The once important and powerful nation of Iran has become a 'mullaharchy' and its people are suffering from poverty in a country that has everything.

Meanwhile, the United States is trying to impose its views on everybody else and continues to increase its debt which has reached US\$30tn. Europe is trying to show a unified continent but struggles to manage the issues of migration, of the taxation of its exports etc. What will it take to revive the earlier empires in this modern world? There has to be an in-depth analysis with long-term targets, taking into account the new technologies and making other countries become more dependent on what each empire can offer. The times of abundance of energy have changed. The world needs minerals like nickel and lithium, as well as copper to develop new technologies. At the same time, ecology is becoming more and more evident.

Most likely, the solution would be to develop an empire which encompasses all the countries and allows this planet to survive. Competition between superpowers is not a solution as history has demonstrated. We need one single but strong government because we are all on the same planet and conflicts do not solve anything. It is time for all of us to realise that we are in the same boat and need to be able to co-exist. Start this with ourselves and then a global movement will appear, but we have to be ready ourselves first. The changes are in our own hands and we need to realise that without a common global understanding, our planet will not survive. Let us avoid being selfish and think of our children and our next generation.



EVOLUTION

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

OFA appoints new president



(Supplied photo)

Muscat - Omani French Friendship Association (OFA) held a board meeting on January 13 during which it appointed a new president, welcomed new members of the board and its events committee, and approved an ambitious programme of events for the first half of 2022.

Sulaiman al Harthy, CEO of Alizz Islamic Bank, already a member of OFA, was nominated to the position of president of the board. All present board members, as well as the French Ambassador to Oman who is an honorary member of the association, paid tribute to the former president, Sheikh Hind Bahwan, for her role which was instrumental

in establishing OFA as a major bilateral association and her continued involvement.

The board also welcomed a new member, Sergio Giorgi, new managing director of Total Energies in Oman, as well as two new committee members - Fatma al Barakat and Bechir Chehab, managing director of JC Decaux in Oman.

After an busy agenda in the fall 2021 including a board meeting, an Inspirational Women of Oman conference, a gastro-nomic event at the French Residence for Goût de France, a presentation on VAT in November, followed by a conference on adventure tourism in December,

OFA has drawn out a calendar of activities for 2022. The first half of the year will include three conferences - on perfumes in February, on digital transformation in March within the fourth edition of French Week, and on energy in May - as well as social and cultural events, with a networking cocktail in January, a traditional iftar in April and a live music performance 'Fête de la musique' in June.

OFA is a non-profit organisation that aims to provide a platform to promote friendship, understanding and matters of mutual interest between French and Omani businesses and social communities active in

the sultanate.

The members of the board of the association are Sulaiman al Harthy, CEO, Alizz Islamic Bank; Erwan Rouxel, contracts representative, Veolia; Sheikh Hind Bahwan, founder and chairperson, Bahwan Cybertek Group; Talal Said Marhoon al Mamari, CEO, Oman Telecommunications Company SAOG; Nailesh K Khimji, director, Khimji Ramdas; Mohammed al Kharusi, group director - Business Development, Mohsin Haider Darwish LLC; Saleh Zakwani, executive chairman, Apex Press & Publishing; Shawqi Sultan; and Sergio Giorgi, managing director, Total Energies.

MoE invites bids for 4 new schools in 3 governorates

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education (MoE) will establish four schools in three governorates. According to a ministry official, MoE will offer a tender to build the four schools in three governorates.

In South Batinah, one school in wilayat of Musannah will have 36 classrooms for male students of Grades 5 to 10. In the same governorate, a school for Grades



5 to 9 will open in the Sawadi al Hikman area of the wilayat of Barka.

Two schools are for girls; one in the wilayat of Suwaiq, North Batinah governorate, with 36 classrooms for Grades 2 to 11, and a 18-classroom school for Grades 10 to 12 in the wilayat of Al Ashkhara, South Sharqiyah governorate.

The last date of submission of bids is February 22, 2022.

There were 56,569 Omani teachers in government schools in 2021 - 17,881 male and 38,688 female - accounting for an

Omanisation percentage of 84.8 per cent.

There were 10,878 Omani administrators and technicians, accounting for an Omanisation percentage of 99.8 per cent.

Additionally, there were 57 Omani male and 250 Omani female teachers in special education schools, accounting for 90.6 per cent Omanisation, and 69 Omani administrators, accounting for 85.5 per cent Omanisation.

Fish prices rise due to soaring demand

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sharp rise in prices of fresh fish and seafood products over the past few weeks is a typical example of trends when demand exceeds supply, market experts in Oman have asserted.

The escalating prices of fish and seafood products have largely contributed to the overall inflation rate in November 2021, according to data available with the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Prices of fish and seafood products recorded a 10.6 per cent jump in November 2021 compared to those in the same month in 2020, the NCSI data showed.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Eng Redha Bait Faraj, director general, Fisheries Marketing and Investment, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, confirmed, "The rise in fish prices is due to the lack of supply in the local markets and the increased demand by consumers."

Faraj attributed the lack of



supply in the local markets to the decrease in fish landings, in general, from Omani coasts, which was affected by the recent climatic conditions during the win-

ter season.

"The size of waves in the sea rise significantly during the winter, thereby preventing many fishermen from sailing and re-

stricting fishing activity. There has also been a migration of some of the large pelagic fish that are a favourite for Omani cuisine," he said.

To help markets restore a balance between supply and demand of fish, the ministry has been conducting studies of the market conditions to determine

The rise in fish prices is due to the lack of supply in the local markets and the increased demand by consumers

ENG REDHA BAIT FARAJ

the quantum of fish landing in local markets as well as regulating the process of exporting fish and fish products. "It is also co-operating with some local fish companies to provide large quantities of fish in the markets affected by the high fish prices," Faraj disclosed.

Khaled Hilal al Hosni, head of Education Technologies and Learning Resources Department at the Institute of Fishermen Rehabilitation, in Khabourah, said, "The high prices of fish in Al Khabourah markets is due to the system of daily auctions for the sale of fish by fishermen. The fish

auctions enable buyers to strike good deals with fishermen and then resell their goods at higher prices, which may not be fair to retail consumers."

He further said, "There are solutions to reduce the prices of fish, such as monitoring the markets and determining prices by placing an electronic screen that shows the daily prices of different fish."

The sultanate's fish production contributed RO276mn to the GDP until October 2021, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. The ministry said the total quantity of fish landed in the sultanate was 608,000 tonnes at the end of October 2021.

Figures related to previous years show that fish production increased by 4.8 per cent to 580,000 tonnes in the sultanate in 2019, compared to 553,000 tonnes in 2018. The National Centre for Statistics and Information also stated that artisanal fishing accounted for 96 per cent of the sultanate's total fish production in 2019.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Private sector investors urge reduction in charges levied by Ministry of Labour

Oman's Ministry of Labour issued a Ministerial decision 12/2021 published in the official Gazette on January 31, 2021, introducing an increase in the fees related to obtaining work permit for recruiting non-Omani workforce from May 1, 2021.

In line with the country's nationalisation programme and in order to address the increasing demand for jobs by national jobseekers, the Omani government took a step forward and increased the fees for obtaining work permit for recruiting non-Omani workforce with the aim of making the national workforce more attractive and less expensive for employers. This initiative is also aiming at meeting the country's objective of optimising the non-oil revenue of the state. Beside the significant increase in the fees, the decision has also made fees specific to different levels of positions and different types of profession and occupations.

While this is a welcome step taken by the ministry to protect the national workforce, there are certain side effects to be considered before introducing such a bill. Charges should be levied in a phased manner and according to business category and strength of expatriate workforce. It will affect many new small businesses run by expatriates.

COVID-19 affected all segments of society during the years 2020 and 2021 and still it is continuing. Most business houses are struggling to meet expenses as sales volume have gone down drastically and expenses are at par or increased.

In Oman, government charges to private sector by various departments such as Muscat Municipality, Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Manpower also increased to cover up the expenses. The expatriate investor visa renewal fee for one year by Ministry of Manpower is exorbitant; it is unaffordable for many private sector investors. In this situation, the government has to support private business by reducing their service charges.

If this continues, many businesses run by expatriate investors will close down. This will affect the Oman economy also, especially employment of manpower. There are many ways to increase the revenue and support the private sector to boost the economy. I humbly urge concerned authorities to look into this area.

Hiten Dutia
Ruwi

EA conducts cleanliness campaigns

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to preserve the Omani environment and cleanliness at beaches, Environment Authority (EA) has conducted a series of cleanliness campaigns in different parts of Oman.

An EA official has disclosed that the authority's specialists ran several campaigns to clean beaches in some governorates.

On January 17, the Environment Department in North Batinah Governorate organised a campaign to clean the beach of Harmoul in Liwa, in cooperation with a number of government agencies, civil and voluntary teams, and community members



(Supplied photo)

in the wilayat. The campaign comes as a continuation of the celebration of Omani Environment Day.

On January 18, the Environ-

ment Department in Al Wusta Governorate, in cooperation with the Mahout Municipality, carried out a campaign to clean and remove waste material from a

beach in the Wetland Reserve in the wilayat of Mahout, the official said.

"The campaigns aim to spread awareness among com-

munity members about the importance of preserving the Omani environment and limiting the spread of waste on beaches," he added.

Ministry opens two new public libraries in Salalah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth has inaugurated a public library and a children's library in the Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment in Salalah, Dhofar governorate.

A ceremony was held under the patronage of Dr Amer bin Ali al Rawas, vice-chancellor of Dhofar University, in the presence of Musa Abdullah al Qasabi, director general of the General Directorate of Culture, Sports and Youth in the Governorate of Dhofar, and a number of officials from various government authorities.

A statement issued by the



(Supplied photo)

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth said, 'The public library includes approximately 15,000 books and is equipped with the latest technologies, with several sections, including a 'Reading

Section' and a 'Computer Section'.

The public library includes collections of major titles, such as 'Oman through History', a series of volumes on the sultanate

in both Arabic and English, besides government publications, such as the Official Gazette and a large number of cultural magazines and periodicals.

'The libraries will also conduct

many cultural programmes and activities for the community, such as competitions, seminars and workshops, and many other events that keep pace with Arab and international cultural events,' the statement said.

The children's library contains many storybooks and informative/educative books in both Arabic and English.

The library is equipped with the latest technologies, such as display screens connected to the Internet for educational and illustrated programmes, in addition to special corners prepared for children.

It will hold cultural programmes and activities for children, including cultural competitions and scientific visits.



(Supplied photo)

49 Asian infiltrators caught; boat seized with 35kg of meth

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 49 individuals of Asian origin were caught trying to illegally enter the country on Sunday, according to a report by the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

A statement issued by the ROP, said, 'The Coast Guard Police in North Batinah Governorate seized a boat carrying 49 infiltrators of Asian nation-

alities while they entered the country illegally. Legal procedures have been initiated against them.'

The ROP confirms its continued efforts in cooperation with the security and military authorities to reduce infiltration by intensifying maritime, air and land patrols, coordinating with neighbouring countries to exchange information, and raising awareness among the community about the dangers of

operating or harbouring violators, and how to deal with them.

Meanwhile, the ROP also confirmed that the Muscat ROP Command was also able to seize a boat carrying five expatriates, including an infiltrator, on Sunday.

The accused had tried to smuggle more than 35kg of crystal meth and a quantity of marijuana in connivance with an international gang.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	24	18
Doha	25	15
Kuwait City	14	8
Manama	19	14
Muscat	27	19
Riyadh	15	9

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.32am
Sunrise	6.51am
Duhr	12.22pm
Asr	3.28pm
Maghrib	5.49pm
Isha	7.03pm

MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,216.82
BSE Sensex	60,754.86

FOREX RATES
(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	193.70
Pakistani Rs	457.42
Bangladeshi Taka	223.36
Philippine Peso	133.72
Sri Lankan Rs	526.10

*Rates as on January 18
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

German investor morale rebounds in January

Confidence among investors in Germany jumped in January, according to figures published on Tuesday, shaking off concerns about global supply chain disruptions and the spread of the Omicron variant.

The ZEW institute's monthly barometer measuring economic expectations rose 21.8 points to 51.7 to begin the new year despite difficult circumstances.

Investors assessment of the current economic situation dipped again, down 2.8 points to minus 10.2, after Europe's largest economy more than likely shrank in the last quarter of 2021.

The period of economic weakness 'should soon be overcome', ZEW president Achim Wambach said.

Investors expected growth to 'improve in the first half of the year', Wambach said, attributing the increasing positivity to expectations the 'incidence of the coronavirus would diminish' over the coming months. The German economy has been beset by supply chain disruptions that have held back industrial production and growth.

Last week, the federal statistics agency said that early estimates showed the economy had shrunk 'between 0.5 and 1 per cent' in the last three months of 2021 on the back of bottlenecks and new health restrictions.

Fitch revises NBO's outlook to 'stable'; affirms 'BB-' rating

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Fitch Ratings has revised National Bank of Oman's (NBO) outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' and affirmed the bank's long-term issuer default rating (IDR) at 'BB-'. Fitch has also affirmed the bank's viability rating (VR) at 'bb-'. The rating actions follow a similar action on Oman's sovereign rating on December 20, 2021 when Fitch revised Oman's outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' while affirming the long-term foreign- and local- currency issuer default ratings at 'BB-'. Fitch has also revised its outlook on the Omani operating environment score to 'stable' from 'negative'.

'The outlook revision reflects our view that pressures on the operating environment from the pandemic and lower oil prices have eased sufficiently, and that the bank's financial metrics have been resilient in the past quarters, despite these pressures,' Fitch said.

Fitch has withdrawn NBO's support rating and support rating floor as they are no longer relevant to the agency's coverage following the publication of its updated bank rating criteria on November 12, 2021. 'In line with the updated criteria, we have assigned NBO a



(Muscat Daily)

The outlook revision reflects our view that pressures on the operating environment have eased sufficiently and the bank's financial metrics have been resilient in past quarters

FITCH RATINGS

government support rating (GSR) of 'b', the ratings agency said.

NBO's issuer default ratings are driven by the viability rating. The bank's viability rating reflects NBO's strong franchise, well-balanced business model, reasonable capitalisation and funding, according to Fitch.

NBO is the third-largest bank in Oman, supported by a large retail branch network, which aids its deposit-collection ability.

The ratings agency said that 'NBO's business model is well-balanced, in our view, with its loan book evenly split between

retail and corporate banking. Nonetheless, the bank's domestic focus and a narrow Omani economy create a heavy reliance on government spending, the main driver of credit growth in Oman and results in high concentrations on both sides of the balance sheet.'

NBO's most recent asset-quality metrics have strengthened with the bank's Stage 3 loans decreasing to 4.9 per cent of gross loans at the end of the third quarter of 2021 as compared to 5.6 per cent reported in the end of 2020. Stage 2 loans represented 18.4 per cent of the

gross loans at the end of the third quarter of 2021, unchanged from end-2019's 18 per cent, but reduced from 20 per cent at the end of 2020. This is high in a global context but is in line with the peer group's, reflecting conservative classification policies at Omani banks. Coverage is comparable to peers', with total loan loss allowances equal to 93 per cent of impaired loans at the end of the third quarter of 2021.

'Fitch's assessment of NBO's asset quality also factors in the bank's high exposure to the Omani economic environment, both as part of its lending but also investment portfolios (including substantial holdings of sovereign/central-bank assets), where high single-name concentrations means the bank is exposed to event risk,' the ratings agency said.

NBO's operating profit/risk-weighted assets increased to 1.1 per cent in the first nine months of 2021 from 0.65 per cent in 2020, owing to lower loan impairment charges, but remains below its pre-pandemic level (2019: 1.74 per cent).

'The extent of the recovery in NBO's profitability in 2022 will depend on the bank's ability to manage margin pressures and improvement of non-interest income generation,' Fitch Ratings said.



OPAZ launches new services on SEZAD online portal

Muscat - The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) announced on Tuesday the launch of two new services on the electronic portal of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).

In this regard, Eng Ahmed bin Harib al Balushi, in-charge of managing operations of the Control and Compliance Sector at OPAZ, said, "The first service comes as an inventory of chemicals, while the second is forming an inventory of hazardous waste. Introducing these two services comes post completing the electronic system for managing chemicals and hazardous wastes in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm".

According to a press release, this endeavour comes in line with the digital transformation programme implemented in the zones overseen by OPAZ. This reflects its continuous efforts to

automate the procedures related to investors.

"Both services contribute to achieving the proper management of hazardous chemicals and waste, as well as facilitating the procedures for investors when sending their periodic reports about data and information on hazardous chemicals and waste. Moreover, these services will serve providing information to the relevant government and private bodies in Oman about data related to chemicals and waste, both in terms of its types, quantities, or importing countries, the purpose of dealing with them, in addition to the classification of waste, its quantities, source, and methods of treatment", Balushi commented.

The system also helps in saving time and effort, increasing efficiency, and establishing a national inventory for hazardous chemicals in SEZAD.

Averda secures four-year waste management contract from Oman Airports

Muscat - The international waste and recycling company, Averda, has been awarded a new, four-year contract to service international airports in Oman.

The contract, signed with Oman Airports Management Company, covers Muscat and Salalah airports, the first and second largest airports in the country.

Work will commence on the new contract on April 1, 2022.

According to a press release, Averda will provide a range of bins and compactor units in addition to staff and collection vehicles to ensure all the waste from the airports - landside, airside, catering, and cargo - is segregated at source, collected and transported to appropriately

authorised facilities for further processing and disposal.

Dedicated recycling bins will be supplied in order to maximise the amount of material recovered and diverted from landfill, in line with the Oman government's commitment to greater sustainability. These will include bins or containers for general waste, recyclables, food and or-

ganic material, used cooking oil and waste electrical items (WEEE), as well as hazardous and medical waste. Pest control is also covered in the contract.

Mazen Chebaklo, Averda's chief growth officer, said, "We are delighted to onboard Muscat and Salalah international airports to our client portfolio. We opened our doors to the aviation

sector in the GCC 5 years ago and this win further cements our position in this sector. Tourism is a vital part of Oman's economy and international airports are the first sight travellers have of a country - we look forward to supporting Oman Airports Management Company present the best face of Oman to its many visitors."

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CBO issues RO158mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of government treasury bills, issue number 132, was held at the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) this week.

The total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO158mn, for a maturity period of 28 days, from January 19, 2022 until February 16, 2022.

The average accepted price reached RO99.951 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO99.950.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.64230 per cent and 0.64261 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the Repo operations with the CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the CBO is 0.75 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds.

The central bank acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

MSX closes flat despite improved activity

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) closed flat on Tuesday. Trading activity improved from the previous session as turnover jumped by 12.82 per cent to RO2.98mn and volumes increased 64.99 per cent to 16.96mn shares.

While Services index rose 0.08 per cent, Financial and Industrial indices fell 0.16 per cent and 0.08 per cent, respectively. MSX Shariah index rose 0.51 per cent at 514.60 points.

Market breadth remained positive as 16 companies closed up, while 14 companies closed down. The rest 21 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were Construction Materials Industries & Contracting Co (4.65 per cent), National Aluminium Products Company (4.63 per cent), Oman National Engineering & Investment Co (3.96

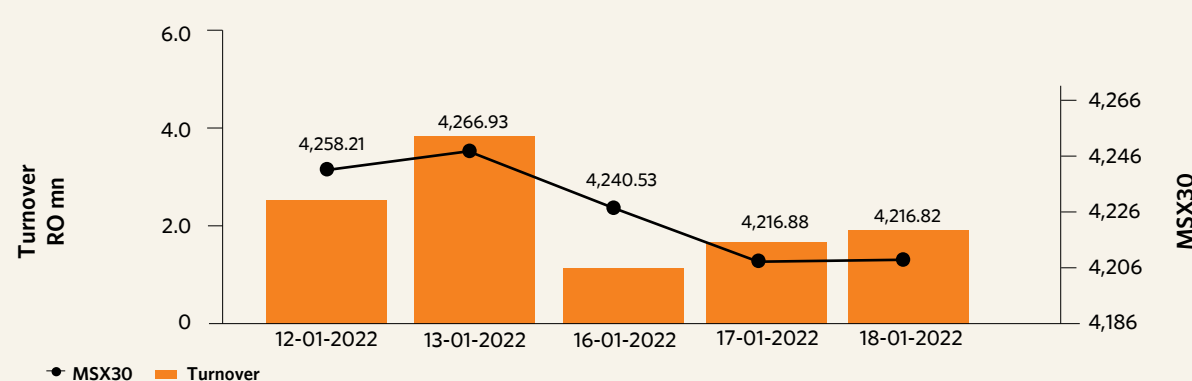


per cent), Bank Muscat (1.55 per cent) and Taageer Finance (1.28 per cent).

Top losers were Oman and Emirates Investment Holding (-8.07 per cent), Al

Anwar Investment (-2.17 per cent), Muscat Insurance (-2.13 per cent), Al Batinah Power (-2.04 per cent) and Al Suwadi Power (-2.04 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



'Robust' oil demand to overcome Omicron threat, says OPEC

Paris, France - Global demand for oil is expected to remain 'robust' in 2022 and overcome short-term disruption caused by the Omicron coronavirus variant, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) said on Tuesday.

But the Saudi-led group of top oil producers warned future virus strains and pandemic-related travel restrictions could threaten the global economic recovery.

The positive forecast comes as prices for the benchmark Brent crude oil reached their highest level since 2014.

Omicron's rapid worldwide spread forced countries to reimpose travel bans and social restrictions following its emergence in November.

Studies have since suggested the highly transmissible variant causes less severe illness, providing optimism for a sustained economic recovery in 2022 driving demand for oil.

OPEC's monthly oil market



report provided a 'robust oil demand forecast', with its estimate for growth of demand unchanged from previous predictions at 4.2mn barrels per day in 2022.

Total global consumption is expected to reach 100.8mn barrels per day this year.

OPEC predicted Omicron's impact 'to be mild and short-lived' but said 'uncertainties remain regarding new variants and

renewed mobility restrictions, amid an otherwise steady global economic recovery'.

Although 'supply chain bottlenecks, ongoing trade issues and their impact on industrial and transportation fuel requirements remain key factors of uncertainty', the report said the oil market 'is expected to remain well-supported throughout 2022'.

AFP

Amazon reconsiders ban on Visa card payments in UK

London, UK - US online retail giant Amazon is reconsidering a decision to ban payments in the UK made with Visa credit cards, as the pair seek to resolve a dispute over fees.

Amazon's plan to begin the ban from today because of 'high' fees has been put on hold.

'The expected change regarding the use of Visa credit cards on Amazon.co.uk will no longer take place on January 19,' Amazon said this week.



'We are working closely with Visa on a potential solution that will enable customers to continue using their Visa credit cards on Amazon.co.uk.'

A Visa spokesman added that the two companies are working 'closely together' to reach an agreement.

AFP

Britain's jobs picture robust as Omicron variant struck

London, UK - Britain's unemployment rate dropped and payrolls recovered further at the end of last year despite the onset of the Omicron variant, official data showed on Tuesday.

The unemployment rate fell to 4.1 per cent in the three months to the end of November, from 4.2 per cent in the quarter ending in October, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

The number of payrolled workers meanwhile jumped 0.6 per cent in December from November, the ONS added.

"The number of employees on payrolls continued to grow strongly in December, with the total now well above pre-pandemic levels," said ONS director of economic statistics Darren Morgan.

He added that the unemployment rate 'fell back almost to where it was before COVID-19 hit'.

Morgan noted however that job vacancies were growing at a slower pace compared with last summer and that real wages in November fell on the year for the first time since mid-2020 following a spike to inflation.

All eyes will be on the latest UK inflation data due out today, as consumers and businesses struggle with surging costs.

"Rising inflation means that squeezed incomes joins the dif-



Pedestrians pass a Marks & Spencer store in Guildford, southwest of London on Thursday (AFP)

ficulties firms are facing filling vacancies as major challenges in the UK labour market," Matthew Percival, director of employment at Britain's main lobby group the CBI, said following Tuesday's jobs data.

"To break this cycle and deliver sustainably rising living standards, the UK needs a plan to unleash business investment and raise ambitions for growth."

Jobs market 'thriving'

Economies are battling against

decades-high inflation that is forcing central banks to hike interest rates, including the Bank of England which last month raised its key borrowing cost to 0.25 per cent.

The rate was increased from a record-low level of 0.1 per cent. At the same time, Britain's economy has surpassed its pre-pandemic level after recording strong growth in November, recent official data showed.

British Finance Minister Rishi Sunak said Tuesday's unemployment figures 'are proof that

the jobs market is thriving, with employee numbers rising to record levels, and redundancy notifications at their lowest levels since 2006 in December'.

Some analysts however cautioned over the immediate outlook, amid energy bills soaring during the UK winter.

Average pay falling in real terms was 'an unwelcome development which is likely to worsen over the next few months', said EY ITEM Club economist Martin Beck.

AFP

Toyota yearly production target hit by chip shortage

Tokyo, Japan - The world's top-selling carmaker Toyota said on Tuesday it no longer expects to meet its annual production target with operations hampered by the global chip crunch.

A worldwide shortage of microchips - essential components of modern cars - has forced many automakers including Toyota to slow or temporarily halt production.

In September, the Japanese giant lowered the number of vehicles it hopes to make in the year to March 2022 to 9mn, down from 9.3mn.

But on Tuesday the company said fresh cuts to a planned bumper factory output next month meant it was unlikely to meet its new target.

'Current demand is very strong, therefore we were aim-



ing for a high February production plan,' Toyota said in a statement.

But 'due to the impact of the continuing demand for semiconductors across all industries', the company said it had reduced its global production target for February to around 700,000 units, some 150,000 fewer than before.

'As a result of the revision, the full-year production forecast for the fiscal year... is expected to be lower than the previous forecast

of nine million units,' it said.

Next month's target is still higher than the 668,000 units Toyota made in February 2021, however, as it scrambles to make up for lost output due to the semiconductor shortage and pandemic disruption to supply chains in Southeast Asia.

The targets are for Toyota and Lexus vehicles only, not the auto group's other brands Daihatsu and Hino.

Toyota said it would halt operations for several days next month on 11 production lines at eight of its 14 Japanese plants.

The company offered its 'sincerest apologies to our customers and suppliers for the various inconveniences these adjustments may cause'.

AFP

Indomie Fried Series

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H E Dr Rahma al Mahrouqiyah explores projects in Al Buraimi Industrial City

H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, visited Al Buraimi Industrial City on Monday to explore the projects and get acquainted with the opportunities available in the industrial city. H E Dr Rahma was accompanied by a number of officials representing the public and private sectors.

Receiving the delegation, Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn, explained that Al Buraimi Industrial City – along with the rest of Madayn’s expanding network of industrial cities – was established to achieve the vision of Madayn in enhancing the sultanate’s position as a leading regional centre of manufacturing, ICT, innovation and entrepreneurship excellence, and its mission in attracting industrial investments and providing continued support, through regionally and globally competitive strategies, good infrastructure, value adding services, and easy governmental processes.



The visit emphasised on the significance of effective integration between Madayn and the educational institutions in Al Buraimi governorate to achieve mutual benefit and identify innovation and knowledge-based investment opportunities in pur-

suance of Oman Vision 2040. The visit also stressed the importance of providing training opportunities to students to develop their skills and meet the requirements of the labour market.

The officials elaborated that Al Buraimi Industrial City was established in 1998 on an area exceeding 5mn sqm, and is adjacent to key ports and local and regional airports.

Located nearly 100km away from Sohar Port and Sohar Airport and around 120km away from Dubai International Airport and Jebel Ali Port, Al Buraimi Industrial City today is home to over 300 projects of various activities.

Moreover, the officials explained that Madayn is currently implementing infrastructure development project in Al Buraimi Industrial City, which comprises developing an area of 300,000sqm to incubate small and medium enterprises, establishing sewage plant as well as rehabilitating roads and rain

drainage channels. H E Dr Rahma then toured Al Buraimi Industrial City where she was introduced to Masar Service Centre which is currently in its soft opening phase in Buraimi.

Through providing a lineup of services that are required by investors, Masar Service Centre aims at accelerating and simplifying procedures, strengthening relations with partners to provide integrated services to investors, and ensuring a reliable and secure environment for the companies to conduct day-to-day transactions with the concerned bodies.

Investors are now able to obtain necessary approvals, permits and licenses required for their projects under one platform and within a specific timeframe through Masar Service Centre.

H E Dr Rahma then visited Canroyal Oil Lubricants and Qila’a Al Batinah Trading where she was briefed on their production lines, products and services.

Bank Muscat Green Finance: Facilitating a sustainable future

The recent celebration of the Omani Environment Day on January 8 once again highlighted the keen focus with which the sultanate has been implementing different initiatives to protect our environment. The strong participation of society and the private sector under the leadership of the Ministry of Environmental Affairs have been a great encouragement in this regard. Today, the widespread adoption of renewable energy is a key part of creating a green economy in the sultanate, and Bank Muscat has been playing its part in making largescale adoption of alternative energy possible by the general public with the introduction of Green Finance for installation of residential solar panels.

Green Finance, which is Oman’s first environmentally-friendly finance product, was earlier launched in 2019 in association with the International Finance Corporation (IFC). It encourages customers to install solar panels on their rooftops and use solar energy for a large part of their household energy requirements. Under the scheme, loans up to RQ25,000 are being given to eligible individ-



uals at highly competitive interest rates. This unique initiative reflects the bank’s commitment to responsible banking and its continuous contributions to the country’s overall progress and development.

Abdullah Tamman al Mashani, general manager – products, Bank Muscat, said: “We are delighted with the response to the pioneering Green Finance scheme. A transformation is taking place at present as renewable energy gets more and more popular. As a pioneer in offering products that meet the different needs of customers and a strong supporter of public-private partnership in promoting national goals, the bank has

been participating in many environmental-friendly initiatives. Bank Muscat is particularly keen to play its role in helping achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040. Customers will be able to install residential solar panels and use solar energy for a large part of their household requirements. It is important to note that this initiative will help Oman in reducing harmful emissions and also energy costs for customers.”

The bank’s customers can obtain Green Finance from any of the bank’s branches located across the sultanate. They can visit the nearest branch with the required documents and obtain financing starting at 3.5 per cent

for a period of up to five years. More details are also available at <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/loans/Pages/details.aspx#green>.

Bank Muscat is also committed to adapting its business to incorporate sustainable business practices like replacing lamps with LED lights, managing Greenhouse Gas emissions, reducing water consumption at its facilities as well as reduce paper and electronic waste.

Earlier in 2018, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat became the first bank to operate a branch on renewable energy when it installed rooftop solar panels at its Al Khoudh branch.

Omran Group appoints new C-Suite executives

Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) has announced the appointment of its new C-Suite executives. The move comes as part of the group’s strategic growth roadmap and restructuring programme, further strengthening its leadership team to drive the tourism sector development in the sultanate.

The new members of the fully Omani senior leadership team have strong market credentials and established track records, working across a diverse range of sectors and industries. The appointments include Hilal Masoud al Jadidi as chief human capital officer, Mohammed Khamis al Ghufaili as chief operations officer, Mohammed Murtadha al Eissa as chief corporate planning and communications officer, Saif Ali al Hinai as chief development officer and Saif Sulaiman al Yaarubi as chief financial officer.

Commenting on the new appointments, Hashil Obaid al Mahrouqi, Omran Group’s CEO said, “The appointment of the new senior leadership team reflects our firm belief in empowering national competen-



cies to lead the next stage of the group’s journey as we are moving rapidly to transform our business culture, in line with the Group’s strategic approach towards achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040 and the National Tourism Strategy. This step comes as part of the group’s restructuring programme, which will certainly expand the capabilities of Omran, its subsidiaries and the wide portfolio of diversified tourism assets and investments through-

out the sultanate, enabling to achieve the group’s goals and vision.”

“This step also reflects our focused approach on empowering Omani competencies across different levels and disciplines, while enabling them to progress the business objectives and support the group’s senior management team that comprises diverse backgrounds and capable professionals with global and local expertise,” he added.

Oman Air Holidays signs exclusive partnership with CONNECT

Oman Air Holidays has signed a partnership agreement with CONNECT, a subsidiary of Oman’s SABCO Group, becoming exclusive travel partner for all CONNECT events on the 2022 calendar. As the Sultanate of Oman’s leading provider of inbound and outbound flight and holiday packages, Oman Air Holidays will offer event delegates, exhibitors and visitors a variety of exclusive accommodation and tour packages, comprising flight tickets, transfers, excursions and bespoke itineraries and add-ons.

“The 2022 MICE season in Oman is shaping up to be a busy one, and we’re delighted to partner with CONNECT to facilitate and enhance the offering of exclusive hotel and tour packages available to everyone attending exhibitions this year,” said Mundher al Shaikhani, senior



manager at Oman Air Holidays. “With five large-scale exhibitions already confirmed on CON-

NECT’s 2022 calendar, Oman Air Holidays has assembled customisable packages offering be-

spoke add-ons and itineraries for those wanting to explore Muscat and other regions in the sul-

tanate during their stay.”

Commenting on the partnership, Sayyid Khalid bin Hamad

bin Hamoud al Busaidi, chairman of CONNECT and SABCO Group, said, “CONNECT is proud to be partnering with the sultanate of Oman’s national carrier and tour operator, Oman Air Holidays. This partnership is borne through the shared ambition to position the sultanate as a world class hub for the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibition (MICE) industry, an industry that has a fundamental role to play in stimulating in-country trade and investment, and in achieving the Oman Vision 2040. Additionally, international exhibitors, delegates and visitors who attend CONNECT’s market leading events will now have the opportunity to experience Oman Air’s multiple award winning services, and through Oman Air Holidays’ extensive network of hotels, transportation

services and excursions, to truly be able to discover the rich history, beauty and hospitality of Oman.”

Covering a wide cross-section of industry, this year’s CONNECT organised events include Oman Design & Build Week (March 14-16), Oman Sustainability Week 2022 (March 14-16), Oman Petroleum & Energy Show (March 21-23), Oman Health Exhibition & Conference (September 26-28), and Food & Hospitality Oman Exhibition & Conference (September 26-28).

Partnering with CONNECT paves the way for Oman Air Holidays to extend its package holidays expertise and presence to Oman’s growing MICE tourism ecosystem, thus strengthening its participation and role in the government’s Vision 2040 tourism objectives.

Oman Shell completes ‘Solar into Schools’ project in 22 schools

Oman Shell recently announced the completion of its ‘Solar into Schools’ project, which is Shell’s fifth ‘Gift to The Nation’ initiative in 2016. In this project, Oman Shell collaborated with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and a number of local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to install solar photovoltaic (PV) generation systems in 22 public schools across the sultanate over a period of five years. Three more schools were added with solar PV systems set to be installed within the period from 2021-2023.

The Solar into Schools initiative helped to install about 27MW of PV solar plants. These projects help to reduce CO₂ emissions (estimated 2,000 tonnes p.a). The project piloted the first PV solar system in Oman raising the awareness of new generations of low-carbon energy solutions.

The project also saw the implementation of Shell’s NXplorers educational programme in all 22 schools. Through this programme, Shell aimed to promote the students’ scientific knowledge and skills and demonstrate that knowledge practically



through direct interaction with solar PV systems in their schools. During the programme, more than 1,400 students were trained with the participation of more than 130 teachers from various schools in various governorates and wilayats.

Commenting on the comple-

tion of the Solar into Schools project, Walid Hadi, Oman Shell’s VP and board chairman said, “Initiatives like these are a part of our commitment towards supporting the sultanate’s energy transition while also contributing to the national economic diversification goals

outlined in Oman Vision 2040. While the ‘Solar into Schools’ project harnessed Oman’s potential for solar energy development and deployment, it also played an important role in raising awareness of the benefits of using low-carbon energy sources amongst the community, boost-

ing interest amongst the Omani youth in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) educational streams and inspiring them to take up entrepreneurial renewable energy roles in the future.”

By partnering with local SMEs to execute the Solar into Schools project, Oman Shell was able to foster the growth and development of renewable energy sector while empowering individual entrepreneurs with the knowledge and skills to capitalise on potential business opportunities.

Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi Undersecretary for education in the Ministry of Education said, “I would like to extend our thanks and recognition to Oman Shell for its continuous and fruitful cooperation with the Ministry of Education in consolidating students’ awareness of clean energy and its importance in our future lives by adopting two major projects in this area. The first project is the Solar into Schools project, where solar PV systems have been installed in 22 public schools across the sultanate over the past five years and the first solar PV systems have been piloted in

Oman. The project focused on educating generations about the importance of clean energy solutions. The second one is NXplorers educational programme, which was also implemented in the 22 schools, through which Shell aims to enhance students’ scientific knowledge and skills and practically demonstrate that knowledge through direct interaction with solar PV systems in their schools.”

Majid bin Saeed bin Sulaiman al Bahri, Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs in MoE said: “The Ministry of Education seeks to optimise the use of renewable energy sources and to reduce the cost of electricity at the Ministry’s buildings by increasing the utilisation of renewable energy through cutting-edge technologies in this space. The Solar into Schools project helps to lower the electricity bills through the power generated by PV panels, thus saving schools the high cost of grid power, increasing awareness of solar energy through the training package developed from the curriculum, and creating viable business opportunities for SMEs entrepreneurs”.



Eman Younus

PSM student receives scholarship

The Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Islamabad, Pakistan at both SSC and HSSC level award ‘Meritorious Scholarships’ every year to 165 students.

It is a matter of pride for Pakistan School Muscat that FBISE has recognised the commendable efforts, put in by Pakistan School Muscat student Eman Younus in the SSC Annual Board Examination held during the session 2021 and awarded her a ‘Meritorious Scholarship’.

Eman scored 1092 /1100 marks in the SSC, FBISE Exam.

It is indeed a matter of pride for students, faculty, parents, community and Pakistan school system.



Pakistan’s Ambassador receives warm welcome upon returning to Muscat

H E K K Ahsan Wagan, Pakistan’s Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman returned to Muscat, after heading a delegation from Oman to Pakistan.

He was accompanied by Eng Redha Juma al Saleh, the chairman of the board of directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and his team, prominent Omani businessmen, Pakistani businessmen based in Oman.

The Omani delegation had B2B & B2G meetings with President and Prime Minister of Pakistan, ministers, and high-level government officials. Top Pakistani businessmen and discussed about trade opportunities between the two friendly coun-

tries in various sectors to boost the relationship. MOU’s worth US\$250mn were signed between the delegates representing Oman and Pakistan.

A visit of this kind has happened after a gap of almost 20 years and it was highly successful with the visionary leadership and support of H E Wagan.

On returning to Muscat, H E Wagan was given a heartfelt welcome by Muhammad Kamran, Jamail Ahmed, Rukhsar Ahmed, Jahan Zeb on behalf of Syed Imtiaz Ali Gilani at Muscat airport. They thanked H E Wagan for making the visit a historical and successful one and appreciated his efforts in heading the delegation.

ABQ Education Group sponsors 300 children to participate in Al Mouj Muscat Marathon

ABQ Education Group is once again an official partner of the 2022 Al Mouj Muscat Marathon. These educational trailblazers are showing their ongoing commitment to children’s health and wellness by sponsoring the three kids’ races (1, 2, and 3km) at the upcoming edition of the marathon. ABQ has further extended their support by sponsoring 300 government school students to participate this year, including students from Al Izzihar School and Suhail Bin Amr School.

Commenting on their involvement, Ibrahim al Salmi, assistant CEO of ABQ Education Group, said, “Out of our keenness to achieve cooperation with the Directorate General of Education - Muscat and the organisers of Al Mouj Muscat Marathon, ABQ Education Group’s initiative comes to support selected public schools to participate in the marathon taking place on February 11 and 12. The initiative falls within the framework of urging students to follow a healthier and more active lifestyle and instilling a culture of exercise in students



and society in general.”

He added, “The motto of our group is ‘We Care’ and this mindset is not limited to ABQ students only. ABQ is involved in various community initiatives throughout the year and are excited to enable the 300 additional students to compete this year. This initiative is a true embodiment of who we are as a school family. Participating in Al

Mouj Muscat Marathon is an investment in their future.”

Nick Cartwright, managing director of SABCO Sport added, “We are delighted to be collaborating with ABQ Education Group for Al Mouj Muscat Marathon 2022. More than 10,000 participants of all ages have registered so far with four weeks to go until the race. If you have always wanted to try a

marathon or half-marathon, regain your fitness, or try something new, then do not miss out on a great opportunity to start building healthy habits and step out of your comfort zone to test yourself. The race weekend will be a festival of running with entertainment, food, arts and crafts - and a race for everyone.”

“We are pleased that ABQ Education Group sponsored a

number of students affiliated with the Ministry of Education to participate in this year’s Al Mouj Muscat Marathon. We look forward to further cooperation in the future and opening the doors to a larger number of government schools in the future,” Cartwright added.

The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon is the most popular event on the national sporting calendar and Oman’s biggest race, and students from all three ABQ schools will participate in this exciting event. Approximately 400 ABQ students have already registered, and this number will most likely grow even more closer to the event.

With over 45 years of cumulative school operating experience and 300+ educators, ABQ has a wealth of knowledge and expertise within the group. They continuously raise the bar and challenge themselves and their students to become the best they can be. This innovative approach has enabled ABQ to become the largest international school operator in the sultanate.

Mammoet supports construction of Dubai’s next iconic landmark

Built by BESIX Construct LLC, a Middle Eastern subsidiary of a Belgian company BESIX, the Infinity Bridge (formerly Al Shindagha bridge) is distinguished by its unique architectural design inspired by the concept of infinity. It is a distinct landmark that promises to be a showcase of Dubai’s architectural advancements worldwide.

40 steel segments of its infinity arch, ranging in weight up to 130 tonnes, needed to be installed over the Dubai creek and above the bridge deck, which could not support a suitably sized crane. Therefore, the installation of the segments could only be performed by cranes operating from the creek’s banks.

To achieve this, crane service

providers Mammoet and Aertssen Machinery Services (AMS) teamed up to install the segments, relying on a duo of powerful Demag lattice boom crawler cranes: Aertssen with its CC 3800, positioned at the northern side of the creek and Mammoet with its CC 8800-1, positioned on the southern bank.

The Infinity bridge is 300m long, 22m wide and sits 15.5m high above the water level. Its infinity arch rises higher; some 42m above the creek.

As a result of this, the mid bridge segments would require tandem lifts by two cranes positioned on opposite banks of the creek and with a working radius of 140m.

These tandem lifts were performed with the CC 8800-1



handling the majority of the weight - in fact, it could position segments on the opposite side of the bridge, thanks to its main boom length and a large lifting radius.

The entire operation was completed over a period of six months, with the last piece of the infinity arch was installed in May this year.

“Working in partnership with Aertssen, we provided equipment with sufficient capacity and reach, along with specialist engineering to support the operation of the CC 8800-1 to maximize the overall utilisation and its capacity,” commented Somnath Bhattacharjee, crane operations manager for Mammoet’s UAE Branch.

“Each lift required an extraordinary level of precision as the

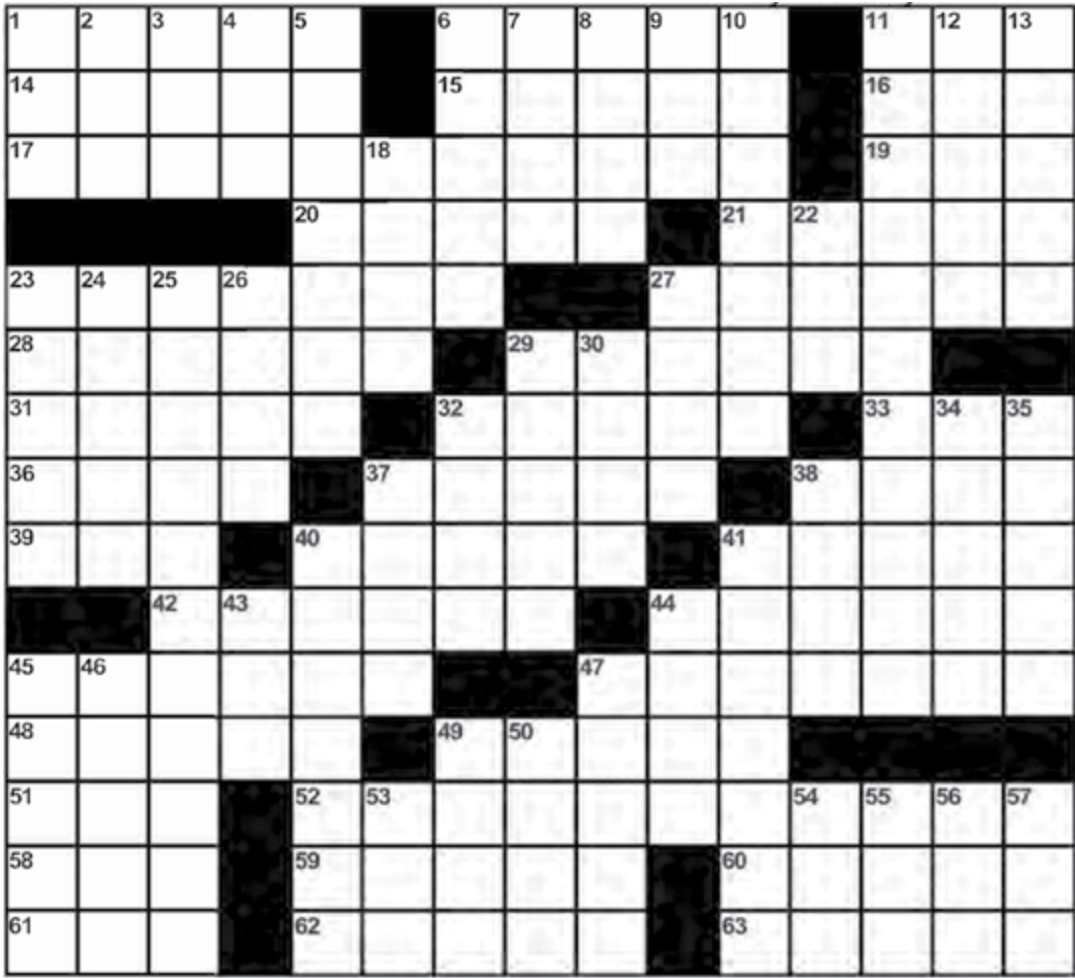
tolerances for joining the segments were a matter of millimeters. But when you have the right machines and a great team, all goes smoothly,” he added.

The AED394mn Infinity Bridge project is part of Dubai’s Road and Transport Authority’s Shindagha Corridor Improvement project, which covers a 13km-long road network.

The bridge can accommodate 24,000 vehicles per hour in both directions and features a combined three-metre-wide track for pedestrians and cyclists. It is part of the RTA’s relentless efforts to keep pace with the ever-growing Dubai landscape.

The Infinity Bridge - the architectural masterpiece - has opened to traffic on January 16.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Fence bridge
 - 6) Thai monies
 - 11) "Fawltly Towers" net-work
 - 14) Mom or pop of a mom-and- pop operation
 - 15) French farewell
 - 16) The whole schmear
 - 17) Beatnik with a beat
 - 19) "The Matrix" charac-ter
 - 20) 1965 Alabama march site
 - 21) Some plums
 - 23) Some cats
 - 27) Work out a cryp-togram
 - 28) Unit of gene activity
 - 29) "Pay to_" (check words)
 - 31) Mortise complement
 - 32) Fussy old hen?
 - 33) It may be slung
 - 36) Joule fragments
 - 3 7) Certain Disney Dal-matian
 - 38) British title
 - 39) Scandinavian rug
- material
 - 40) Composer
 - Carmichael
 - 41) Native American group
 - 42) Rustic shelter
 - 44) "Groaned" partner
 - 45) Go to, as a show
 - 47) Whopper tellers
 - 48) Pediatrician's patient
 - 49) "When Harry Met_ ... (1989)
 - 51) _ out (dress up)
 - 52) Leaps of faith?
 - 58) "It's no _"
 - 59) All excited
 - 60) Tsar's edict
 - 61) "As to"
 - 62) Dropped hints about
 - 63) Lamp denizen

DOWN

 - 1) Open up the flood-gates, so to speak
 - 2) Tango requirement
 - 3) Motel relative
 - 4) Drumstick, essentially
 - 5) Shoreline problem
 - 6) They lead to a walk
 - 7) Famous gardener
- 8) "Howdy!"
 - 9) Golf gadget
 - 10) It's for skilled opera-tors
 - 11) City on the Penobscot River
 - 12) Suffer a gash
 - 13) Near
 - 18) Ball-_ hammer
 - 22) Blackjack card
 - 23) Schlepper
 - 24) Mimicry
 - 25) It might be a fat cat in India
 - 26) Ringling_
 - 27) Carpentry groove
 - 29) Cry in a crowded hall
 - 30) Touchy or sensitive
 - 32) Gravy server
 - 34) Brown pigment
 - 35) Ownership docu-ments
 - 37) Small waterway
 - 38) Dull as dishwater
 - 40) Lady's clutch
 - 41) Man-shaped drinking mug
 - 43) Wriggling swimmer
 - 44) Denver's height
 - 45) Become troublesome
 - 46) The items yonder
 - 47) Admiral's command
 - 49) Agitation
 - 50) Home to the Taj Mahal
 - 53) Mysterious craft
 - 54) Hawaiian instrument, shortened
 - 55) One overboard?
 - 56) Letters of inflation
 - 57) Have good eyesight
- NOTE PAD**
-

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

- ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Luck is on your side today, so if you've been waiting for all the blabbermouths to stop talking and for peace and quiet to take over your life for a while, you're all set! Those busybodies who usually annoy you are nowhere to be found right now, which will free you up to move forward through your day with no one standing in your way. You're feeling better than you have in a long time.
- LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

A long-distance invitation could arrive from a dear friend you haven't seen in far too long. Does this mean you'll definitely be the one travelling? Not necessarily. As fond as you are of home, you'll probably be able to talk them into making the trek instead. But if you do decide to go, make your plans now. It's a terrific time to do something totally spontaneous. And weren't you just wishing for a break from your routine?
- SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

You can be forgiven for getting caught up in the moment if good news sends you into a silly rant of excitement! Let loose when the good news hits your ears, and make your smile the biggest one in town. Happiness can be contagious, so spread the joy to the people you encounter by opening doors, offering a ride, paying someone else's toll, or just offering a sweet 'hello' when you meet someone else on the street.
- TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Patience has never been at the very top of your list of personality traits, especially if you want something and you've wanted it for a while. If there's something out there you've been gazing longingly at while shopping, you won't be willing to wait until it's half price. Full price will do just fine as long as you get to bring it home and play with it today. It's time to take a stroll in the shopping mall and buy everything you have been waiting for.
- VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Here's your dilemma: On the one hand, you want to keep playing, especially because someone you absolutely weren't expecting to see has suddenly turned up. On the other, you've been struck by a strong dose of duty and responsibility, and you're already starting to worry about work. There's only one thing to do: divide the day equally. Work during daylight and play after sunset.
- CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Now here's a day you can live with. Everyone will be acting solid, practical, and responsible, the way you are all the time. This certainly could mean that you'll be moved to make a business decision like the one you've been putting off for a while now. If it feels right, go ahead. If you're doubtful, bring the papers to a seasoned professional before you sign anything at all.
- GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Speaking of making a move, if you don't do it first (and you know how fond you are of that sort of thing), they will. Enough with thinking about it, mulling it over, and trying to decide which moment would be best. Use your instinct, which really has yet to let you down if you think about it, and just do it. They've been waiting long enough and so have you. Besides, isn't it nice to keep them on their toes?
- LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your sense of obligation is stronger than ever, which could cause your social life to suffer a bit in the coming weeks. When faced with a choice between having mindless fun and helping someone, you won't let yourself out of your responsibility to be there for someone special. This is a wonderful quality. You won't miss out on the fun too much, and you'll move a relationship to the next level.
- AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You adore your family, but your friends? Your friends are very, very special to you. They're always there for you, and vice versa, and you undoubtedly share an awful lot of memories. It's all about these kindred spirits for you today as you try to make them happy in any way you possibly can. If that includes saying what you think they want to hear, you might reconsider that part. It's called 'enabling'.
- PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Every word you utter will have a solid, grounded tone to it, so when you're asked for your opinion (or even if you're not), you'll be more than happy to give it. This easy confidence comes to you courtesy of the cosmos, which is in a warm, loving, equally confident mood and determined to make the rest of us feel that way too. Your opinion will be highly valued and appreciated.

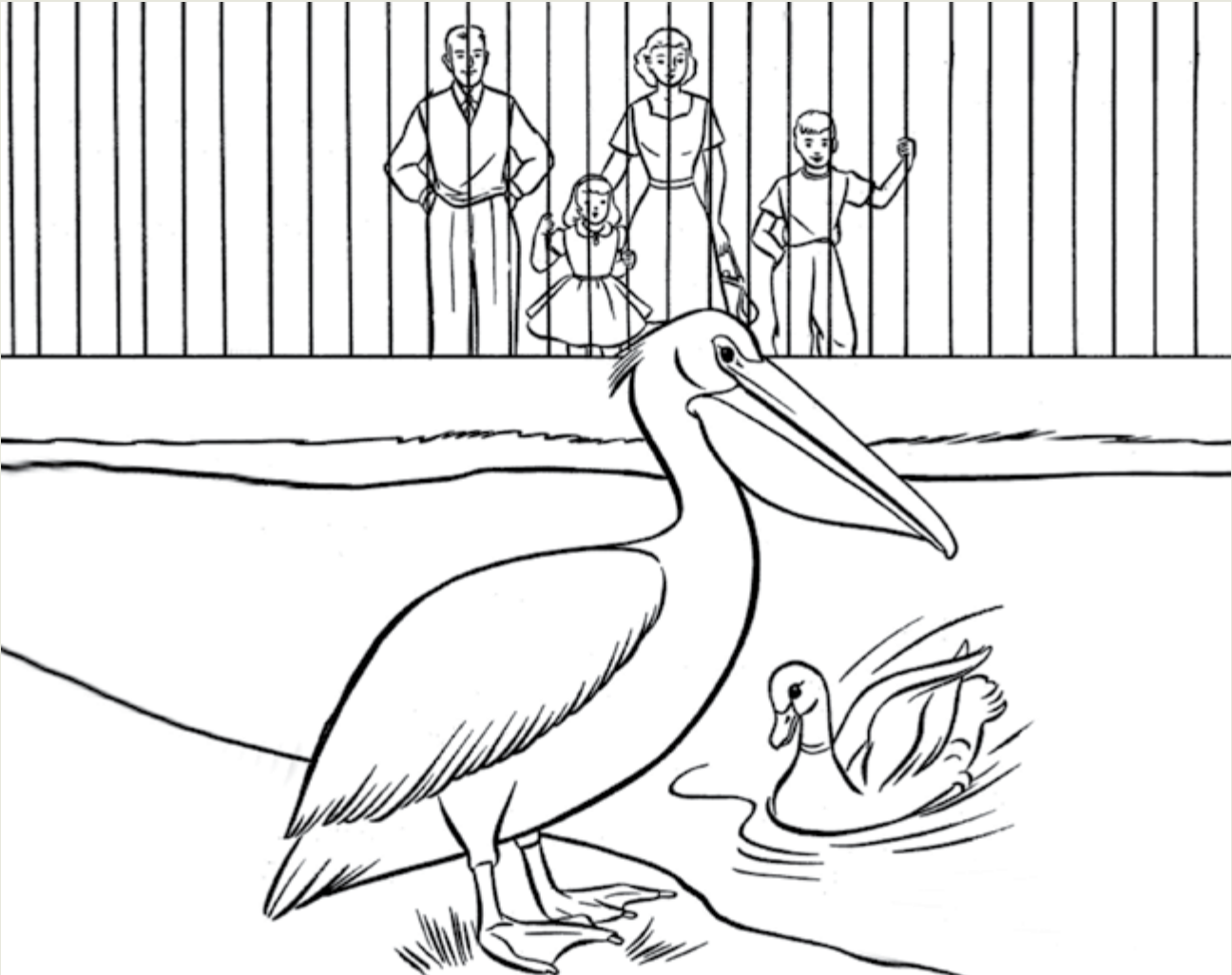


TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- The term which denotes that each side has made equal point at game point, in Tennis, is referred to as
 - a. baseline
 - b. deuce
 - c. fault
 - d. grand slam
- The telescope is used for viewing
 - a. distant objects
 - b. near objects
 - c. small objects
 - d. living cells
- The term butterfly is associ-ated with
 - a. kabaddi
 - b. swimming
 - c. boxing
 - d. wrestling

Answers: 1. b 2. a 3. b

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

I	Y	W	S
S	H	S	S
E	T	T	E
H	R	O	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.

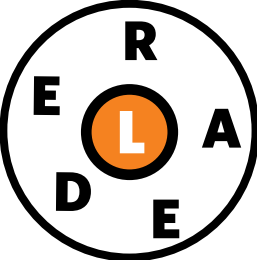
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

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

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

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

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

11 dead as coalition bombs Yemen after deadly attack on Abu Dhabi

Sanaa, Yemen - Eleven people were killed in airstrikes on Yemen's rebel-held capital, a witness and medical sources told AFP on Tuesday, as the Saudi-led coalition hit back after a deadly attack on Abu Dhabi that sent Gulf tensions soaring.

Residents were combing the rubble for survivors after the strikes levelled two houses in Sanaa, hours after the Huthi rebels claimed a drone and missile attack that killed three people in the Emirati capital.

"Eleven people were killed. The search is still going on for survivors in the rubble," said Akram al Ahdal, a relative of some of the victims. A medical source confirmed the death toll.

The UAE, part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Iran-backed rebels, had vowed a tough response to Monday's attack, the first deadly assault acknowledged inside its borders and claimed by the Yemeni insurgents. The coalition launched fresh strikes 'targeting Huthi camps and headquarters' in Sanaa on Tuesday, Saudi Arabia's state-owned Al-Ekhabariya TV tweeted.

Crude prices soared to seven-year highs partly fuelled by the attacks, which exploded fuel tanks near storage facilities of oil giant ADNOC, killing three. The Huthis later warned UAE residents to avoid 'vital installations'.

Yemen, whose near seven-year war has killed hundreds of thousands, occupies a strategic position on the Red Sea, a vital conduit for oil from the resource-rich Gulf.



Yemenis inspect the damage following overnight airstrikes by the coalition targeting the Huthi rebel-held capital Sanaa, on Tuesday (AFP)

US vows to hold Huthi rebels accountable

Washington, US - The United States condemned Monday's drone strike on Abu Dhabi claimed by Yemen's Huthis, and vowed to hold the rebels accountable for the 'terrorist attack' that left three people dead.

"The Huthis have claimed responsibility for this attack, and we will work with the UAE and international partners to hold them accountable," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in a White House

statement.

"Our commitment to the security of the UAE is unwavering and we stand beside our Emirati partners against all threats to their territory."

The State Department echoed the condemnation, according to a statement from spokesman Ned Price.

"We express our condolences to the families of these victims and to the people of the UAE," he said.

"We reiterate our unwaver-

ing commitment to the security of the UAE and stand united with our Emirati partner."

Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke later on Monday with Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, Price said in a second statement.

"Secretary Blinken condemned the terrorist attacks today, which killed and wounded innocent civilians," Price said.

AFP

After the attacks, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed agreed in a phone call to 'jointly stand up to these acts of aggression', UAE state media said.

'No end in sight'

The rebel attack opened a new front in the Yemen war and further reduced hopes of any resolution to the conflict, which has displaced millions in what was already the Arabian peninsula's poorest country.

The United States pledged to hold the Huthis accountable,

while Britain, France and the European Union also condemned the assault. "These attacks threaten the security of the United Arab Emirates and regional stability," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said.

The targeting of Abu Dhabi follows a surge in fighting in Yemen, including advances by the UAE-trained troops of the Giants Brigade, who drove the rebels out of Shabwa province.

The defeat dealt a blow to the Huthis' months-long campaign to capture neighbouring Marib, the government's last stronghold in the north.

Earlier this month, the Huthis hijacked the UAE-flagged Rwabee in the Red Sea, saying it was carrying military equipment - a claim disputed by the coalition and the UAE. The ship's 11 international crew are being held captive.

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Huthis seized the capital Sanaa, prompting Saudi-led forces to intervene to prop up the government the following year. The conflict has been a catastrophe for millions of its citizens who have fled their homes, with many on the brink of famine, in what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The UN has estimated the war killed 377,000 people by the end of 2021, both directly and indirectly through hunger and disease. "There is no end in sight for the Yemen war," Elisabeth Kendall, a researcher at the University of Oxford's Pembroke College, told AFP.

AFP

US\$1.6bn funding sought for Palestine refugees

Jerusalem - The UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, announced a US\$1.6bn funding appeal on Tuesday to help counter 'chronic' budget shortfalls. It is the latest in a series of warnings from UNRWA on possible deep cuts if the international community fails to provide more support.

"Chronic agency budget shortfalls threaten the livelihoods and well-being of the Palestine refugees that UNRWA serves and pose a serious threat to the agency's ability to maintain services," agency head Philippe Lazzarini said in a statement.

UNRWA's funding suffered a blow in 2018 when former US president Donald Trump cut support to the agency.

The former president's administration branded UNRWA as 'irredeemably flawed', siding with Israeli criticisms of the agency founded in 1949, a year after Israel's creation.

President Joe Biden's administration has restored some support, but UNRWA has said it is still struggling.

In November, it warned it was facing an 'existential threat' over budget gaps.

The agency has a staff of 28,000 and provides services such as education and health care to more than 5mn Palestinians registered in the Palestinian territories, including Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

AFP



Sudanese demonstrators barricade Al-Sahafa street during protests in the capital Khartoum on Tuesday (AFP)

Sudan security forces kill seven protesters in anti-coup rallies

Khartoum, Sudan - Sudanese forces opened fire killing seven protesters on Monday in one of the deadliest recent mass rallies against a military coup, with UN Security Council members urging Khartoum to exercise the 'utmost restraint'.

The latest violence, which took place in the capital as well as in other major cities, comes ahead of a key visit by US diplomats, as Washington seeks to broker an end to the months-long crisis in the northeast African nation.

UN special representative Volker Perthes condemned the 'continued use of live ammunition' to put down the protests, confirming at least seven people killed and 'scores injured', while the US embassy in Khartoum criticised 'the violent tactics of Sudanese security forces'.

Nine UN Security Council members including Britain and France urged all parties to 'refrain from the use of violence', stressing the importance of 'peaceful assembly and freedom of expression'.

The seven deaths on Monday brings to 71 the number of protesters killed since the army's

October 25 takeover led by General Abdel Fattah al Burhan.

The military power grab triggered international condemnation, and derailed a fragile transition to civilian rule following the April 2019 ouster of long-time autocratic president Omar al Bashir.

Protesters - sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands - have regularly taken to the streets despite the security clampdown and periodic cuts to communications since the coup.

On Monday, anti-coup medics said three protesters were shot dead by 'militias of the putschist military council', while later, the independent Central Committee of Sudan Doctors reported four more were killed during a 'massacre by the coup authorities'.

Medics reported multiple were wounded by 'live rounds'.

Sudan's mainstream civilian bloc, the Forces for Freedom and Change, called for 'civil disobedience' following what they also dubbed a 'massacre'.

In protests in Khartoum, as well as its North Khartoum suburb and twin city Omdurman across the Nile, security officers

deployed in large numbers, firing volleys of tear gas at protesters.

Several people were seen suffering breathing difficulties and others bleeding due to wounds by tear gas canisters, an AFP correspondent said.

Demonstrators used rocks and burning tyres to create roadblocks, demanding the soldiers go back to their barracks, and chanting slogans in favour of the demonstration.

At nightfall, hundreds of protesters remained on the streets in several parts of Khartoum, while pro-democracy activists led online calls to keep up the demonstrations.

Burhan held an emergency meeting with security chiefs on Monday, who blamed the 'chaos' on protesters who 'deviated from legitimate peaceful demonstration', and vowed to hold to account those involved in 'violations' during protests, according to a statement by Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council.

The authorities have repeatedly denied using live ammunition in confronting demonstrators.

AFP

Putin to host Iran's Raisi in Moscow today

Moscow, Russia - Russian President Vladimir Putin will host his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi in Moscow on Wednesday, the Kremlin said, amid talks aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal.

The meeting will be Raisi's most important official visit abroad since he took office, and the first visit by an Iranian president to Russia since 2017.

The leaders will discuss the 'whole range of issues of bilateral cooperation', including the 2015 deal that offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme, the Kremlin said in a statement.

In 2018, Washington an-



Iran President Ebrahim Raisi (AFP)

nounced its unilateral withdrawal from the agreement under former president Donald Trump, prompting Iran to walk back on

its commitments.

Since last year, Iran has been in talks with the signatories of the accord - the United States, France, Britain, Russia, China and Germany - to restore the deal, but negotiations stopped in June after Raisi's election.

They resumed in November.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov earlier this month noted 'real progress' in the talks.

Moscow and Tehran have strong political, economic and military ties, shared interests in Afghanistan, and are key allies of Syrian President Bashar Assad in his country's decade-long civil war.

This will be Raisi's third visit

outside Iran - after Tajikistan and neighbouring Turkmenistan - since he took over the presidency in August from moderate Hassan Rouhani.

The Iranian side confirmed the visit, saying Raisi would leave on Wednesday for a two-day trip to Russia together with the country's oil, foreign and economy ministers.

A Russian lawmaker told reporters that Raisi would speak at the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, on Thursday, while TASS news agency cited a source as saying he would meet with religious leaders at Moscow's main mosque.

AFP

Woman swept away in tsunami found dead

London, UK - The body of a British woman swept away by a devastating tsunami that struck Tonga has been found, her brother said in a statement received on Tuesday.

A massive underwater volcanic blast near the Pacific island on Friday has left neighbouring countries scrambling to assess the full extent of the damage, with the tiny nation cut off from the world.

The first confirmed death was Angela Glover, a 50-year-old who ran a stray animals charity, who was reported missing by her husband after the tsunami hit.

"Earlier today my family was sadly informed that the body of my sister Angela has been found," her brother Nick Eleini said.

The woman's husband, James Glover, who ran a tattoo shop in Tonga, had confirmed the death to the family, Eleini said.



Angela Glover was missing since a massive tsunami hit Tonga (Facebook)

The brother told AFP he understood Glover managed to relay the news by using a satellite phone at the British high commission in Tonga.

Communications from the country have been crippled after an internet cable was severed during the volcanic eruption.

The couple were washed

away when the tsunami hit, Eleni told British newspaper *The Guardian*.

He said he believed the pair were on the west coast of Tonga's main island, Tongatapu, when the tsunami struck.

"James was able to cling on to a tree for quite a long time, but Angela was unable to do so and

was washed away with the dogs," he said.

His sister had established the Tonga Animal Welfare Society to help the island's stray dogs, an emotional Eleini said from the family's home in England.

"The funny thing was, the uglier the dog, the more she loved it," he said.

Eleini, who lives in Sydney, said he understood his sister was trying to rescue the couple's dogs when she was swept away.

Her last Instagram post was photos of the sunset after Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted in the early hours of January 14.

"We've been under tsunami warnings today," she wrote, noting that the situation remained calm with a few swells and electrical storms.

But, she added, 'everything looked like I was watching through an Instagram filter'.

AFP

Russia starts Belarus drills as Ukraine talks stall

Moscow, Russia - Russian troops arrived in Belarus on Tuesday for snap military drills, as Moscow hosted Germany's Foreign Minister for the latest talks over fears of an invasion of Ukraine.

More than a week of negotiations between Russia and the West have done little to ease worries raised by the massing of tens of thousands of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders.

Adding to the tensions, Russia and Ukraine's neighbour Belarus launched a wave of military exercises, with video published by the Belarusian Defence Ministry showing columns of military vehicles including tanks being unloaded from trains blanketed in snow.

Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock was in Moscow for her first one-on-one meeting with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov.

She came to Moscow fresh from Kyiv, where she told Ukraine's Foreign Minister earlier this week that Germany 'will do our all to guarantee Ukraine's security'.

Ukraine, the United States and the European Union have all raised deep concerns over the



A Russian troop train transporting military vehicles arriving for drills in Belarus on Tuesday (AFP)

Russian troop build-up, despite repeated denials from Moscow that an invasion is planned.

Moscow has instead accused the United States and NATO of ignoring Russia's security concerns, and demanded that the

security alliance permanently bar membership to Ukraine.

Kyiv has been at war with pro-Moscow separatists in the east of the country since 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine after

demonstrations ousted a Kremlin-aligned leader.

On the eve of Baerbock's Moscow trip, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called on Russia to de-escalate tensions, warning that 'military aggression

against Ukraine would have serious political as well as economic consequences'.

The Belarusian Defence Ministry said it was hosting the combat readiness drills because of the continuing 'aggravation' of

military tensions 'including at the western and southern borders of the Republic of Belarus'.

Britain sends weapons

Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin summoned dozens of foreign military diplomats stationed in Moscow - including 16 from NATO member countries - to announce the drills in Belarus, which he said were aimed at 'thwarting external aggression'. He said that S-400 missile systems, which Russia has controversially sold to NATO member Turkey, would be deployed as part of the exercises in Belarus.

Moscow has not disclosed the number of troops participating in the drills, which Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko earlier this week said were the result of growing military threats from neighbours Ukraine and Poland.

Russian negotiators met separately this month with delegations from the United States, NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in meetings that failed to produce any concrete results.

British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace announced in parliament on Monday that Britain is sending weapons to Ukraine as part of a package that would help Kyiv secure its borders.

"Ukraine has every right to defend its borders, and this new package of aid further enhances its ability to do so," Wallace said.

The types of equipment being sent 'are not strategic weapons and pose no threat to Russia', he said, describing them as 'light, anti-armour, defensive weapon systems'.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Tuesday described the announcement of the shipments as 'extremely dangerous' and 'not conducive to reducing tensions'. Russia also on Tuesday also dismissed media reports that it was drawing down numbers from its diplomatic missions in Ukraine, saying that its embassy in Kyiv was operating normally.

The United States has warned Russia it faces sweeping economic measures if it invades Ukraine, a threat dismissed by Russia.

AFP

Rescuers search for survivors after deadly Afghan quake

Herat, Afghanistan - Rescuers searched on Tuesday for survivors of a powerful earthquake in a remote western region of Afghanistan that killed at least 22 people and caused 'massive' damage to buildings, officials said.

Monday afternoon's shallow 5.3-magnitude quake jolted Qadis district in Badghis province, a rural area not easily accessible by road.

"The earthquake caused massive damage to houses, about 700 to 1,000 have been damaged," Badghis provincial spokesman Baz Mohammad Sarwary said in a video message.

Afghanistan is already in the grip of a humanitarian disaster, worsened by the Taliban takeover of the country in August when Western countries froze international aid and access to assets held abroad.

Sarwary said 22 people were killed and four were injured, revising the death toll from the previous figure of 26 he gave to AFP



The earthquake caused massive damage to houses, says Badghis official

late on Monday.

"There is the possibility that the casualties could increase," he said in his latest video message.

Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid confirmed the toll.

Images circulating on social media showed residents, including children, searching through the rubble of collapsed homes.

Government officials said rescue workers were helping search for survivors and transferring the injured to local hospitals.

A Taliban team was in the

area assisting in the relief work.

Mujahid said that all government agencies had been instructed to provide the food, medical aid and shelter to those affected.

'We also call on international aid agencies and humanitarian agencies to assist the victims of the disaster,' he said in a statement posted on Twitter.

The epicentre of the quake was near the city of Qala-i-Naw, the capital of Badghis, less than 100km from the Turkmenistan border, according to the United

States Geological Survey.

The United Nations has said it needs US\$5bn in 2022 to avert the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan.

A devastating drought has compounded the crisis, with earthquake-hit Qadis one of the worst affected areas.

Afghanistan is frequently hit by earthquakes, especially in the Hindu Kush mountain range, which lies near the junction of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates. Even weak earthquakes can cause significant damage to poorly built homes and buildings in the impoverished country.

In 2015, over 380 people were killed in Pakistan and Afghanistan when a powerful 7.5-magnitude earthquake ripped across the two countries, with the bulk of the deaths in Pakistan. In that disaster, 12 young Afghan girls were crushed to death in a stampede as they tried to flee their shaking school building.

AFP

Pakistani police officer killed in gun battle with local Taliban

Islamabad, Pakistan - A police officer was killed and two others injured in a shootout with Pakistan's Taliban in Islamabad, officials said on Tuesday, a rare attack by the militants in the heavily guarded capital.

The Monday night firefight started when two gunmen of the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) opened fire from a motorbike on a police checkpoint in central Islamabad.

'A policeman was martyred while two others were wounded,' the police said in a statement, adding that both attackers were killed.

The TTP - a home-grown Pakistani movement that shares common roots with the Afghan Taliban - claimed responsibility for the ambush.

'We are proud of these heroes, and our fighters will continue to follow in their footsteps,' the group said in a statement.

Pakistan's Interior Minister warned of the potential for further attacks in the capital - home to dozens of embassies - where



Cops pay tribute to the officer killed in an attack on Tuesday (AFP)

It is a signal that terrorist activities have started in Islamabad. It is the first incident this year and we need to stay alert

SHEIKH RASHID AHMED

security has improved in recent years.

"It is a signal that terrorist activities have started in Islamabad," Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told reporters.

"It is the first terrorist incident of this year and we need to say alert," he added.

Pakistan's government announced late last year it had entered a month-long truce with the TTP, facilitated by Afghanistan's Taliban, but that expired on December 9 after peace talks failed to make progress.

The TTP has been blamed for hundreds of suicide bomb attacks and kidnappings across the country, and for awhile held sway over vast tracts of the country's rugged tribal belt, imposing a radical version of Islamic law.

But after the 2014 massacre of nearly 150 children at a Peshawar school, the Pakistan military sent huge numbers of troops into TTP strongholds and crushed the movement, forcing its fighters to retreat to Afghanistan.

AFP

A decade after Norway massacre, extremist Breivik seeks parole

Oslo, Norway - Rightwing extremist Anders Behring Breivik remade a Nazi salute and held up racist messages on Tuesday as he asked for parole, a request widely expected to be denied just ten years after carrying out Norway's deadliest peacetime attack.

Wearing a black suit, white shirt and beige tie, Breivik (42) appeared before the district court in the southern region of Telemark, convened for security reasons in the gymnasium of the Skien prison where he is incarcerated. He lifted his arm in a Nazi salute to the three judges as they entered the room.

The families of his victims had expressed fears Breivik would use the three-day hearing, which is being broadcast almost live, as a platform for his political views, and have called for him to be deprived of the attention he is seeking.

Breivik wore a note pinned to his lapel reading 'Stop your genocide against our white nations'.

The message was also taped to his briefcase, and he held up

signs bearing the message during the prosecutor's opening remarks, which head judge Dag Bjorvik asked him to put away.

In 2012 Breivik, who killed 77 people during the massacre, got 21 years in prison, which can be extended indefinitely as long as he is considered a threat to society. At the time, that was Norway's harshest sentence, though the law has since been changed to allow for the possibility of handing down longer jail terms.

Breivik had to serve at least ten years before he could make his first request for conditional release.

A 'test'

On July 22, last year, Breivik killed eight people when he set off a truck bomb near government offices in Oslo, then gunned down 69 others, most of them teenagers, at a summer camp for the Labour party youth wing on the island of Utoya. He said he killed his victims because they embraced multiculturalism.

"As in any other state gov-



Anders Behring Breivik raises his arm to make a Nazi salute as he arrives on the first day of the trial where he is requesting release on parole, at a makeshift courtroom in Skien prison, Norway on Tuesday (AFP)

erned by the rule of law, a convict has the right to request conditional release and Breivik has decided to exercise this right," his lawyer Oystein Storrvik told AFP.

Breivik's attacks were Norway's deadliest since World War II, and his request is widely expected to be rejected.

But the hearing is seen as a

test of Norway's rule of law.

"It is a test for all of us that a person who murdered children, who hunted down fleeing youths with the aim of killing them and

who shot people who begged for their lives, should also benefit from the liberal aspects of our criminal justice system," daily VG wrote in an editorial on Tuesday.

"He shall have the rights conferred on him by the rule of law. Not for his sake. But for ours. No terrorist should be allowed to change the way we are governed and the rule of law that applies to all Norwegian citizens."

In 2016, Breivik - who has three cells at his disposal in prison, with a television and DVD player, a games console and a typewriter - got the Norwegian state convicted of 'inhumane' and 'degrading' treatment because of his isolation from other inmates.

The verdict was overturned on appeal.

Propaganda concerns

In court and in his communications, including those to AFP, Breivik has in the past claimed to have distanced himself from violence.

But Tore Bjorgo, the head of

the Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, said: "He has not become less of an extremist from an ideological standpoint."

"He has in no way distanced himself from the mass killing he committed and which he considers totally legitimate."

The hearing is being broadcast almost live, with a brief delay in order to mute offensive remarks.

There were concerns ahead of the hearing that Breivik would use it to spread the propaganda he set out in the manifesto he published just before committing his attacks.

A support group for the families said it wanted to 'encourage as little focus as possible on the terrorist and his message'.

"I feel it's quite absurd that he is allowed so much attention by asking for his release after only 10 years," Lisbeth Kristine Royneland, head of the support group, told Norwegian broadcaster NRK. She lost an 18-year-old daughter on Utoya.

AFP

British PM lied about lockdown party, says ex-aide Cummings

London, UK - British Prime Minister Boris Johnson lied to parliament when he claimed he did not know of his staff's plans to hold a drinks party during lockdown, his former aide Dominic Cummings has said.

Johnson is already battling damaging 'Partygate' allegations that he and staff attended boozy events during lockdowns and a senior civil servant is investigating the claims.

The prime minister has apologised for a May 20, 2020, party in the garden of Downing Street, but said he did not know about it in advance and thought he was attending a work event.

Cummings, who himself has been accused of breaking lockdown rules in spring 2020, made the claim on social media on Monday evening.

He has repeatedly attacked his former boss since resigning in November 2020.

Johnson's former chief advisor wrote that the party was arranged by the prime minister's principal private secretary, who was told by two senior officials to cancel it and would have checked this with Johnson.

Cummings said he himself warned the prime minister over the party, saying Downing Street was becoming a 'madhouse', but Johnson 'waved it aside'.

"The events of 20 May alone, never mind the string of other events, mean the PM lied to Parliament about parties," said Cummings.



This file photo shows Boris Johnson (left) and his special advisor Dominic Cummings outside Downing Street, in London on September 3, 2019 (AFP)

"The suggestion that the PM was warned (about the party) is not true," deputy prime minister Dominic Raab insisted to BBC Radio 4, after a presenter said Cummings 'threw a grenade in the direction of his former boss'.

Raab told Sky News that 'the prime minister has been very

clear that's not true, accurate'.

Johnson is facing calls to stand down from several senior MPs over allegations of illegal parties during national lockdown measures.

Downing Street has apologised to Queen Elizabeth II after it emerged that his staff held

leaving parties during a period of national mourning for her husband, Prince Philip, in April 2021.

The *Times* wrote on Tuesday that Johnson has 'sustained immense damage' from the revelations.

Cummings said in his blog that a May 15, 2020 gathering in the Downing Street garden that

he himself is pictured attending along with Johnson and his now-wife Carrie, was not a party, however. He said staff were encouraged to hold meetings outside at the time and while there was wine at the table, they were discussing work issues.

AFP



A resident undergoing a nucleic acid test for COVID-19, in Ningbo in China's eastern Zhejiang province on Sunday (AFP)

China orders overseas mail disinfection over Omicron fears

Beijing, China - China's postal service has ordered workers to disinfect international deliveries and urged the public to reduce orders from overseas after authorities claimed mail could be the source of recent coronavirus outbreaks.

The move illustrates China's unrelenting focus on stamping out all coronavirus cases as it prepares to host the Winter Olympics next month, even as experts say the risk of such surface transmission is low.

Multiple small outbreaks in recent weeks - including in Beijing - have tested China's strict policy of targeting zero COVID cases, which authorities have pursued even as the rest of the world has gradually reopened.

In recent days, Chinese officials have suggested that some people could have been infected by packages from abroad, including a woman in the capital whom authorities said had no contact with other infected people.

She tested positive for a variant similar to those found in North America.

China Post on Monday published a statement ordering workers to disinfect the outer packaging of all international mail 'as soon as possible' and requiring employees handling foreign letters and packages to receive booster vaccine shots.

The postal service also asked the public to reduce purchases and deliveries from 'countries and regions with a high overseas epidemic risk' and said domestic mail should be handled in differ-

ent areas to prevent cross-contamination. The coronavirus is spread through small liquid particles exhaled by infected people.

Both the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control have said the risk of being infected from contaminated surfaces - known as fomite transmission - is low and becomes less likely as time passes.

The CDC has said there is a 99 per cent reduction in virus traces left on most surfaces within three days.

No risks

Leong Hoe Nam, an infectious diseases expert at Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, told AFP a more likely explanation was the silent spread from asymptomatic people who had received false negatives in initial PCR tests.

"The virus may survive transiently on inanimate objects, but the passage from overseas to China would have been way beyond transient," he said.

"Repeated testing will help to weed out the virus together with lockdown and contact tracing... but at high cost and inconvenience," Leong added.

But China - where the virus first emerged in late 2019 - is not willing to take any risks, even more so ahead of next month's Winter Olympics. The country uses strict local lockdowns, mass testing and contact-tracing apps to try and eliminate outbreaks as soon as cases are detected.

AFP

Ibiza trip lands French Minister Blanquer in hot water

Paris, France - France's education minister faced calls to resign on Tuesday after it emerged he had announced a strict COVID-19 testing protocol for students while on vacation on Ibiza.

Jean-Michel Blanquer, a close ally of President Emmanuel Macron, unveiled the strict testing and isolation rules in a video interview with the *Parisien* newspaper on January 2, just hours before classes were to resume after the holiday break.

The paper did not specify that Blanquer, who has infuriated teachers with successive protocol changes that prompted a



Jean-Michel Blanquer (AFP)

major strike last week by teachers, was speaking from the Spanish island resort of Ibiza.

The new rules forced thousands of classes to close and left students waiting in long lines

Instead of preparing the return to class with teachers and parents, minister staged a PR coup

YANNICK JADOT

with their parents outside pharmacies and labs for tests.

Schools denounced a shortage of substitute teachers to replace COVID-stricken staff as well as a lack of masks and other

personal protection equipment.

Subsequent changes to the testing rules added to the confusion, prompting tens of thousands of teachers to walk off the job last Thursday.

The revelations of the Ibiza trip by the investigative website Mediapart on Monday added to their fury, fuelling calls for further strikes this week and next.

Blanquer's critics have called on Macron to fire him.

'Instead of preparing the return to class with teachers and parents, the minister staged a PR coup with his feet in the sand. This degree of contempt

and irresponsibility is unacceptable,' Greens presidential candidate Yannick Jadot said on Twitter.

"When improvisation is born from a lie, confidence is no longer possible," Socialist party chief Olivier Faure said.

In the wake of last week's strike, Blanquer promised to provide 5mn high-grade FFP2 masks for school staff and to hire thousands of teachers and other staff to replace those forced to isolate after contracting COVID-19 or coming into contact with an infected person.

AFP

Hong Kong to cull hamsters after COVID found in pets

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kong will cull hundreds of hamsters after some tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said on Tuesday, as the city pushes to maintain its strict 'zero-COVID' strategy.

The Chinese territory's staunch adherence to the mainland's 'zero-COVID' policy has kept the number of cases low, but maintaining it has cut the finance hub off from the rest of the world for the last two years.

The decision to cull about 2,000 hamsters and other small animals comes after health officials recorded COVID cases at a Hong Kong pet shop.

Health secretary Sophia Chan said the move will protect public health after a pet shop employee and a customer handling hamsters tested positive.

The employee was found to be infected with the Delta variant, which has become rare in Hong Kong.

"Internationally, there is no evidence yet to show pets can transmit the coronavirus to hu-



A man walks past a pet shop, where an employee and a customer were tested positive for COVID-19, in Hong Kong on Tuesday (AFP)

mans, but... we will take precautionary measures against any vector of transmission," Chan said during a press conference.

Eleven preliminary positive samples were found on hamsters for sale at the Little Boss pet shop in the bustling shopping district of Causeway Bay.

Officials believe they were imported from the Netherlands and urged anyone who bought a hamster after December 22 to give up their pet for culling.

About 1,000 animals from Little Boss and its warehouse will be seized and put down, while staff and customers have been sent for testing.

Health officials also issued quarantine orders for around 150 people who visited the pet shop as well as more than 20 warehouse employees.

The shop was shuttered on Tuesday. Another 1,000 hamsters from other pet shops across Hong Kong will also be killed and businesses have been ordered to close temporarily.

Imports of small mammals

will be suspended, officials added. Deputy agriculture chief Thomas Sit defended the cull as a precautionary measure when asked why the decision was made without a clear scientific basis.

"The public should avoid kissing their pets and keep their homes clean," added agriculture director Leung Siu-fai.

"They should not abandon their pets on the streets under any circumstances."

Reaction from hamster lovers in Hong Kong was swift - and angry.

Is there anyone who can save the hamsters and other small animals? said one person in a Facebook group called Hamster Blog HK - which boasts over 10,000 members.

Another ridiculed officials over the cull, telling them to 'go to Wuhan and help the bats there wear two masks', referring to the Chinese city where COVID-19 first emerged two years ago.

AFP



Malonga says he revels in foraging for ingredients and meeting the people who grow the aromatic herbs and edible flowers used in his dishes (AFP)

meeting the people who grow the aromatic herbs and edible flowers used in his dishes.

The restaurant is not cheap - an average meal, including drinks, costs around US\$150 per person - but his customers are happy to pay for an experience that marries traditional African ingredients with modern techniques.

On the day AFP visited, the 10-course menu included sweet potato-marinated tuna, shrimp with powdered cassava and, for dessert, a coffee foam dusted with crushed peanuts.

His clientele includes locals, expatriates and tourists, who line up for a meal that looks as good as it tastes - with chefs using tweezers to meticulously arrange each dish.

Training ground for budding chefs

Although Africa-born chefs like Pierre Thiam have made a splash on the global food scene, popularising Afro-fusion in the West, Mal-



with a pastor's family, later joining a renowned cooking school in Muenster. It was a perfect fit.

"I like to eat, I eat all the time," he said, bursting into laughter. "I come from a family that likes and celebrates food."

30-year-old Congolese chef Dieuveil Malonga poses inside his restaurant 'Meza Malonga' in Rwanda's capital Kigali, on October 27, 2021. (AFP)

Malonga wants to raise the continent's own gastronomic profile.

By 2023, he hopes to create something big by opening a new restaurant in the rural northern region of Musanze, at the foot of the Virunga mountain range and its famous gorillas. He wants the second incarnation of Meza Malonga to serve as a training ground for the next generation of Africa's top chefs.

In Kigali, the soft-spoken Malonga works with 10 young cooks, mainly Rwandan but also Burundian, Ugandan and Tanzanian, who praise his openness to their ideas and his willingness to let them shine.

In Musanze, he says, he plans to recruit and train many more chefs with the goal of transforming the continent's gastronomic reputation.

AFP

SECRETS OF AFRICA

Congolese chef Dieuveil Malonga learned his craft in Europe's top restaurants, but says he owes his success to grandmothers across Africa, who passed on the gastronomic secrets that underpin his celebrated Afro-fusion cuisine.

"I travel (to) different countries... to learn from the grandmothers. Then I get these old recipes and I bring it to my laboratory here and we try with my chefs to give it something of a modern touch," he said.

The 30-year-old from Congo-Brazzaville has visited 38 of Africa's 54 countries, bringing back fermentation and other techniques, as well as ingredients that add texture and flavour to the dishes served at his restaurant

in Rwanda's capital Kigali. The treasures sourced during his trips are everywhere in Meza Malonga (Malonga's Table, in Kigali).

Bins holding tiny chilli peppers from the Ivory Coast, pebe nuts from Cameroon and dried mbinzo caterpillars from the Congo fill an entire wall of the establishment.

Food experts have largely ignored the continent's culinary heritage, with not a single Michelin-starred restaurant to be found on the continent. But that may soon change, thanks to the efforts of chefs like Malonga, who co-founded Chefs in Africa - a website devoted to promoting the region's rising stars.

"Something is happening in Africa, and people are getting interested in knowing more about African cuisine," he said in an in-

terview with AFP at his restaurant, minutes before the dinner rush kicked off.

He stressed the diversity of African food, citing the example of Nigeria, where one can choose from more than 20 dishes on any given day.

The 'key' to his new life

Malonga was born near Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo, where, despite losing his parents at a young age, he enjoyed a very happy childhood within a tight-knit community, as per his website.

At 13, he moved to Germany and lived

Congolese star chef brings culinary secrets of African grandmothers to the dining table

After graduating, he trained at some of Germany's top restaurants, including the triple Michelin-starred Aqua in Wolfsburg, before moving to France to work at the Inter-Continental hotel in Marseille.

Despite his success, he said he could not shake off the feeling that something was "missing". So he headed back to Africa and embarked on a two-year odyssey across the continent. There he found the 'key' to his new life, he said.

After falling in love with Rwanda, he opened Meza Malonga in 2020. Here, he says, he revels in foraging for ingredients and

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CHIA SEEDS

IMMUNITY Booster



During the pandemic, daily meals need to include regular intakes of immunity boosters that play a supportive role in ones overall good health. Consider chia seeds, the fun ingredient, that peps up any meal



How about introducing a regular intake of chia seeds in your diet as a sure way of building sound immunity? Chia seeds contain quercetin, an antioxidant that can reduce your risk of developing several health conditions, including heart disease. These seeds are also high in fibre which can help to lower high blood pressure and reduce the risk of developing heart disease. Chia seeds are a great source of omega-3 fatty acids and some minerals essential for bone health, including calcium, phosphorus, and magnesium. Many people wonder whether chia seeds are basil seeds (or sabja) as both look similar at first glance. There seems to be a lot of confusion between the two, with some people even thinking they are one and the same. However, though they appear similar, basil seeds are black, tiny and round while chia seeds are a bit larger, more oval in shape, and come in a variety of colours, like grey, brown, white and black.

Basil seeds cannot be eaten without first being soaked in water for at least a couple of hours. However, chia seeds can be consumed both raw and soaked, depending on how you want to use them. Chia is not just a good coolant, it is also good source of iron which combats acidity and relieves of constipation. One can consume chia seeds in many interesting ways. Chia water is one of the simplest ways to include chia seeds in your diet. Just add them to water and consume as and when needed. To give your drink some flavour, you can add chopped fruit or squeeze in a lemon/orange. You can also make chia pudding as you would chia water. For a thicker, pudding-like texture, add more seeds and let the mixture soak longer. You can make this treat with juice or milk, including flavourings like vanilla and cocoa. Chia pudding makes a delicious dish that can be eaten for breakfast or as a dessert. Chia in smoothies is yet another delicious way of consuming the seeds. Consider adding chia seeds in almost any smoothie by soaking them to make a gel

before adding. Although many people prefer to soak chia seeds, you can eat them raw, too - try sprinkling them on your smoothie or oatmeal. You can also make Chia cereal to try something different for breakfast and top with nuts, fruit, or spices like cinnamon. You can also use mashed banana and vanilla extract to make a delicious morning treat. In a stir-fry, you can also add chia seeds for a delicious topping or sprinkle them on your salad to give it some texture and a healthy boost. Simply mix them in and add your favourite salad vegetables. It's possible to add chia seeds to many recipes, including bread. It can also be used as a crispy crumb coating for meat or fish. Ground into a fine powder, the seeds can be mixed with your usual breadcrumb coating or used to substitute it altogether. You can also mic them with other grains. You don't need a fancy recipe, simply stir 1tbsp of seeds into a cup of rice or quinoa. Breakfast bars can also incorporate chia while cutting back on the sugar content.

Mango Chia Pudding

Mango Chia Pudding is a healthy and nutritious, creamy and delicious, make-ahead, no-cook option for breakfast, as a mid-day snack, or even as a dessert.

Ingredients

2 cups whole milk
1 / 4 cup + 2 tbsp chia seeds
2tbsp honey, maple syrup, or agave nectar
2 cups mango puree or chunks

Method

In a bowl, simply add milk, chia seeds, and sweetener. Mix it well. Keep it in the refrigerator for 15 minutes. After 15 minutes, bring this mixture out, stir to get out any chia seeds clumps that have formed. Now place this mixture in the fridge to set for 2 hours or overnight.

While the chia seed pudding is setting, you can peel the skin and remove the flesh of the mangoes. Add this flesh to a high-power blender and blend it into a smooth puree. Ensure that the mangoes you use are ripe and sweet for good results. Keep this in the refrigerator till you are ready to serve.

Once chia pudding is set, it becomes gelatinous in texture. In serving glasses, spoon the chia seed pudding followed by a layer of mango puree. Garnish it with some more mango chunks or any toppings of your choice, like chopped strawberries. (Any leftovers can be stored back in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.)



Lemon Chia Cookies

Mango Chia Pudding is a healthy and nutritious, creamy and delicious, make-ahead, no-cook option for breakfast, as a mid-day snack, or even as a dessert.

Ingredients

50g almond meal, 50g coconut flour, a pinch of sea salt
2 tbsp coconut sugar, 1 tsp baking powder
1 tbsp coconut oil, melted and cooled slightly
1 large egg, 1 tsp vanilla extract
Zest and juice of ½ lemon, 2 tbsp chia seeds

Method

Place the almond meal, coconut flour, coconut sugar, baking powder and salt in a large mixing bowl and stir until well combined. Whisk the coconut oil, egg and vanilla extract together in a small bowl. Add the lemon juice, lemon zest and chia seeds and mix until well combined.

Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and mix until well combined. If the dough is too wet, add a tablespoon more of flour. If the dough is too dry, add a few drops of water or coconut oil. Leave the cookie dough to rest, covered in a plate for 10 minutes in the refrigerator.

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 160°C and line a baking tray with baking paper. Scoop out 1 heaped tbsp of the mixture and roll into a ball. Place on the prepared baking tray and flatten slightly using the back of a spoon. Repeat with the remaining mixture. Bake in the oven for 10-12 minutes. Leave to cool for 5-7 minutes on the tray before moving to a cooling rack to cool completely before serving.

Store in an airtight container for up to a week.



Deposed captains Kohli, De Kock gear up for one-day series



FIXTURES:

January 19, Paarl
January 21, Paarl
January 23, Cape Town

Paarl, South Africa - Two deposed captains, Virat Kohli and Quinton de Kock, could play significant roles in a three-match one-day international series between South Africa and India, starting at Boland Park in Paarl on Wednesday.

Both former skippers have the potential to be the leading batsmen for their respective sides.

For Kohli, it will be the first ODI series since Rohit Sharma was named captain by the Indian selectors in December.

Even though Sharma had to withdraw from the series in South Africa because of injury, the captaincy was not returned to Kohli but was passed to K L Rahul.

Kohli, who captained India in 95 ODIs with a 65-27 win-loss ratio, made it clear after India's Test series defeat last week that he could speak about the coming one-day games purely 'from a player's point of view'.

Kohli, who stepped down from the Test captaincy, said, "You are obviously very driven and motivated to perform in any match you play for India. As an individual I can definitely say that I am looking forward to the ODI series and I am driven to perform in those ODI games."

De Kock was made South Africa's long-term white-ball captain in February 2020 and was made Test captain for four matches last season. But he did not seem comfortable in the role and a decision was made last March to put Temba Bavuma in charge of the white-ball teams, with Dean Elgar taking over as Test captain.

De Kock, who was already due to miss the last two Tests against India on paternity leave, announced after the first Test last month that he was retiring from Test cricket, although he remained available for limited-

overs games.

The series marks De Kock's return to action for the first time since becoming the father of a baby daughter. He fell to two indifferent shots in his final Test match and South Africa will be hoping for a return to the free-flowing, motivated batsman who hit three centuries in successive matches against India eight seasons ago.

The series is not part of the International Cricket Council's World Cup Super League but South Africa in particular will be keen to record their first one-day series win since beating Australia 3-0 in March 2020 before cricket was effectively shut down by the coronavirus pandemic.

Since then, series against India and England have been aborted because of the virus, they have lost against Pakistan and Sri Lanka and have had to share the honours against Ireland

and the Netherlands.

One match was lost, one won and another rained off in Ireland and the first match of a series against the Netherlands was washed out and the remaining matches postponed because

South Africa was placed on a coronavirus travel 'red list'.

India won the only two ODI series they played in 2021, at home against England and away against Sri Lanka.

AFF

SQUADS

SOUTH AFRICA:

Temba Bavuma (captain), Keshav Maharaj (vice-captain), Quinton de Kock (wkt), Zubayr Hamza, Marco Jansen, Sisanda Magala, Janeman Malan, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Lungi Ngidi, Wayne Parnell, Andile Phehlukwayo, Dwaine Pretorius, Kagiso Rabada, Tabraiz Shamsi, Rassie van der Dussen, Kyle Verreynne (wkt)

INDIA:

K L Rahul (captain), Jasprit Bumrah (vice-captain), Ravichandran Ashwin, Yuzvendra Chahal, Deepak Chahar, Shikhar Dhawan, Ruturaj Gaikwad, Ishan Kishan (wkt), Venkatesh Iyer, Shreyas Iyer, Virat Kohli, Prasidh Kumar, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Rishabh Pant (wkt), Mohammed Siraj, Washington Sundar, Shardul Thakur, Jayant Yadav, Suryakumar Yadav



Player of the match Vaishali Jesrani receives prize from Paul Sheridan, Oman Cricket Board Member, after the match on Tuesday (Supplied photo)

Vaishali leads Oman Women to exciting win over Wanstead

Muscat - Oman Women captain Vaishali Jesrani topscored with a fighting 29, leading her side to an exciting 11-run victory against the touring Wanstead Women Cricket Club of UK here at Oman Cricket Turf 1 in Amerat on Tuesday.

Oman now leads the three-match T20 series 1-0 with the next games following on January 20 and 21 at OC Turf 2.

Wanstead had a good first session, restricting Oman to just 103 for 6 in 20 overs, except that it gave away 17 runs in extras including 13 wides and 3 no balls.

Knowing her side's ability to defend a total, Vaishali stayed on till the 16th over, forging partnerships, running hard for singles, and keeping the scoreboard ticking.

The ever-reliable Fiza Javed chipped in with a useful 22 and by the end of 20 overs Oman had reached a total that it believed was worth a fight. And fight it did.

Wanstead had a wonderful start, reaching 62 for 1 in 13 overs

before Oman started to fight back. Yasmin Daswani (29 off 42) was trapped in front by Priyankawas made to sweat for every run as Oman applied relentless pressure.

Though the tourists took the fight to the last over, by that time they had clearly run out of steam, and wickets as well, getting bowled out for 92 with 3 balls to spare. Yasmin Daswani and Saba Naseem were their main scorers with the scores of 29 and 28 respectively. Bhakti Shetty and Priyanka Mandonca were the pick of Oman bowlers, taking two wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES:

Oman Women 103 for 6 in 20 overs (Vaishali Jesrani 29 - 1x4, Fiza Javed 22 - 1x4, Sakshi Shetty 14 - 1x4, Priyanka Mendonca 11 - 1x4) **beat Wanstead Women CC 92 all out in 19.3 overs** (Yasmin Daswani 29 - 1x4, Saba Naseem 28 - 3x4, Aisha Usman 10 - 1x4, Bhakti Shetty 2-10, Priyanka Mendonca 2-15) by 11 runs.

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka start with easy wins in ICC Commonwealth Games qualifiers

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Pre-tournament favourites Bangladesh and Sri Lanka eased to victory in their respective games on the opening day of the ICC Commonwealth Games Qualifier 2022 at the Kinrara Oval in Kuala Lumpur.

Bangladesh spinners set up a regulation run chase to overcome Malaysia while Sri Lanka thwarted Scotland through a powerful batting display.

MALAYSIA VS BANGLADESH

Bangladesh got off to a winning start on the back of a disciplined bowling effort led by Rumana Ahmed, who picked up two for four in her full quota before a quick-fire 28 from Shamima Sultana helped them chase down a target of 50 in just eight overs.

Bangladesh won the toss, elected to field first, and strung together a procession of dot balls in the Powerplay.

Malaysian opener Wan Julia lost her off stump to an arm ball from off-spinner Salma Khatun to leave the hosts one wicket down in the fourth over with just three runs on the board. Yusrina Yakoop was next to go, playing



Bangladesh celebrate after winning the match against Malaysia (Twitter)

We worked so hard back home for this. We played some practice matches...we all know if we do well here, this is going to help us in the upcoming World Cup as well

NIGAR SULTANA

around a low full toss from seamer Suraya Azmim. Mas Elysa then joined skipper Winifred Duraisingam at the crease. The pair stitched together 15 runs - the highest part-

nership of the innings - before Mas Elysa was run out by bowler Nahida Akter.

Malaysia would go on to post 49 for nine with Duraisingam top-scoring with 12 off 31 balls.



Sri Lankan skipper Chamari Athapaththu led from the front, pummeling 86 runs off 45 balls (Twitter)

Needing to chase 50 for victory at 2.5 runs per over, Bangladesh's openers wasted no time whatsoever. Shamima Sultana brought up a milestone of 500 T20I runs courtesy of a flurry of boundaries, including a towering six over square leg off the bowling of Duraisingam.

Bangladesh skipper Nigar Sultana acknowledged how her team's hard work is paying off.

"We worked so hard back home for this. We played some practice matches...we all know if we do well here, this is going to help us in the upcoming World Cup as well," she said

SRI LANKA VS SCOTLAND

Sri Lankan skipper Chamari Athapaththu led from the front, pummeling 86 runs off 45 balls with 13 fours and two sixes to propel her team to 182 before her bowlers stepped up to bowl Scotland out for 73. Scotland, however, were unfortunate to

lose both Lorna Jack and Ellen Watson to injury; the former not batting at all and the latter retiring hurt on 30.

Earlier in the day, Sri Lanka won the toss and decided to bat. Athapaththu took advantage of opening bowlers Kathryn Bryce and Rachel Slater missing their lines in the powerplay as she scored boundaries all around the wicket.

In reply, Scotland started well with both Ellen Watson and Sarah Bryce finding the fence on a regular basis. Soon after lifting left-arm Udesika Prabhodani over long on for six, Sarah Bryce tried to go over the top but could not clear mid-off, getting caught in the circle by Nilakshi De Silva.

Debutant Sachini Nisansala contributed in taking two wickets in quick succession. First she bowled Kathryn Bryce with a straighter one. In her next over, Nisansala ran out Katie McGill with a direct hit off her own bowling. Athapaththu won the Player of the Match award but chose instead to dedicate her award to debutant Nisansala for her two wickets and an impressive effort in the field.

Tsitsipas vows to be 'more daring' after opening win

Melbourne, Australia - Stefanos Tsitsipas eased past practice partner Mikael Ymer into the second round at the Australian Open on Tuesday - but admitted he must be more 'daring' as he pursues his first Grand Slam title.

The Greek world number four always had the measure of the 86th-ranked Swede, polishing off a 6-2, 6-4, 6-3 win in 2hr 10 min in a night match on Rod Laver Arena.

It set up a second-round encounter with Argentina's Sebastian Baez.

Tsitsipas broke Ymer's service seven times, lost his own twice and hit a total of 30 winners, while committing 38 unforced errors.

"There were a lot of rallies, a lot of ball exchanges, he gave me a hard time, he was going after every single ball and stayed in the match for as long as he could," Tsitsipas said on court.

"I will be trying to decrease the amount of unforced errors, I think I had a few more than I usually have. I'll be trying to keep the consistency and trying to attack a bit more, be a bit more daring in certain moments."

Tsitsipas, a two-time semi-finalist in Melbourne, lost to Novak Djokovic in last year's French Open final after leading by two sets. The first Greek player to reach a Grand Slam final, Tsitsipas holds the distinction of beating both Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer on his way to his semi-final appearances at the Australian Open.

He admitted at this month's ATP Cup in Sydney that he was struggling with elbow pain, which was affecting his serve.

AFP



Stefanos Tsitsipas reacts during his match against Sweden's Mikael Ymer, on day two of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)



Estonia's Anett Kontaveit hits a return against Czech Republic's Katerina Siniakova, on day two of the Australian Open on Tuesday (AFP)

Kontaveit defies nerves to showcase Melbourne title credentials

Melbourne, Australia - Anett Kontaveit began her tilt at a maiden Grand Slam title with a 6-2, 6-3 victory at the Australian Open on Tuesday as she looks to build on a breakout 2021.

The Estonian sixth seed proved too hot for Czech doubles specialist Katerina Siniakova, blitzing past her in 81 minutes, smacking 26 winners.

She will meet either Australian Astra Sharma or Denmark's Clara Tauson in round two.

The 25-year-old Kontaveit is shaping up as a serious contender at Melbourne Park after her electric form in the second half of last season.

It saw her capture four titles in two months before ending runner-up at the WTA Finals to Garbine Muguruza.

"I think first round is always a little bit nervous. But I think I was getting better as the match went on and then playing a solid match," said Kontaveit.

"Of course every time I step

on the court I want to win. I want to go deep in the Slams."

Kontaveit reached the quarter-finals at Melbourne Park in 2020, her best showing so far at a Grand Slam, but she is not getting carried away by her sizzling form.

"Every match is a new challenge and I want to take it really step by step and not think ahead too much," said the world number seven.

"I think everybody here is going to be tough. I think it's important for me to focus on what I'm doing and I'm really looking forward to another challenge."

Kontaveit had won her last three encounters with Siniakova, including during title runs last year at Cleveland and Moscow, and after early nerves quickly took charge. It turned out to be a blip, with the Estonian breaking back twice as she drew errors from her exasperated opponent and raced to victory.

AFP

Halep still dreaming of more Slams despite first-round wobble

Melbourne, Australia - Former world number one Simona Halep said she was still dreaming of more Grand Slam success on Tuesday despite an error-strewn performance to reach the Australian Open second round.

The fit-again Romanian 14th seed came into the tournament full of confidence after her first title in 16 months at the Melbourne Summer Set.

But she struggled to find her groove against Poland's 102nd-ranked Magdalena Frech before banking the win 6-4, 6-3 on Margaret Court Arena to keep her hopes of a third major title alive.

"I feel good physically, I have no problems. I think I'm fit. I worked hard in the off-season," she said when asked if she could

go all the way at Melbourne Park.

"I don't know what to say about the final. It's one of my dreams to get there, but I know it is difficult. I'm not going to think about that."

Halep, the runner-up in 2018 to Caroline Wozniacki and semi-finalist two years later, is on her way back after a truncated 2021 season when she struggled with calf and knee injuries.

It was a far-from-convincing performance against Frech, with both players struggling to hold serve in the opening set. The Pole was broken three times and Halep twice. Halep reeled off five games in a row to ensure victory.

"The first match is always tough," she said later.

AFP



Not a good day: US Open finalist Fernandez stunned in Melbourne

Melbourne, Australia - Leylah Fernandez said she must 'improve in every aspect' after the US Open runner-up was dumped out in the first round of the Australian Open by a wildcard on Tuesday.

The 19-year-old Canadian, who lost to fellow teenager Emma Raducanu in the championship decider at Flushing Meadows in September, saw her Melbourne title bid fall at the first hurdle against Australia's 133rd-ranked Maddison Inglis, 6-4, 6-2.

Fernandez, seeded 23, was at a loss to explain her poor performance but said the only thing she could do would be to get back on the practice court as soon as possible.

"Today was just not a good day, too many mistakes," said Fernandez, whose stunning exploits in New York where she knocked out defending champion Naomi Osaka and world number two Aryna Sabalenka had earmarked her as a star of the future.

"We had a good pre-season,



Canada's Leylah Fernandez hits a return against Australia's Maddison Inglis on day two of the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

we worked hard, we improved my tennis game," she added after her return to Grand Slam action turned sour.

"Just leading up to these tournaments, I was just extremely happy with how I was progressing and how I was practising."

Fernandez said she was deter-

mined to look forward despite her disappointment.

"I can't go back in time," she said. "The only thing I can do right now is get back on the tennis court and put in the hours, work hard and just improve in every aspect."

AFP





Britain's Emma Raducanu reacts as she plays against Sloane Stephens of the US on day two of the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

Raducanu on fire to win on Australian Open debut

Melbourne, Australia - Teenage US Open champion Emma Raducanu sent 2017 Flushing Meadows winner Sloane Stephens crashing out of the Australian Open at the first hurdle Tuesday, producing some devastating tennis in a return to form.

Raducanu made history by becoming the first qualifier to win a Grand Slam singles title in New York last year, but had won only two matches since.

The 19-year-old was back to some of her dazzling best on Margaret Court Arena despite a second-set battle, ousting the American Stephens 6-0, 2-6, 6-1 in a performance that will make her rivals sit up and take notice.

"Both me and Sloane really put everything out there. I thought it was a high-quality match with some great rallies," said the 17th seed from Britain, who was making her Australian Open debut.

"I'm really happy to come through against a great champion like her.

"It was a tough match for the first round, I had to work extremely hard for every point, and I'm very pleased."

Stephens was ranked just 67, but had plenty of experience, reaching at least the quarter-finals at all four Slams.

However, she has struggled in Melbourne since reaching the last four in 2013, slumping in the first round now on six occasions since.

In the first clash between the two players, the Briton made a blistering start, racing to a 3-0 lead with Stephens winning just two points.

Raducanu was full of confidence and aggressive, not letting the American into the match, pushing her around the court and producing some fine winners.

AFP



Britain's Andy Murray hits a return against Georgia's Nikoloz Basilashvili during their singles match on day two of the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

Murray roars into round two; so does Medvedev

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Melbourne, Australia - Former world number one Andy Murray turned back the clock in typically combative style and favourite Daniil Medvedev set up a blockbuster second-round showdown with Nick Kyrgios at the Australian Open on Tuesday.

In the women's draw, top-10 seeds Garbine Muguruza, Iga Swiatek and Anett Kontaveit all made comfortable starts to their Melbourne title charges, while Simona Halep and Aryna Sabalenka also won despite struggling with their serves.

Emma Raducanu, the US Open champion, was also victorious on her tournament debut but there was defeat at the first hurdle for her fellow 19-year-old Leylah Fernandez - the woman Raducanu beat in the Flushing Meadows decider.

Canada's Fernandez, the 23rd seed, went down 6-4, 6-2 to Australian wildcard Maddison Inglis, to the delight of the home crowd. After Sunday's deportation of men's defending champion and top seed Novak Djokovic, the first Grand Slam of the year is now in full swing and many are eager to move on from the visa saga.



'Couldn't ask for more'

If it has been a distraction for Murray, he did not show it.

second major, who made light work of 91st-ranked Henri Laaksonen on Rod Laver Arena, dismantling the Swiss 6-1, 6-4, 7-6 (7/3).

With Djokovic out of the picture and Roger Federer not in Melbourne because of injury, the draw has opened up for the 25-year-old Medvedev and Spanish great Rafael Nadal.

Medvedev, who lost last year's final in Melbourne to Djokovic but then beat the Serbian in the US Open final in September, plays combustible but talented Australian showman Kyrgios in round two.

Another of the 'Next Gen' young talents challenging the 'Big Three' of Djokovic, Nadal and Federer is Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas.

The fourth seed was a comfortable winner in three sets over practice partner Mikael Ymer to get his tournament up and running.



Russia's Daniil Medvedev celebrates after victory against Switzerland's Henri Laaksonen, on day two of the Australian Open on Tuesday (AFP)

In the women's draw

Spanish world number three Muguruza, a finalist at Melbourne Park two years ago, eased past 77th-ranked Frenchwoman Clara Burel 6-3, 6-4.

There was also little trouble for Kontaveit, despite some early nerves, and Swiatek, but Romania's Halep was far from comfortable.

The former number one laboured into round two 6-4, 6-3 after an error-strewn clash with Poland's Magdalena Frech.

Second seed Sabalenka, was far from perfect on her serve but survived to beat Storm Sanders 5-7, 6-3, 6-2. In the last action of the day, Raducanu ousted the American Sloane Stephens.

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Sabalenka 'just survives' thanks to Philippoussis

Melbourne, Australia - World number two Aryna Sabalenka revealed on Tuesday that Mark Philippoussis helped iron out her early season serving horrors as she recovered from a set down to make the Australian Open second round.

The second seed from Belarus came into the season-opening Grand Slam low on confidence after self-destructing at two warm-up tournaments where her serve left her distraught.

It got so bad against world number 93 Rebecca Peterson in Adelaide that Sabalenka was reduced to sending deliveries underarm, at one point breaking

Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka celebrates after beating Australia's Storm Sanders at the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

down in tears.

Across two defeats, she threw down 39 double faults.

She reduced the count to 12 against Storm Sanders on Rod Laver Arena to win 5-7, 6-3, 6-2, but with four in her first two service games it appeared she was in for another miserable night.

Sabalenka (23) kept her cool though and finally found her range to stay in the match and the tournament, with former world number eight Philippoussis to thank.

"After the first matches of the season I was really worried and I spoke with Mark Philippoussis," she said of the Australian, who reached the finals of the 1998 US Open and Wimbledon in 2003.

"He was in Adelaide (commentating) and after my second match he just wrote me, like, 'Well, girl, just stop thinking a lot on your serve'. He said: 'If you have some time today... I can help you.' And, yeah, I think at 9.00pm or 8.00pm we went on court and we served a lot and he gave me some tips about what should I focus on during the game when I'm struggling with my serve. Im really thankful to him for this help because that's what helped me today on match to just survive there."

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