



THURSDAY, 23 DECEMBER 2021

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SPECIAL SEASONAL SUPPLEMENT WITH THIS EDITION

GCC rail network on track

Gulf Railways Authority will enhance the economic integration among GCC countries: Experts

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following approval to set up Gulf Railways Authority at the 42nd Gulf Cooperation Council summit held in Riyadh earlier this month, citizens and experts alike have welcomed the decision.

The final statement following the summit stressed the importance of realising the economic visions of the GCC countries to achieve economic diversification and maximise the benefit of their economic potential. The statement highlighted opportunities to boost joint investments by developing the integration of road, rail and communications networks among the GCC countries.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Nasser al Hosni, a businessman, said, a railway project between the GCC countries will reduce distances, travel time and transportation cost. It will make Duqm a gateway for huge investments from China and also other



(Image for illustrative purpose)

Plans to set up a metro

The Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS) includes plans to set up a metro network that will connect Ruwi and Muttrah to Muscat International Airport and Seeb.

The metro will be one of the main transport arteries of a new, revitalised Muscat, which will have Ghala as the centre of its commercial activities.

ONSS is a blueprint for the urban plan of the sultanate's cities for the next 20 years.

Alongside the metro, revised transportation plans include a passenger rail service that will connect Seeb to Sohar, the main hub of North Batinah governorate, providing easier access to the towns in between.

countries.

"It will also help revitalise tourism and encourage the establishment of tourism and entertainment projects in all GCC countries. A railway project can be easily set up because the terrain between the GCC states is not rugged," Hosni said.

He expects the project to facilitate opening of new markets, attract investors from other countries, and encourage Gulf in-

vestors to increase investments in the these countries. It will also support industries in the Gulf by facilitating and increasing the movement of import and export products between the countries of the council and the world.

Expressing gratitude for the decision on the Gulf Railways Authority, Ali Hamad al Shayadi, a teacher, said it was long overdue. A pan-GCC railway network will strengthen economic and social

ties between the people of the Gulf countries, he noted. "The project will increase commercial traffic and support the Gulf economies after losses and stagnation due to the epidemic and low oil prices."

According to Dr Waddah al Sibani, director of Financial Affairs at Sultan Qaboos University, establishment of the Gulf Railways Authority is vital as it will ease movement of people and trade, besides boosting tourism and creating opportunities for job seekers among the GCC countries.

Sibani said, most significantly, a GCC railways network will strengthen social ties among people of the Gulf.

Khalfan al Touqi, an economic analyst, described the establishment of the Gulf Railways Authority as a "very important step".

He informed that the GCC has made concerted efforts to establish a unified railway network since 2012. "There were great challenges in the establishment of the project, including the drop in oil prices, political crises and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic."

According to Touqi, the Gulf Railways Authority will enhance economic and customs integration among the GCC countries, increase trade and reduce cost of goods transport.



(Supplied photo)

Omani graffiti artist creates giant wall art

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To express his love for His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the Late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, an Omani graffiti artist has painted portraits of the two on a wall in Harmul in the wilayat of Liwa, North Batinah.

It took Abdulmajeed Mohammed Salim al Mamari, 28, eight hours over two days to paint the portraits, which he said "will impress every one".

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Mamari said, "I have been making graffiti since childhood. This is not the first time that I have painted portraits of the two s-

ultans." The wall art is 3m high and 4m wide.

Mamari believes his graffiti art, done in several prominent locations around Harmul, add value to the sites and help promote tourism.

"I will continue to promote my country in all its glory through art," Mamari pledged.

Muscat footballer dies during warm-up

Muscat - Mukhaled al Raqadi, who plays for Muscat Football Club, died hours before his team's match against Al Suwaiq Football Club. He collapsed during warm-up before a match on Wednesday.

'Muscat FC player Mukhaled al Raqadi died after being taken to hospital after falling while warming up before the start of his team's sixth round Omantel Football League match with Al Suwaiq FC,' Oman News Agency said.

NEWS BRIEFS

HM THE SULTAN CONDOLES KING OF KSA, EMIR OF KUWAIT

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) on the death of Prince Nahar Saud Abdulaziz al Saud.

In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sympathies, praying to the Almighty Allah to rest the deceased's soul in peace in paradise and grant his family patience to bear the loss.

His Majesty the Sultan also sent a cable of condolences to Sheikh Nawaf al Ahmed al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, on the death of Sheikh Moudhi Salem Ali al Malek al Sabah.



First Oman-made 3D printer launched



Oman, TotalEnergies ink deals for gas projects

Muscat's international schools third most affordable in Mideast

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat is the third most affordable city among eight in the Middle East for international schools. The metropolitan area of UAE Dubai-Sharjah-Ajman (DSA) is the most expensive city with prices ranging from US\$2,317 to US\$26,019 per year.

The research, compiled by International Schools Database based in Prague, reveals the cost of international education in the world, including the Middle East, in 2021.

DSA, ranked 36th in the world, is followed by Doha (39th), Kuwait City (47th), Abu Dhabi (48th), Muscat (52nd), Riyadh (60th) and Manama (64th).

Four cities in the middle of the table - Kuwait City, Abu Dhabi, Istanbul and Muscat - all have similar median prices of roughly US\$8,000 - US\$9,000. Even at the top and bottom ends of the table, the situation is not that different. Manama, the cheapest city in the Middle East for international schooling, has a median price of under US\$7,000. Doha, the second most expensive city, has a median of just over US\$10,000.

	Min	Max
UAE	2,317	26,019
Doha	1,312	20,784
Kuwait City	1,250	18,231
Abu Dhabi	2,532	20,420
Muscat	1,195	21,427
Riyadh	1,792	24,853
Manama	1,002	12,995

(Figures in US \$)

'What this tells us is that although it may not be as affordable as other regions of the world, such as Africa, the cost of international education in the Middle East is at least largely consistent throughout the region,' stated the research.

Globally, New York City is the most costly place for international schools, followed by Beijing, Shanghai, San Francisco Bay Area, Zurich, Shenzhen, London, Lausanne - Vaud, Geneva and Guangzhou making the top ten.

The four most expensive countries for international education - USA, China, Switzerland and UK - are all known for having some of the best international schools in the world.

COVID-19 UPDATE

42 NEW CASES
Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday announced 42 new infections within a 24-hour period. With this, the total number of COVID-19 cases registered in the country goes to 304,938. No deaths were reported in the last 24 hours. 'The total number of COVID-19 related deaths reported in the country stands at 4,113,' an MoH statement said.

'There were no new hospitalisations in the last 24 hours. The total number of COVID-19 patients currently in health institutions is eight, including two in intensive care units.'

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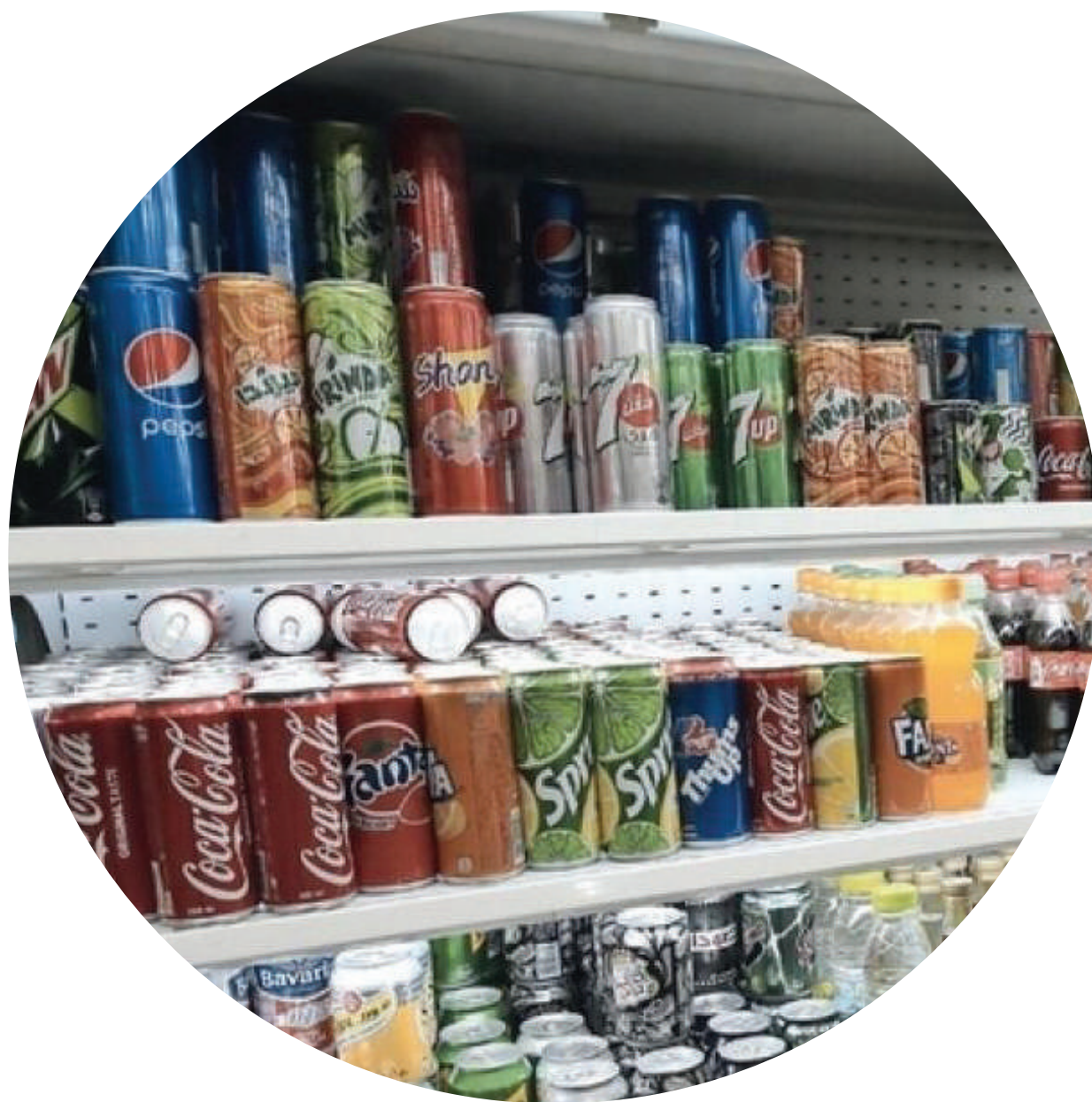
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Tourism sector urged to follow COVID-19 measures

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has called on all tourism establishments to adhere to precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

A statement issued by MoHT said, 'The ministry recently observed negligence of some hotel and tourism establishments in abiding by the precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.'

'The ministry urges all tourism facilities to follow the decisions issued by the competent authorities regarding the prevention of the spread of COVID-19.'

According to the statement, tourism establishments - including hotels, restaurants and meeting halls - will continue to accommodate 50 per cent of total capacity. Additionally, these facilities must adhere to preventive measures such as wearing face masks and maintaining social distancing to ensure the safety of society and to avoid legal action, including closure of the establishment.

The instructions were issued to strike a balance between safety for workers and guests.

323 organ transplantation surgeries conducted so far

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To commemorate Omani Organ Donation Day, observed on December 19, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has announced that 323 organ transplant procedures have so far been performed in the sultanate.

Regulating human organ and tissue transplantation is complex and difficult, and is considered one of the biggest challenges faced by the health system.

A statement issued by The Royal Hospital said, 'The total number of organ transplants carried out within the national organ transplantation programme is 323, of which 310 were kidney transplants and 13 liver transplants.'

MoH recently announced a decision to set up the National Centre for Organ Transplantation.

H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, informed that organ transplantation in Oman started in 1988 with kidney transplants, "but it is unfortunate that development in this field was very slow for several reasons. In 2017, we started liver transplants. The outbreak of the pandemic forced



Organ transplantation in Oman started in 1988 with kidney transplants, but it is unfortunate that development in this field was very slow for several reasons

H E DR AHMED AL SA'EEDI

us to stop that programme. However, now it has resumed at The Royal Hospital."

There are more than 2,260 patients on dialysis in the sultanate, who often visit dialysis centres in the morning and then leave for work, H E Dr Sa'eedi noted. "These patients face psy-

chological and physical suffering. The sultanate is equipped to perform organ transplantations, especially kidney transplants. We must now begin to do more organ transplantations, including liver, bone marrow and cornea."

In March 2021, H E Dr Sa'eedi issued a ministerial decision to

develop a national programme to regulate human organ and tissue donation. The decision aimed to establish guidelines in the field of transplantation of human organs and tissues.

The National Programme for Regulating Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues is also proposing priority standards for performing human organ and tissue transplantation, control mechanisms and inspection of medical practices in this area, besides developing a plan to enhance community awareness about the significance of tissue donation and encouraging organ donation.

OCEC wins award for environmental sustainability

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) has been awarded the title of 'Local Winning Institution' in HSBC Bank's Living Business Programme held in the Middle East.

OCEC received the award in recognition of its efforts to support environmental sustainability and spreading awareness on it.

Elaborating of the award, Said bin Salim al Shanfari, CEO of OCEC, informed that 71 institutions participated in the competition.

"We affirm our commitment to maintaining a sustainable environment by spreading awareness of the importance of protecting it. Every year, the centre's environment team works to implement various programmes to support environmental sustainability and reduce energy consumption," Shanfari said.

OCEC has launched several initiatives for environmental sustainability, including one to reduce water consumption for watering its gardens where indigenous plants are grown.

In 2022, OCEC will announce plans to implement renewable



We affirm our commitment to maintaining a sustainable environment by spreading awareness of the importance of protecting it

SAID AL SHANFARI

energy solutions with the aim of reducing the use of energy generated by hydrocarbons.



Royal Oman Police

Directorate of Public Relations

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Royal Oman Police, represented by the General Administration of Customs, announces the international updates on some codes issued in 2022, and they will be implemented starting from January 1, 2022. Therefore, we draw the attention of the commercial community to the fact that the validity of the current import and export permits that are affected by these updates will remain valid only until December 31, 2021.

For more inquiries, please contact the customs call center number: 24349000.

RAO CELEBRATES GRADUATION OF CADET OFFICERS



The Royal Army of Oman (RAO) celebrated the passing out of a batch of cadet officers as well as the first batch of female cadet officers from Sultan Qaboos Military College on Wednesday. The ceremony, in the Parade Ground at Al Murtafaa Garrison, was held under the auspices of Sheikh al Fadhi Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary General of the Council of Ministers (ONA)



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ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on/ Before 08:00 am Wednesday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
MOH/HQ-200/2021	Supply of Laboratory Items		19/January/2022		
MOH/HQ-201/2021	Replacement of Water Purification System in the Dialysis Unit at Haima Hospital in Al Wusta Governorate			Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-202/2021	Replacement of Air Handling Unit at Khoula Hospital in Muscat Governorate	30/December/2021	26/January/2022		
MOH/HQ-203/2021	Refurbishment of Sewage Treatment Plant at Ibri Hospital in Al Dhahirah Governorate				

- Tenders should be submitted on line on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> enclose **Electronic Bank Guarantee** issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.
- For any Clarification, you may contact via Telephone: 24402200, Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

250 housing units completed in Dhofar



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Construction of 250 housing units has been completed at a cost of more than RO7mn in the wilayat of Mazyona, Dhofar governorate.

A statement issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning said the housing project is spread over 645,000sqm and includes public utilities and integrated services. The project

aims to provide adequate housing for citizens.

According to an official, the ministry has already constructed 590 housing units, seven mosques and a council building in Mazyona within the Aid and Housing Loan Programme.

In 2021, the ministry has handed over 553 housing units, including 81 in the wilayat of Saham, 96 in Shinas, 68 in Suwaiq, 29 in Khabourah and three in Sohar in North

Batinah governorate.

The ministry has also handed over seven housing units in the wilayat of Mussanah and one in Barka in South Batinah governorate, and 45 units in the wilayat of Jalan Bani Bu Hassan in North Sharqiyah governorate.

The ministry has built 15,000 housing units to support citizens with limited income and social security families at a total cost of more than RO340mn since 1973 to 2020.

First Oman-made 3D printer launched

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The first Oman-made 3D printer and its production line was launched in an inauguration ceremony on Wednesday, under the patronage of H E Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi, Undersecretary for Research and Innovation in the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), in the presence of a number of senior officials, directors and managers.

The first Oman-made 3D printer was launched through a strategic cooperation between the 3D Factory company and Makers Oman Centre at the Innovation Park Muscat of MoHERI.

It is a high-quality, accurate and ultra-quiet printer that keeps pace with rapid advances in object manufacturing and prototyping technologies as well as



This launch came about to keep pace with the growth witnessed in the field of 3D printing around the world and meeting the scientific needs of those interested

MOOSA AL AMRI

converting ideas into masses of tangible products. It is hoped that the 3D printer will contribute to support the national economy as well as enter the local and global markets.

Moosa al Amri, CEO of 3D Factory, said, "This launch came about to keep pace with the growth witnessed in the field of 3D printing around the world in

general and the sultanate specifically, and meet the scientific needs of those interested - including manufacturers, students and researchers - in the production of prototypes or commercial manufacturing."

He stressed that the printer is characterised by an ability of resume printing in the event of a power loss or a sudden power

outage, besides its ability to print with most modeling and engineering materials with shortened time and effort, in addition to the availability of a high-definition touch screen that contributes to making the experience easy for all groups with one click of a button.

He also explained that a team of programmers in the company

is currently working on making Arabic the main language for the printer, with the possibility of changing the language.

3D Factory was established in 2017 and includes nine young Omanis working full-time, with high academic qualifications and various technical skills, including mechanical engineering, space science engineering, mechatronics and robotics, as well as finance, accounting and human resources.

It is a company specialised in 3D printing and its technologies, production and mass manufacturing, and the creator of the largest printer farm in the sultanate.

Makers Oman Centre covers an area of approximately 1,200sqm, and includes the latest devices, equipment and interactive work techniques, which are supervised by specialised engineers who are Omani youth.



MAFWR to set up water resources centre in Amerat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has announced a plan to establish an Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources Centre in Muscat to support farmers and livestock breeders.

Abdul Hamid Saleh al Darmaki, Director of Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in the Governorate of Muscat, said, "The ministry will establish the Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources Centre in the wilayat of Amerat soon. This new centre will be the third after the establishment of the Seeb and Quriyat centres recently."

Talking about the water resources sector, he said, "MAFWR is currently implementing two protection dam projects, one of them in Mawaleh area in the wilayat of Seeb and the second in the

wilayat of Amerat. The two dams will support the water security system in the sultanate."

One hundred and sixty-nine dams have been registered in Oman till 2020, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). These include 115 surface storage dams, 51 underground recharge dams, and three protection dams.

According to NCSI, average rainfall in the sultanate increased by 9.2 per cent in 2020, recording a precipitation of 103mm compared to 94.3mm in 2019.

MAFWR also established 14 rainwater harvesting stations to enhance precipitation and increase the level of underground water. The ministry said it is working to enhance the underground water table and preserve water resources from waste and depletion.

MAFWR also announced on Wednesday that it will open a fish market in the wilayat of Quriyat soon.

Deals worth RO1mn inked for services in Dakhliyah



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sheikh Hilal bin Said bin Hamdan al Hajri, Governor of Dakhliyah, signed several agreements worth more than RO1mn with a number of representatives from the private sector to implement various services and development projects.

The agreements aim to develop and improve municipal

services in all the wilayats of Dakhliyah governorate.

The agreements included the design and construction of internal roads in the wilayat of Adam, the implementation of public parking lots in Nizwa Central Market and municipal slaughterhouses in the wilayats of Nizwa and Manah.

Agreements were also signed for the establishment of air-conditioned parking shades in the

wilayats of Nizwa, Manah and Adam, and a vegetable and fruit market in Qal'at al Awamer in the wilayat of Izki, in addition to annual maintenance services projects for the wilayats of Izki, Samail, Bidbid, Nizwa and Adam.

Agreements will also provide for and transfer irrigation water to Izki Park, Manah Park, Dakhliyah Municipality building and the public street in the wilayat of Adam.

CONDOLENCES



The Board of Directors, Management and Staff of Khimji Ramdas would like to express their deepest condolences on the sad demise of

Gulabsi Ratansi Khimji
of Al Tasnim & Al Turki Group

May the Almighty bless his soul and may he rest in eternal peace.

MARKET WATCH

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*Rates as on December 22
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS
Qatar Airways launches legal challenge against Airbus
Qatar Airways said it had launched legal proceedings against Airbus in the High Court in London, following a dispute with the aircraft manufacturer over degradation of the exterior fuselage surfaces. The issue has led the airline, one of the Gulf region's 'big three' carriers, to ground some of its A350 planes and not accept further deliveries of the wide-body aircraft from the European firm until the problem is resolved.
'We have sadly failed in all our attempts to reach a constructive solution with Airbus in relation to the accelerated surface degradation condition adversely impacting the Airbus A350 aircraft,' Qatar Airways said in a statement as reported by AFP. The airline added it 'has therefore been left with no alternative but to seek a rapid resolution of this dispute via the courts'.
Airbus has argued the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has confirmed its findings that the paint-related issue had 'no airworthiness impact on the A350 fleet'.

Oman signs agreements with TotalEnergies for gas projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals has signed three agreements with TotalEnergies for the development of low-carbon natural gas projects in the sultanate, the French energy giant announced on Tuesday.
The first agreement is for the establishment of Marsa LNG, an integrated joint venture company between TotalEnergies (80 per cent stake) and OQ (20 per cent stake).
Marsa LNG will produce natural gas from Oman's Block 10, with a view to subsequently develop a low-carbon LNG plant in Sohar, powered by solar electricity, for the production of LNG for bunker fuel, TotalEnergies said in a statement.
The second agreement is a



concession agreement for Block 10, to develop and produce natural gas from this block, the company said.
Marsa LNG will hold a 33.19 per cent interest in Block 10, together with its partners OQ and Shell Integrated Gas Oman BV (operator). TotalEnergies said its production from Block 10 is expected to reach approximately 24,000 barrels of oil equivalent

per day in 2023.
The third agreement between the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and TotalEnergies is a gas sales agreement, under which Marsa LNG will sell natural gas from Block 10 to the government of Oman, for a duration of 18 years or until the start-up of Marsa LNG plant.
'We are pleased to sign these agreements with the Sultanate of

Oman and further develop our activities in the country while contributing to develop its energy sector in a more sustainable manner,' said Laurent Vivier, senior vice president - Middle East and North Africa, exploration and production, at TotalEnergies.
The Ministry of Energy and Minerals on Tuesday also reached an agreement with Shell

for the company to produce natural gas from Block 10. The ministry signed the concession agreement with Shell Integrated Gas Oman BV, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, and its partners OQ and Marsa LNG, to develop and produce natural gas from Block 10 of the Saih Rawl gas field. The concession agreement establishes Shell as the operator of Block 10, holding a 53.45 per cent working interest, with OQ and Marsa LNG holding 13.36 per cent and 33.19 per cent, respectively.
In Oman, TotalEnergies' production was 39,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day in 2020. The company produces oil in Block 6 (with 4 per cent interest), as well as LNG through its participation in the Oman LNG/Qalhat LNG liquefaction complex with an overall capacity of 10.5mn

tonnes per year.
In 2020, TotalEnergies also signed an exploration and production sharing agreement for Block 12 with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals. TotalEnergies is operator of Block 12 covering 10,000 sqkm with a 80 per cent share alongside its partner PTTEP of Thailand (20 per cent interest).
TotalEnergies is the world's second largest privately owned LNG player, with a global portfolio of nearly 50mn tonnes per annum by 2025 and a global market share of around 10 per cent. The company benefits from strong and diversified positions throughout the LNG value chain: gas production and liquefaction, LNG transportation and trading, and contribution to the development of the LNG industry for maritime transport.

OPAZ board of directors amends fee structure for services

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To attract more local and foreign investments into Oman's special economic zones and freezones, the board of directors of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has amended the fees for the provided services.
The OPAZ board of directors on Wednesday held its fourth meeting for the year 2021. The meeting was headed by H E Dr



Ali bin Masoud bin Ali al Sunaidi, chairman of OPAZ, according to a press statement.

In a bid to attract more investments, the OPAZ board approved a proposal intended to

amend the fee structure for the different services provided by OPAZ. The proposal included

merging and cancelling some fees, in addition to reviewing the delay penalties.
During the meeting, the board of directors of OPAZ also discussed the digital portal for the services provided to investors in the special economic zones and free zones.
The digital portal has been established in line with the digital transformation plan of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones. This portal is aimed to facilitate the li-

censing processes through the special economic zones and free zones supervised by OPAZ.
The board of directors also reviewed the executive status of the usufruct agreements in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) and the legal actions taken by OPAZ against the non-compliant companies during the past years.
Furthermore, the board of directors also approved the fees of the usufruct for one of the green hydrogen projects in Duqm.

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Port of Salalah breaks previous years' record in container volumes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Port of Salalah in 2021 has managed to break its previous years' record with a record-breaking container handling volume of 4.37mn TEUs (twenty-foot-equivalent units) with two weeks to go for the year-end closure.
While the global supply chain continues to battle with reliability issues and port congestions, the container carriers are finding it challenging to adhere to their port schedules which also puts pressure on port operations.
It is despite these challenges that the Port of Salalah managed to reach this record.
In a statement, Mark Hardiman, CEO of Port of Salalah said, 'I am happy that we have managed to reach our targets despite the challenging environment and our capacity constraints, an achievement that's entirely attributable to the support of our customers and the outstanding work done by our team.'
'The level of dedication that is



We have managed to reach our volumes targets despite the challenging environment and our capacity constraints

MARK HARDIMAN

displayed together with a continuous improvement mindset is also helping us aim higher and add value to those we serve.'
Port of Salalah also highlighted the collaboration of various government agencies like the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, ROP Customs, Coast Guard and Asyad Group.
The port continues to actively contribute to Oman's Vision 2040 and objectives and sup-

port Oman's economic diversification strategy.
Strategically located on the trade crossroads between Asia and Europe, and serving the markets of East Africa, the Red Sea, the Indian Subcontinent and the Arabian Gulf, the Port of Salalah is operated by APM Terminals as part of the APM Terminals global terminal network.
The port operates both a container terminal and a general cargo terminal.

GOOD FOR YOU!

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Members of the public, some wearing face coverings to help combat the spread of COVID-19, cross a road on Oxford Street in London on Tuesday (AFP)

UK economic recovery slowed before Omicron

London, UK - Britain's economic recovery from pandemic fallout slowed more sharply than previously thought in the third quarter even before the arrival of the Omicron variant, official data showed on Wednesday.

Gross domestic product grew 1.1 per cent in the July-September period as the economy reopened, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

That compared with the prior estimate of 1.3 per cent, and followed a downwardly-revised 5.4 per cent growth in the second quarter as global supply disruptions hurt businesses.

Economists predict the slowdown will extend into the fourth quarter due to recent curbs aimed at tackling the spread of the Omicron coronavirus strain that emerged in November, while surging inflation and a Bank of England interest rate hike is also set to weigh.

Nevertheless, the ONS added on Wednesday that the economy was closer to its pre-pandemic level in the third quarter as a result of an upgrade to last year's data.

Gross domestic product (GDP) shrank by 9.4 per cent in 2020 on fallout from the COVID-19 emergency health crisis.

That was up from the prior figure of a 9.7 per cent contraction.

"Our revised figures show UK GDP recovered a little slower in the third quarter, with much weaker performances from health and hairdressers across the quarter, and the energy sector contracting more in September than we previously estimated," said ONS official Darren Morgan.

"However, stronger data for 2020 means the economy was closer to pre-pandemic levels in the third quarter."

He also noted that households saved less cash as the economy reopened, but saving was still up on pre-pandemic levels.

The economy is meanwhile forecast to take a major hit from new coronavirus restrictions imposed earlier this month in reaction to rampant COVID-19 infection rates.

"The downward revision to GDP in the third quarter means the economy had a little less momentum going into the closing months of the year than we previously thought," noted economist Bethany Beckett at Capital Economics.

"And given early signs that the huge surge in COVID-19 infections has weighed on activity so far in December, growth looks to have slowed in the fourth quarter."

AFP

Sony, Zee finalise India merger

Mumbai, India - Sony's India unit finalised merger plans with local broadcasting giant Zee Entertainment on Wednesday in a deal that may yet be blocked by fierce opposition from a disgruntled US investor.

Analysts say the arrangement could create the country's second-biggest entertainment network, rivalling market leaders Disney.

The proposal gives Zee's founding family 4 per cent of the new entity but keeps them in management control, with chief executive officer and managing director Punit Goenka to continue at the helm.

"The combined company will create a comprehensive entertainment business, enabling us to serve our consumers with wider content choices across platforms," he said in a statement.

But Goenka's tenure has been opposed by Zee's largest share-



holder Invesco, which in September demanded his ouster for 'repeated governance failures and underperformance'.

Zee and the US investment company have since faced off in court over Invesco's pursuit of an

extraordinary general meeting and board overhaul.

Sony's deal would also allow Goenka's family to raise its stake in the combined entity to 20 per cent in the future - a clause shareholders led by Invesco are

likely to oppose.

A successful merger would nonetheless be a 'win-win proposition' that would expand the reach of both companies in India, Elara Capital media analyst Karan Taurani told AFP.

"Sony has a strong sports offering and an urban entertainment offering, which Zee does not have, and Zee is very strong in the regional and rural segments," he added.

India, home to 1.3bn people, has an entertainment market worth US\$24bn, according to accounting giant EY.

If approved by regulators and shareholders, the deal is expected to be completed by the end of March 2022 and the new company will be publicly listed in India.

Sony Pictures Networks India will hold a majority 50.86 per cent stake under the proposed merger.

AFP

Sri Lanka inflation hits record high

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's inflation hit a record 11.1 per cent in November, official figures showed on Wednesday, as authorities warned a worsening economic crisis could prompt further food rationing.

The island's tourism-dependent economy was hammered by the pandemic and the government imposed a broad import ban to shore up foreign exchange reserves, triggering shortages of essential goods.

Supermarkets have for months been rationing milk powder, sugar, lentils and other

essentials as commercial banks ran out of dollars to pay for imports.

On Wednesday official data showed prices soaring at their fastest rate since the National Consumer Price Index (NCPI) was launched in 2015, with food prices up 17 per cent from a year ago.

Authorities may have to impose further food rations and seek foreign aid to help feed the most needy, agriculture ministry secretary Udith Jayasinghe told reporters. "We may have to borrow grains such as corn

from friendly countries and think of rationing food so that mothers and the sick can be fed," he said. "Others may have to make sacrifices."

But within hours Jayasinghe was replaced by another official, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's office announced, without saying why he was sacked.

Food shortages have been worsened by the government's ban on agrochemical imports, which was lifted last month after widespread crop failures and intense farmer protests.

Sri Lanka had foreign reserves of just US\$1.58bn at the end of November, down from US\$7.5bn when Rajapaksa took office in 2019.

The central bank has appealed for foreign currency - even loose change that people may have after returning from overseas trips. Earlier this week ratings agency Fitch downgraded Sri Lanka due to mounting fears of a sovereign default on its US\$26bn foreign debt. The government insisted it can meet its obligations.

AFP

CONDOLENCES



The **Ramesh Khimji Group of Companies** deeply mourn the sad demise of our beloved, **Gulabsi Ratansi Khimji**

We offer our sincere condolences to the bereaved family and may God give them strength to bear this great loss.

May his Soul Rest in Peace



www.rameshkhimjigroup.com



Sohar Port and Freezone successfully conducts emergency response exercise

Sohar Port and Freezone (SOHAR) in coordination with the Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) conducted its annual emergency response field exercise. Held in collaboration with Safety Region Rotterdam, the Port’s strategic partner for safety management, and SOHAR’s health, safety, security and environment (HSSE), the teams simulated a life-like emergency scenario at the Hutchison Ports terminal.

Emergency response teams from companies in the Port including OQ, Vale, SIUCI, OMC and Jindal Shadeed participated to ensure that they know how to respond quickly and effectively to any crisis or incident and are able to work together using the mutual aid system.

The various scenarios comprised of a fire combined with a release of hazardous materials. Both were successfully handled by the specialised teams and in fact demonstrated a high level of readiness.

Mark Geilenkirchen, CEO of



Sohar Port, said, “Several of the tenants within Sohar Port and Freezone provide their own

emergency response fire and ambulance team to manage crisis and incidents. By engaging

them with all along with PACDA in regular training exercises, we know that the same comprehen-

sive protocols are followed throughout the site.” He added, “We are confident

knowing that the teams have been trained, understand the science behind our actions, have

the skills to prevent injury and damage to assets in addition to protect the environment.”

“The guidance received and lessons learnt during these exercises allows us to update our safety protocols in accordance with best international HSSE practices and prepare teams to respond when called upon.”

Continuing to prioritise and promote a culture of safe and socially responsible business practices, Sohar Port and Freezone’s Emergency Response strategy outlines procedures that are designed to provide the immediate prepared response for multiple scenarios.

Having made giant strides in ensuring a safe working climate, the port continues to employ innovative, world-class solutions to resolve complex challenges and manage incidents in a time critical manner, factoring in the port’s potential risk profile, foreseeing its occurrence and responding effectively to mitigate all risks to persons and property.

Bank Muscat’s QR Code makes accepting e-payments easy

In line with the directives of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to promote financial inclusion and digital payments across the sultanate by ensuring e-payment options at businesses in Oman, Bank Muscat has urged all its customers to use its e-channels for their various banking transactions. As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate and in line with its vision ‘To serve you better, everyday’, the bank has been continuously expanding the number of e-payment options available to its customers including debit, prepaid and credit cards, wearables, Mobile Wallet and the Mobile Banking app.

Amjad Iqbal al Lawati, assistant general manager - Cards and eBanking, Bank Muscat, said, “Bank Muscat aims to serve its tech-savvy customers in the best possible manner and is encouraged by the rapid shift to digital and contactless payments. Using the e-payment option improves financial inclusion and offers new, convenient and highly secure e-payment options for the benefit of our valued customers. We are happy to welcome all merchants to use our world-class e-payment options to accept payments from their customers securely in real time. We are sure that this will greatly benefit the sultanate in achieving the landmark goals of Oman Vision 2040.”

The bank had earlier upgraded its BM Wallet and mBanking app in 2019 to make it easy for customers to transfer money to or request funds from others using the Central Bank of Oman’s Mobile Payment Clearing and Switching System (MPCSS). Funds can be transferred instantaneously using one of the following modes. For person to person transfers, money can be sent or collected from



Amjad Iqbal al Lawati

the recipient’s default account or wallet. ‘Send money’ can be initiated by using mobile number, Alias or by QR code scanning and ‘collect money’ can be initiated using recipient Alias/Mobile Number if both the sender and recipient are registered on MPCSS. Bank Muscat customers have the facility to register on the MPCSS via both its BM Wallet and the mBanking app. Funds can be transferred instantly and at zero cost to both Bank Muscat and non-Bank Muscat accounts or wallets by using their MPCSS -registered mobile number/alias/QR code. There is no need to enter an account number. Beneficiaries can be instead selected from one’s phone contact list to initiate a payment.

It is important to note that the QR code scanning option is a very helpful option for the bank’s merchant partners, especially small businesses, in accepting e-payments from their customers quickly and securely. The security of transactions is enhanced by ensuring that payments are directly credited into the business’ account in real time without the need to handle physical cash and the inconvenience of maintaining change for customers. Payments can be easily initiated from a customer’s Mobile Banking or BM Wallet to the merchant’s account by scanning a QR code. A merchant can also request money from a customer using Mobile Payments System registered mobile number / Alias / QR code.

Mazoon Electricity focuses on unsafe connections

To raise awareness on the need to practice electrical safety to prevent mishaps, Mazoon Electricity, the leading electricity provider in Oman, has launched a campaign to educate citizens and residents about the dangers of unsafe connections.

The campaign also aims to educate individuals on appropriate electrical safety practices while dealing with electricity equipment such as streetlights and electricity poles. As part of the safety campaign Mazoon



Electricity is conducting awareness campaigns through social media, videos and workshops.

Mazoon Electricity accords high importance to electrical safety putting strict standards and practices in place. The company sees it as their responsibility to educate people about the risks that come from neglecting electricity assets like streetlights and electricity poles. Mazoon Electricity also urges everyone to report damaged infrastructure or unsafe connection if they see

one. Asking everyone to not underestimate the risk of unsafe and illegal electricity connection, Mazoon Electricity has stressed the need to work together to ensure safety. The company provides help to install temporary electricity connections through its call center.

The company keeps electrical safety as top priority to assist in continuing its goal of guaranteeing zero harm to members of the community, employees and contractors.

Irresistible EMIs on MG Motor cars that now come with ten years unlimited kilometre warranty

MG Motor Oman presents irresistible offers on its incredible range of cars. With starting EMIs as low as RO61, you can now own your favourite MG Motor with complete peace of mind as MG Motor cars and SUVs come with ten years unlimited kilometre warranty. This is Oman’s first-ever and highest warranty offered in the mass market automotive brands.

A senior spokesperson of MHD ACERE, the sole distributor of MG Motor in Oman, said, “MG Motor vehicles are renowned the world over for their quality and reliability. Owning one of these exceptional models brings with it a level of assurance that you are investing in a vehicle that is durable, sturdy and high-performance. That assurance is further strengthened with MG’s extended ten years warranty on cars and SUVs and the 24/7 responsive customer service. With reasonable EMIs, this is certainly the best time to own an MG and experience its Do More thrill.”

MG5

Adventure, lively and capable - the MG 5 is one of the most exciting sedans around. Whether for work or for pleasure, you can be confident that the vehicle is always looking to do more to excite, with the three trim levels - STD, COM, and DEL - providing all the requirements you could possibly need. Available with a charismatic exterior, comfortable interior, 5-star safety features and an EMI of RO61 only, MG 5 is too good to be true.

MG GT

Embracing MG’s latest design ethos, the all-new 2022 MG GT provides fresh looks and a fighter-jet inspired cabin. With an EMI of RO75 only, you can enjoy the thrilling experience offered by this born rebel. This model is the first from MG to offer the new 1.4 SGE direct injection petrol engine in addition to the 1.5 NSE. MG GT is also the first MG to offer EPS steering and



MG6

With sporty styling, head-turning aesthetics, a turbo-charged engine and an unbelievable EMI of RO83, MG 6 is a model that wants you to experience more. This car is a smart and adventurous sedan that comes in three trim levels and is powered by a 1.5L turbo-charged engine that guarantees lively, energetic and dynamic performance for your various adventures.

MG ZST

A popular crossover in the region, the MG ZST is an energetic vehicle that can fill your motoring life with a Do More spirit, a joie de vivre and plenty of adventures. A contemporary design and punchy drive characterise the MG ZST which, though designed and built with British heritage in mind, offers more equipment than ever, with an upgraded engine, additional styling features and the very latest in technology. The MG ZST can be yours with a starting EMI of RO74 only.

MG RX5

Versatile, capable, sporty and fun, the ultimate SUV from MG Motor - the MG RX5 - can be

seven speed dual-clutch TST transmissions. In Oman, it is available in 1.5L and 1.5 Turbo versions.

MG HS

The dynamic MG HS is a smart and practical SUV that exudes charm and capability, letting you experience life like never before. With an EMI of RO106, the MG HS can be your reliable automotive partner. Embracing the design concept of X-Motion and exuding a real drive to do more, this stylish option will prove reliable and fun to drive, with some of the finest technology providing a fully engaging motoring experience.

easily yours with a starting EMI of RO83 only. It has been developed to offer everything the inquisitive and adventurous motorist demands - driving safety, engaging technology, and responsive performance. It also provides a passion for performance to match your own. With the MG RX5, every journey is an event to remember.

MG RX8

A seven-seat perfectionist, the MG RX8 is a bold and capable SUV which provides dynamic performance on and off-road. With an EMI of RO125 only, you can embrace the ultimate driving experience of MG RX8. This model provides dynamic performance, embracing the do more spirit of adventure of MG. It does so while you can sit back in comfort.

MG T60:

A durable vehicle for your demanding schedules, the MG T60 is available with a starting EMI of RO94 only. Hard workers need a versatile partner, and there is no light pickup better suited to a challenging schedule than the MG T60. This is a model that enables you to do more with two engine options and 4x2 and 4x4 configurations.



National Museum holds art workshop on the occasion of Armed Forces Day

The National Museum, represented by the Learning Centre and in cooperation with the Royal Navy of Oman at the headquarters of the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum, organised an artistic workshop entitled 'Naritime Glories of Oman' on Tuesday, coinciding with the celebration of the Armed Forces Day, which falls on December 11 of each year.

The workshop was presented by Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Rajaibi, education specialist (Outreach Programme) at the National Museum and in the presence of a number of school students in the wilayat of Matrah.

The students excelled in creating and painting the *Shabab Oman* ship, which has always played a prominent

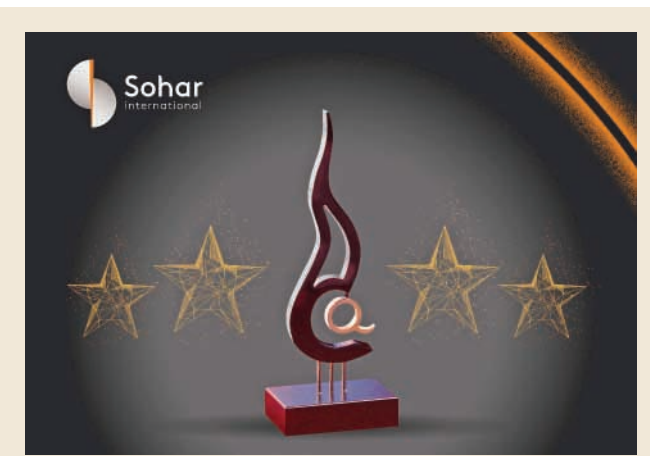
role in spreading the message of peace and strengthening friendship between the countries of the world, in addition to creating and painting weapons belonging to the Royal Air Force of Oman and the Royal Army of Oman.

The workshop came as part of the activities accompanying the inauguration of the exhibition 'The Biography of a Leader and

his Glorious Reign' at the headquarters of the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum in Beit al-Falaj, which tells the glorified historical biography of the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimour, under the patronage of His Excellency Jamal bin Hassan al-Moosawi, Secretary General of the National Museum.

It is worth noting that the National Museum is the first mu-

seum in the Sultanate that includes a learning center, equipped according to the highest international standards, and offers various educational programs aimed at raising public awareness about the importance of the Omani cultural heritage, thus creating more interest among all categories of visitors in the ancient history of Oman.



Sohar International wins ESQR's Quality Achievements Award

A premium bank that has been committed to offering unparalleled products and services to customers, Sohar International recently won the Quality Achievements Award 2021 which is run by the European Society for Quality Research (ESQR).

This award recognises the bank's outstanding commitment, support and efforts to endorse and improve achievements in quality management.

The Quality Achievements Awards 2021 presentation ceremony took place recently at Dusit Thani, Dubai.

Mazin Mahmood al Raisi, executive vice president and head of marketing at Sohar International, received the

award on behalf of the bank.

Commenting on this achievement, Ahmed al Musalmi, chief executive officer of Sohar International said, "This award attests to Sohar International's unflinching dedication towards upholding the highest levels of business excellence, operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. While product innovation, customised services and a keen focus on digitalisation have been a vital part of our continued success, our excellent team of professionals has always ensured that every initiative, strategy and campaign has been executed keeping in mind all quality parameters."

Khedmah offers Awasr, Omantel broadband subscriptions

Attesting to its vision of meeting clients' needs and exceeding their expectations, Oman Investment and Finance Company, Khedmah, constantly seeks to expand its wide portfolio of services to target all segments of the community. The popular app strives to offer a plethora of unique and seamless solutions, that also include broadband sub-



scriptions from Awasr and Omantel.

Along with Khedmah's wide array of solutions, customers can now apply for Omantel or Awasr broadband subscription through a selected number of branches across the sultanate including but not limited to MBD, Amerat, Barka, Mawaleh, Nakhal, Al Awabi, Jebel Akhdar,

Sohar, Abri and many more. Consumers can also subscribe to Awasr Internet through Khedmah app and avail themselves plenty of other services at the same time.

Through Khedmah branches and electronic platforms, customers can easily pay their electricity, water and telephone bills, recharge their phone, and also

pay their electricity prepaid meter bills. In addition, customers can make payments to the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI) and recharge entertainment subscriptions.

Khedmah recently added a new service in the field of collecting vehicle insurance premiums. Through the direct integration between Khedmah and the sys-

tems of Dhofar Insurance Company, customers of Dhofar insurance can now pay the insurance premiums for renewal of their vehicle insurance through the app and website. Customers can also now benefit from a gamut of Oman Post & ASYAD Express services outside their working hours through a selected number of Khedmah branches.

Majan University College holds graduation ceremony of 25th batch



Majan University College, with 26 successful years in higher education to its credit, recently graduated its 25th batch of graduates. This year over 880 graduates of the 2019-2020 academic year were conferred their awards. The ceremony, held over a span of two days with two ceremonies each day, was conducted in strict compliance with COVID-19 measures.

The ceremony was held in the state-of-the-art auditorium in Al-Maha Building, Majan's newest edifice.

The procession of Majan's academic staff, beautifully clad in their academic gowns, saw the start of the occasion closely followed by the recitation of the Q'uran by the Dean and CEO of Majan University College, Dr Maha Kobeil.

Dr Maha delivered her welcome address by first appreciating the vision of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, and looking to the future under the new leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

She felicitated the graduands and applauded their steadfastness and courage in facing head on the challenges of the preceding year when their studies were plagued with the COVID-19 pandemic. She urged them to remain resilient, adaptable and open to learning and most importantly embrace change. She also appreciated the relentless efforts and sacrifices made by parents and families in supporting their wards.

Acknowledgements and appreciation were also rendered for

the support of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and Majan's main academic partner institution, the University of Bedfordshire, UK.

Similarly, via video telecast, Professor Rebecca Bunting, Vice Chancellor and CEO of the University of Bedfordshire, UK commended the graduands for their zeal, hardwork and dedication in spite of all odds. She called on them to be bold, ambitious for themselves as well as to be changemakers, making positive contributions to the nation. She also called on them to extend gratitude to their families and to the excellent support staff at Majan.

Furthermore, to the Dean and staff of Majan, Dr Bunting expressed her great respect and trust in the Majan team, referring

to the decades old partnership as still striving with new projects for collaboration and growth.

The graduation speech in Arabic was read eloquently by Naama Yaqoob al Qarni, reminiscing of students' times in Majan.

The English Speech on the other hand was rendered by Abdulsalam Mabrook al Rashdi.

A memorandum of understanding was signed by Majan in 2020 with the University of Bradford, UK for academic collaboration, research, curriculum development and staff exchange towards an executive Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programme.

For the elated Graduates, the just concluded ceremonies were filled with joy, laughter and lots of selfies.

HEARTFELT CONDOLENCES

We deeply mourn the sudden and sad demise of



GULABSI RATANSI KHIMJI

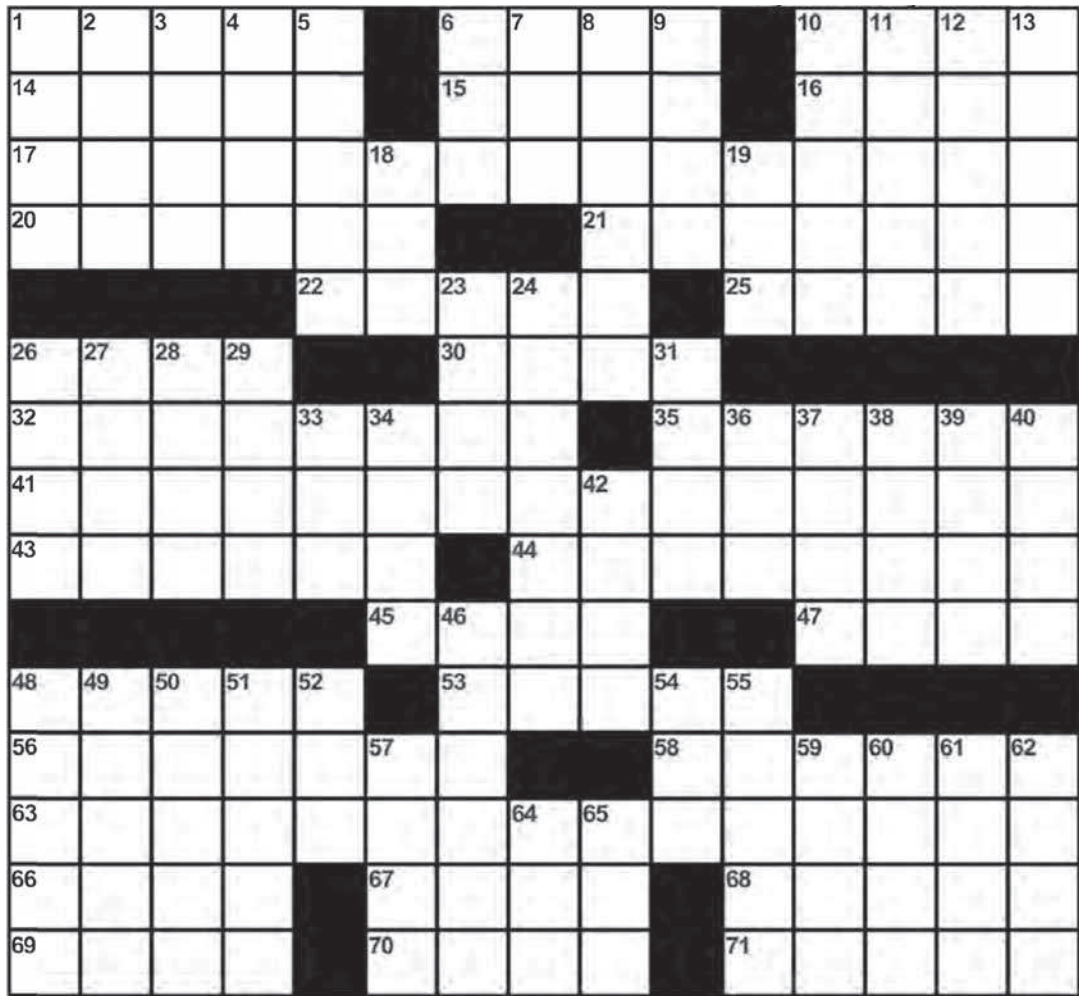
on 22 December 2021

"We pray and ask The Almighty to give his family the strength to bear this great loss."

May his soul rest in peace

بنك برودا
Bank of Baroda
India's international Bank

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Open a pill bottle
 - 6) Peke squeaks
 - 10) Celebratory poems
 - 14) La_ University (Philadelphia school)
 - 15) Unglazed pot with a wide mouth
 - 16) “_ Las Vegas” (Presley film)
 - 17) What “helps the medicine go down,” in song
 - 20) Take off the books
 - 21) Obscuring, in a way
 - 22) “Filthy” dough
 - 25) Uptight
 - 26) Cannabis product
 - 30) Oregano, e.g.
 - 32) Walled off
 - 35) _Lorraine (region of France)
 - 41) Shortened weapon
 - 43) Waterfall phenomenon
 - 44) Received a varsity award
 - 45) Surgery aftermath
 - 4 7) Type of media
 - 48) One in deep thought
- 53) Government operative
 - 56) Remove, as a bracelet
 - 58) Win, at an auction
 - 63) Nondrinking period
 - 66) A little over 2 pounds
 - 67) Unstable subatomic particle
 - 68) Ball charmer
 - 69) No longer hidden
 - 70) “Can I get you anything?”
 - 71) Hurdles for graduate students

DOWN

 - 1) Superpower no more
 - 2) Neck section
 - 3) Horse hooves sound
 - 4) Moisturizer ingredient
 - 5) Colony type
 - 6) Not me or them
 - 7) Sick
 - 8) Sandpiper relative
 - 9) Umpire’s scream, sometimes
 - 10) Developing egg
 - 11) Cook’s exhortation
 - 12) The “Good Times” family
 - 13) Nickname for a noncom
 - 18) Winter malady
 - 19) Take a seat
 - 23) Culinary guru
 - 24) It signals danger
 - 26) Sound like a snake
 - 27) Hairy twin in the Bible
 - 28) Freshly cut, as a lawn
 - 29) Academy freshman
 - 31) Bangkok buck
 - 33) “And now, without further_ ... “
 - 34) AAA offerings
 - 36) Auctioneer’s batch
 - 37) Part of a flower
 - 38) City in India
 - 39) Billiard sticks
 - 40) Make-meet connector
 - 42) Dried up
 - 46) Bottle top capacity
 - 48) Some cologne scents
 - 49) Get the knots out
 - 50) It might go from 1 to 10
 - 51) “Rocket Man” singer John
 - 52) “Norma_” (1979 movie)
 - 54) San Francisco hill
- 55) Prefix with “jet” or “prop”

57) Unnamed quantity

59) Stadium seating level

60) Famed gymnastics coach Karolyi

61) “_just have to do”

62) Changes color

64) This puzzle’s theme

65)_two punch
- NOTE PAD**
-

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You can easily keep from embarrassing yourself by watching what you say a little more carefully. It’s weird how many blowups can be averted with a just little forethought. If everything goes south anyway, try a three-second rule when it comes to communication. Count slowly to three before you say everything that’s zipping through that brain of yours toward your eager mouth. It’s not as hard as it seems.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

One of your partnerships (work, school, or home) could hit a rough spot. While it might feel as though the two of you have reached an impasse, this can actually be a very positive experience for both of you. Get ready to learn things about this person that will surprise and confuse you! If you can just keep the communication open and honest, you two will be much stronger and happier after this experience.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It might seem unnecessarily complicated, really, but now is a great time to keep quiet. Shutting your mouth isn’t exactly normal for you. After all, no one loves aimless chitchat quite like you do! But if you resist the impulse to overshare, you might just avoid catastrophe. Be sure to parcel out the information sparsely so you don’t see the situation slip away from you. Remember that silence is golden!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

It’s incredibly tempting to simply go for it and lay down a ton of rules on what you want in a partner, but try flipping that around and thinking about what you can accept. Go for the positive instead of looking for the worst right away. If you’re already with someone, apply this point of view to all that they do for you rather than what you think they’re doing wrong.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

It might be time to move on in some way. Your conscience may be urging you on, but you’re probably dead set on ignoring it. If you keep screaming no on the inside, the universe might have to take drastic action to remind you to listen to your intuition. There is a much better option, though. Try dealing with your problems as soon as you see them, and then everything should resolve in the best way possible.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

If you feel as if you’ve wandered into a maze, that’s no big surprise considering the mess of crazy and mixed signals you have to deal with. Rebuff these overcomplicated forces by making sure you’re well informed, direct, and unfailingly polite, even to those who are simply adding to the chaos. You’re an irresistible force when you set out to make solid plans. Everyone wants to be on your team for good reason!

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

When it comes to your financial health, you can’t leave anything to chance right now. As unenjoyable as it may seem, you need to do some research so you can make a decision that you won’t regret. And if you’re sensitive about being called a cheapskate, you need to get over that. The people who toss around those terms are the same people who are in debt, so what do they know? Being thrifter will help you increase your cash flow.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Serious business is absolutely the last thing you want to deal with now, but someone close brings up important issues that require immediate attention. Go ahead and have some fun, but let them know you’ve heard their concern and that you’re going to take care of it just as soon as you get a chance. If you can, try to persuade them to join you in your mischief. It should lighten the mood.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Self-respect is always important, but right now it’s imperative! You need to be adamantly on your own side, especially when you think back to earlier days and see the times when you failed to stand up for yourself. Embrace who you are inside and celebrate your uniqueness. Not only should this boost your self-esteem, but you might be amazed by how much more respect you have for those around you.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you’re dealing with personal or relationship issues, don’t fret. Change is coming. It doesn’t come about without some serious effort, though, so be sure you’re ready to sweat. Your energy demands a good, long look at your unconscious patterns that keep repeating or emotional baggage you’ve been trying to get rid of for too long. Deal with all the bits and pieces of your past if you want a future of your own making.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

It’s more important than ever for you to balance your goals with the goals of other people. You’ve been doing an admirable job of putting your needs behind those of the people you love, but don’t get too carried away. You are responsible for improving your own life too. Going out of your way for the benefit of someone else could also be sending the wrong message about who you are and how much respect you deserve.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You can usually make deeply rigorous intellectual arguments, but today some emotional issue might leave your brain feeling just too worn out to work. Still, it’s vital that you get your heart and your mind working together, particularly when it comes to assessing someone’s character. It’s not worth giving in to the stress because you think you need to leave out one of these important factors when you evaluate personal relationships.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 1. The news agency Reuters belongs to which of the following country?**

 - a. Palestine
 - b. Yugoslavia
 - c. Vietnam
 - d. UK
- 2. The sacred place of the followers of Shintoism is**

 - a. Central shrine of Ise (Central of Japan)
 - b. Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo
 - c. Both are correct
 - d. None of the above
- 3. The smallest state of India is**

 - a. Rajasthan
 - b. Sikkim
 - c. Himachal Pradesh
 - d. Goa

Answers: 1. d 2. c 3. d

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

L	H	I	R
L	O	T	F
L	H	R	L
G	E	I	I

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

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

WORD BUILDER

O

A

R

B

E

D

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

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

'My children are cold': Brutal winter hits Syria

Winter is harsh in northwest Syria, home to more than 3mn people, nearly half of them displaced

Kafr Arouk, Syria - Umm Raghad's children don't have proper clothes or a furnace at home to stay warm during Syria's bitter winter so they burn scraps of garbage to keep the biting cold at bay.

"Every morning I wake up and find that my children aren't near me," Umm Raghad told AFP from a displacement camp in the northwestern province of Idlib.

"They go out early to collect scraps of plastic from the streets, such as bags and shoe soles," the mother-of-three said, her face half-covered by a thick black scarf.

Winter usually spells tragedy for northwest Syria, home to more than three million people, nearly half of whom have been displaced by a decade-long war that has killed nearly half a million. In makeshift camps in the country's last major rebel enclave, streets turn muddy, tents leak and inhabitants die of hypothermia or in fires caused by unsafe heating methods.

Widowed by war, Umm Raghad moved to the Kafr Arouk camp three years ago to escape fighting in other parts of Idlib province.

The harsh winter is unbearable for her family, which doesn't have enough money for even the most basic of necessities, she said. "I can't afford to buy a furnace or to feed my children," Umm Raghad said.

"My children are cold. They don't have proper clothes."

'Survival'

Snowfall and sub-zero temperatures are not unusual in northwestern Syria.

Aid agencies often help insulate tents and provide blankets and clothes, but donor funding is struggling to keep up with growing demand.

According to the UN's refugee agency UNHCR, US\$182 mn are required to finance growing needs in winter assistance across Syria this year but only half of the amount has been secured.

In the Kafr Arouk camp, a rudimentary furnace set up in Umm Raed's tarpaulin tent attracts dozens of people looking



Children from the Syrian family of Abou Hussein, who fled the Hama province four years prior, warm up around a bonfire at a make-shift camp in Idlib (AFP)



Raghad and brother Hassan search for and collect trash to be burnt for warmth at a camp for the displaced in Kafr Uruq in Syria's northwestern rebel-held province of Idlib (AFP)

to keep warm.

Last year, a group of people donated the heater to Umm Raed, whose eight children include three with special needs.

The 45-year-old can't afford coal or wood, so she makes do with scraps collected by Umm Raghad's children and other neighbours who forage for hours

across the camp's sludgy grounds. "Our neighbours all gather here in my tent to stay warm," she told AFP. "It gets crowded with around 15 people crammed in one tent, where they eat and drink and sit."

Last month, Doctors Without Borders, or MSF, which provides support to dozens of camps in

Syria's northwest, warned that unsafe heating methods are putting people at higher risk of contracting respiratory diseases and complications related to smoke inhalation.

"Respiratory illnesses are consistently one of the top three illnesses reported in our facilities in the northwest," it said.



A girl carries another child outside their tent in a camp in Idlib (AFP)

'A lot of smoke'

Umm Mohammad, displaced nine years ago from the northern city of Aleppo, is among the people risking their lungs to stay warm. Inside her tent in an Idlib camp, the mother of three burned twigs and paper to feed a small furnace emitting white fumes.

"The smell is strong and there is a lot of smoke," she said.

"Yesterday, my chest started hurting and I wanted to go to see a doctor but I couldn't afford it."

Nearby, Abu Hussein looked on as a group of children surrounded an outdoor fire fed by nylon bags and scraps of wood.

"When we light a fire inside, where it's crowded and smoky and there are a lot of children, it is leading to suffocation," the 40-year-old father of ten told AFP.

Abu Hussein, who fled the countryside of Hama province four years ago, said he can barely buy firewood, let alone medicine for respiratory diseases.

"The cheapest prescription drugs cost around 50 to 60 Turkish liras (US\$3.80-US\$4.60) but... I don't have work or access to aid," he said.

On top of that, his tent is leaking, causing rain to drip on his children when they are asleep, he said. "Sometimes, we stay up all night... putting up plastic bags so rain doesn't fall on their heads."

AFP

Syria war kills 3,700 in 2021, lowest toll

Beirut, Lebanon - The conflict in Syria killed 3,746 people in 2021, a monitor said on Wednesday, significantly fewer than in 2020, which had already seen the decade-old war's lowest death toll. According to figures compiled by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 1,505 of them were civilians and among those 360 were children.

The figure is by far the lowest tally since the start of the war in Syria and confirms a downward trend that saw 6,800 people killed last year and just over 10,000 in 2019.

The Observatory, an NGO based in the UK but with a network of sources in all regions of Syria, said 297 people were killed in 2021 by landmines and various explosive remnants.

The Landmine Monitor said in November that Syria had overtaken Afghanistan as the country with the highest number of recorded casualties from landmines and explosive remnants of war. The fighting, which erupted in 2011 after the brutal repression of anti-government protests, has abated over the past two years.

Russian-backed government forces still sporadically strike targets in the northwestern rebel enclave of Idlib but a ceasefire deal has largely held.

Fighters from the Islamic State group who went underground after their 'caliphate' was crushed in 2019 have also carried out deadly hit-and-run attacks in eastern Syria.

AFP

UN agency cuts food aid to Yemen for want of funds

Sanaa, Yemen - The World Food Programme said on Wednesday it was 'forced' to cut aid to Yemen due to lack of funds, and warned of a surge in hunger in the war-torn country.

"From January, eight million will receive a reduced food ration, while five million at immediate risk of slipping into famine conditions will remain on a full ration," the United Nations agency said in a statement, adding that it was 'running out of funds'.

Yemen has been devastated by a civil war between the Saudi-backed government and Iran-backed Huthi rebels since 2014, and millions of civilians are on the brink of famine.

The fighting has killed tens of thousands, displaced millions and left some 80 per cent of Yemenis dependent on aid.

"Every time we reduce the amount of food, we know that more people who are already hungry and food insecure will join the ranks of the millions who are starving," said WFP Middle East and North Africa director Corinne Fleischer, according to the statement.

"But desperate times call for desperate measures and we have to stretch our limited resources and prioritise, focusing on people who are in the most



This file photo shows Yemeni children receiving the aid being provided by the World Food Programme, in Sanaa on June 1 this year (AFP)

critical state."

WFP said that it needs US\$3.85bn to continue to help the most vulnerable in Yemen through May and US\$1.97bn during 2022 to continue to deliver food assistance to families on the brink of famine.

Food running 'dangerously low'

The UN warned in March of a 'death sentence' against Yemen after a donor conference yielded less than half the funds needed to prevent famine.

It had appealed for US\$3.85bn to pay for urgently needed aid, but just US\$1.7bn was offered at a virtual pledging conference co-hosted by Sweden and Switzerland.

Shrinking humanitarian budgets last year forced the closure of many programmes, including health services and food distribution, heaping hardship on a country the UN has said is already witnessing the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

According to the latest UN figures, more than 16mn Yemenis, about half the approximately 30mn population, will face hunger this year. Nearly 50,000 are already starving to death in famine-like conditions.

The WFP's announcement on Wednesday comes as UN aid flights into Yemen's rebel-held capital Sanaa have been halted following air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition.

AFP

Halk Ekmek: Turks queue up for bread

Istanbul, Turkey - Under a heavy winter sky, the grimly silent queue of people stretches around the corner from Bayram Duman's kiosk, which offers discount bread for Istanbulites hurt by Turkey's economic malaise.

Turkey's cultural and historic capital has been offering cheaper bread for the poor at *Halk Ekmek* (People's Bread) shops since the 1978.

But with prices soaring on everyday items as Turkey battles one of its gravest economic crises in decades, Duman says the queues are especially long this year.

"The prices have risen significantly at the bakeries. People keep coming," the 50-year-old says.

The queues are a worrying sight for Turkey's veteran President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is trying to fight inflation by slashing interest rates.

As economists had predicted, Erdogan's solution is not working out.

Countries usually raise borrowing rates to slow spending and bring down prices - a policy mix the Turkish leader, a pious Muslim, rejects citing Islamic laws against usury.

According to official data, which many Turks are starting to question, prices last month rose by 21 per cent compared to No-



Residents queue up to buy bread at the Istanbul Municipality's cheap bread shop in Sultangazi district (AFP)

vember 2020.

Economists expect this figure to nearly double by early next year because of a sharp depreciation of the lira, which makes imports much more expensive.

But the higher prices are already on display in Turkish stores, where basics such as sunflower oil, eggs and butter cost roughly double what they did a year ago.

'Dirty game'

Pro-government media accuse the city, which is run by opposition mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, of politicising the bread queues ahead of an election due by mid-2023.

One newspaper claimed

Imamoglu was playing a 'dirty game' by shutting down many of the discount bread shops, making the queues longer at existing ones.

The city counters that it is actually making more loaves of discount bread than ever before, additionally selling them in some supermarkets.

Yet the kiosk queues are also long in other big cities, including the capital Ankara.

After waiting in patient silence under the rain for about 10 minutes, most of Duman's customers leave with four or five loaves of bread in clear plastic bags.

Hiding under hoods and umbrellas, few wish to speak to re-

porters about what brought them out the cold streets in search of Turkey's cheapest bread.

The loaves sell for 1.25 liras (10 US cents), about half the prices of most regular bread.

The savings might seem meagre - about 25 cents for five loaves - but they add up in a country where more than 40 per cent of the people are making the official minimum wage.

Facing the prospects of the toughest election of his 19-year rule, Erdogan last week raised the minimum monthly take-home pay from 2,826 to 4,253 liras - about US\$340 at current exchange rates.

AFP

‘We have nothing left’: Philippine typhoon survivors plead for help

Loboc, Philippines - Concepcion Tumanda picks through the mud-caked wreckage of her home on a Philippine island devastated by Typhoon Rai that left hundreds dead across the country and survivors pleading for food and water.

Rai slammed into the popular tourist destination of Bohol last Thursday, dumping torrential rain, ripping off roofs, uprooting trees and smashing fishing boats.

“The house was destroyed, everything was broken,” Tumanda told AFP, weeping as she stood in the ruins of her home in the riverside town of Loboc.

“We have nothing left.”

Bohol - known for its dive spots, rolling ‘Chocolate Hills’ and tiny tarsier primates - was one of the hardest hit islands after Rai flooded villages and sent residents scrambling to their rooftops.

At least 98 people lost their lives, Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook. Another 16 were still missing.

Yap has pleaded for President Rodrigo Duterte to send funds to buy food and water for desperate residents after electricity and communications were knocked out across the island.

“We need food, especially rice, and water,” said Giselle Toledo, whose house was swept away by floodwaters.

“We were not able to save anything. We don’t know where to start our lives again.”

Rai also caused widespread destruction on Siargao, Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which bore the brunt of the storm, packing winds of 195km per hour.



Residents receive relief goods distributed by government workers at a village in Calape town, Bohol province on Wednesday (AFP)

We need food, especially rice and water. We were not able to save anything. We don’t know where to start our lives again

GISELLE TOLEDO

Duterte declared a state of calamity in the typhoon-hit areas, where at least 375 people were killed, freeing up funds for relief efforts and giving local officials power to control prices.

The military has deployed ships, boats, aircraft and trucks to deliver food, drinking water and medicine to survivors.

The Red Cross is also distributing aid, and a growing list of foreign governments have

pledged millions of dollars in financial assistance.

But local officials and residents complain it is not arriving fast enough.

“Please speed up the relief, it’s our only hope because we have nothing else,” said a worker on a floating restaurant on the Loboc river that was destroyed in the storm.

Lines of people waiting to refill empty water drums have formed

along roadsides of Bohol, while large crowds of motorbike riders queue up at petrol pumps.

“Water is our main problem,” said Jocelyn Escuerdo, who is living with her family at an evacuation centre after they were left homeless.

“The containers provided by relief agencies are not very big, just five litres, so we run out of water all the time,” she said, adding they have ‘just enough’ food for a day.

While many people fled their homes before the storm hit, some stayed behind to look after precious livestock like chickens

and pigs, as well as to protect their properties.

Some of them were cut off by flooding and went hungry for three days, said village chief Pedro Acuna - until he paddled a boat to deliver them food.

Nearly a week after the typhoon hit, residents are still trying to salvage furniture and other belongings from their destroyed homes. Elderly resident Telesfora Toledo said she did not know how to start again, with ‘so many things that need to be fixed’.

“It was so painful looking at what was left of the house,” Tumanda said, digging out plates and other kitchen items that survived the onslaught.

AFP



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at his office in Jerusalem (AFP)

Sullivan meets Israel PM to discuss Iran issue

Jerusalem - The US national security advisor held talks on Wednesday with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who warned that negotiations in Vienna on Iran’s nuclear programme had ‘profound ramifications’ for Israeli security.

Bennett’s government has remained firmly opposed to ongoing international efforts to revive a 2015 accord that saw Iran agree to curbs on its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief.

Jake Sullivan, national security advisor to US President Joe Biden, said his visit to Israel had come at ‘a critical juncture’.

“It’s important that we sit together and develop a common strategy, a common outlook, and find a way forward that fundamentally secures your country’s interests and mine,” Sullivan said, according to an Israeli government statement.

He did not directly mention Iran but the Israeli statement said the meeting focused on the Vienna talks.

Bennett has called to halt the negotiations, accusing Iran of ‘nuclear blackmail’ and charging that revenue it gained from sanctions relief would be used to acquire weapons to harm Israelis.

Lead US Iran negotiator Rob Malley told CNN on Tuesday that there are only ‘some weeks’ left to revive the deal if Tehran continues its nuclear activities at the current pace.

Negotiations to restore the pact known as the Joint Collective Plan of Action resumed in November.

Washington was a party to the original agreement, but

It is important that we sit together and develop a common strategy, a common outlook and find a way forward that fundamentally secures interests of your country and mine

JAKE SULLIVAN

withdrew under president Donald Trump in 2018.

The Biden administration has warned it may soon be too late to revive the JCPOA.

“It really depends on the pace of their nuclear process,” said Malley, the US special envoy for Iran.

“If they halt the nuclear advances, we have more time.

“If they continue at their current pace, we have some weeks left but not much more than that, at which point the conclusion will be there’s no deal to be revived,” he said.

Iran says it wants to have a civil nuclear programme.

Sullivan is also scheduled to meet Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The Palestinians cut off ties with the Trump administration, accusing it of pro-Israeli bias. The US official said the Biden administration had already ‘redeveloped’ ties with the Palestinian Authority.

“We are looking to strengthen them,” the official said.

AFP

One dead, many missing after landslide at jade mine

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar rescuers scoured a lake for dozens of people missing after a landslide near a jade mine killed at least one person on Wednesday, authorities told AFP.

Scores die each year working in the country’s lucrative but poorly regulated jade trade, which sees low-paid migrant workers scrape out gems highly coveted in neighbouring China.

The disaster struck at a mine in the country’s northern Hpakant township close to the Chinese border, where billions of dollars of the precious mineral are believed to be scraped from bare hillsides each year.

Rescuers initially said at least 70 were missing after the landslide that struck around 4am, but



Rescuers take part in a search for missing people on Wednesday (AFP)

later added only 20 were unaccounted for.

The search would continue until 5pm local time, Ko Jack from Myanmar Rescue Organi-

zation told AFP.

“We’ve sent 25 injured people to hospital while we’ve found one dead,” said Ko Nyl, a rescuer.

Hundreds of diggers had re-

turned to Hpakant during the rainy season to prospect in the open-cast mines, according to a local activist, despite a junta ban on digging until March 2022.

“They mine at night and in the morning they tip out the earth and rock,” the activist said.

Ko Nyl of the rescue team also said increased pressure from the weight of dumped soil and rock had pushed the ground downhill into the lake.

Around 200 rescuers were working to recover bodies, with some using boats to search for the dead in a nearby lake, he added.

Pictures posted by Myanmar’s fire services showed dozens of people lined up along the lakeshore and rescuers carrying an unidentified object up from the water.

The fire services, who said personnel from Hpakant and the nearby town of Lone Khin were involved in the rescue, could not be reached for comment.

Access to the mines in the remote north of the country is heavily restricted by the military and internet access is patchy.

Local outlet Kachin News Group said more than 20 miners had been killed in the landslide.

Jade and other abundant natural resources in northern Myanmar including timber, gold and amber have helped finance both sides of a decades-long civil war between ethnic Kachin insurgents and the military.

AFP

Visitors return to Afghan national museum Taliban once ransacked

Kabul, Afghanistan - Afghanistan’s national museum is once again welcoming visitors and exhibiting pre-Islamic artefacts with the Taliban’s blessing - a stark contrast to when the hardliners ransacked and shuttered the facility during their last stint in power.

A trickle of citizens made their way around the sprawling exhibit rooms in Kabul when AFP recently visited, marvelling at treasures ranging from painted Stone Age pottery to ancient coins and religious items.

“It’s inborn in humans that they attach value to their history,” said Rahmatullah (65) after intently examining a collection of 2,000-year-old swords.

“I wanted to know more about the history of my country. It has a special place in my heart.”

The museum reopened in late



This recent file photo shows visitors looking at artefacts at the National Museum of Afghanistan, in Kabul (AFP)

November with permission from the Taliban’s new ministry of information and culture, around three months after the Islamists

retook power and ended their two-decade insurgency.

Some artefacts on open display are fundamentally at odds

with the Taliban’s radical ideology, including pottery collections featuring images of animals and humans.

During their first 1996-2001 rule, Taliban fighters destroyed items including statues at the museum, while tens of thousands of items were looted and never recovered.

But Taliban fighters now guard the museum and its treasures from potential attack by Islamic State insurgents.

According to chief curator Ainuddin Sadaqat, there has been no attempt to restrict what is on display.

Only ‘15 to 20 per cent of exhibits are of Islamic heritage’, the 35-year-old told AFP.

“We also have visitors from the Taliban,” who sometimes come to tour the museum in large numbers, the chief curator Sadaqat said.

The reopening comes as the hardlines try to present a more moderate image while seeking to

unlock billions of dollars in international aid suspended since the fall of the western-backed government and for sanctions to be lifted.

‘Felt hopeful’

The museum also boasts a collection of 18th- and 19th-century jewellery.

“I came here to see the jewellery - what it looked like in the past; the necklaces, earrings,” said Zohal (24), who only gave her first name.

“I wanted to see the difference between the jewellery of the past and what jewellery we have now,” said this Afghan woman, who works for the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Visitor numbers are well below the hundreds who used to visit daily under the previous regime - a time when numbers

were swollen by coachloads of children.

“For the moment, the cultural policy of the Taliban towards artefacts does seem very positive and realistic,” said Philippe Marquis, who formerly headed the French archaeological delegation in Afghanistan.

Future policy ‘will probably depend on the reaction of the international community’ to Taliban pleas to restore suspended aid, he added, with the risk that withholding such assistance will result in backsliding in culture and other policy areas.

Another key cultural institution, the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, remains closed. Its director Ahmad Naser Sar-mast fled the country along with hundreds of staff, students and their families.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Chinese city locks down 13mn residents

With Winter Olympics in February, Beijing is on high alert in fighting local outbreaks

Beijing, China - Over 13mn people were ordered to stay home in the Chinese city of Xi'an, which imposed a strict lockdown on Wednesday and dramatically tightened travel controls to fight a growing COVID-19 outbreak.

With Beijing preparing to host the 2022 Winter Olympics in February, China is on high alert as it fights local outbreaks in several cities.

The new restrictions were imposed after Xi'an reported 52 new coronavirus cases on Wednesday, bringing the total to 143 since December 9.

From midnight on Thursday, all households may only 'send one household member outside once every two days to purchase necessities', with all others ordered to remain indoors except for emergencies, the city government said in a statement.

Residents 'should not leave the city unless necessary', the government said, adding that those seeking to leave would have to provide evidence of 'special circumstances' and apply for approval.

The orders came a day after the city in northern China began testing all of its 13mn residents.

Long-distance bus stations were closed and authorities have set up disease control checkpoints on highways out of



People lining up to be tested for COVID-19 in Xi'an, in China's northern Shaanxi province on Tuesday (AFP)

Xi'an, government notices said.

More than 85 per cent of flights to and from the city's main airport have been grounded, according to flight tracker Variflight.

Inside the city, passenger capacity has been slashed on public transport and schools closed.

All 'non-essential' businesses and public facilities aside from supermarkets, convenience

stores and medical institutions have been ordered to close, while the local government has urged employers to allow people to work from home, CCTV had reported.

Large-scale meetings including activities in outdoor parks have been suspended, while the museum housing the world-famous Terracotta Army - the 2,000-year-old mausoleum of

China's first emperor - has shut until further notice.

Zero COVID strategy

China - where the coronavirus was first detected - has slowed new cases to a trickle since the middle of last year through a zero-COVID strategy involving tight border restrictions, targeted lockdowns and lengthy quarantines.

Even a single case can lead to a swift imposition of curbs.

The southern city of Dongying on Tuesday ordered its 200,000 residents to isolate at home after detecting infection.

The country has stepped up its already-strict zero-tolerance COVID policy as it braces for the arrival of thousands of international athletes at the Olympics a month away, with the capital Beijing demanding negative COVID-19 tests from visitors and limiting flights from other cities.

COVID-19 is not the only scourge to hit Xi'an in recent weeks, with the city also logging several cases of potentially deadly haemorrhagic fever since the beginning of winter.

Local authorities have urged calm about the rodent-borne disease, saying it is common across northern China and easily preventable by vaccination.

AFP

Daily cases in France to exceed 100,000

Paris, France - The number of daily COVID-19 cases in France is set to exceed 100,000 by the end of December due to the faster-spreading Omicron variant, Health Minister Olivier Veran said on Wednesday.

"This is what the modelling is showing," he told BFM-TV in an interview, also announcing that France would from Wednesday open vaccinations to five- to 11-year-olds for the first time.

France recorded almost 73,000 new infections on Tuesday, with an average of over 54,000 over the last seven days. But officials fear that the emergence of Omicron has changed the nature of the pandemic.

Veran said that Omicron cases accounted for 20 per cent of new infections in France but up to 35 per cent in the Paris region.

He said the variant may account for the majority of new cases between Christmas and the New Year.

"There is one certainty. Omicron is very contagious, it will spread, and no country will be spared," said Veran.

AFP

Israelis over 60, medical teams to get 4th jab to curb Omicron: PM

Jerusalem - Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said on Tuesday Israelis over the age of 60 and medical teams will be eligible for a fourth COVID-19 vaccination, following the recommendation of an expert panel.

The decision came as the state was struggling to contain the spread of the Omicron variant, imposing travel and other restrictions while avoiding a domestic lockdown.

"I gave an order to prepare immediately for a fourth vaccination," Bennett said on Twitter, with a spokesperson saying Israel would be the world's first country to administer the fourth shot. "The world will follow in our footsteps."

Earlier, Bennett had called the country's Pandemic Expert Committee's recommendation to administer a fourth coronavirus vaccination to Israelis over 60 and medical teams 'wonderful news'.

"(It) will assist us in getting through the Omicron wave that



Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said the recommendation to administer a fourth jab to Israelis over 60 and medical teams 'wonderful news'

is engulfing the world," he said.

"The citizens of Israel were the first in the world to receive the third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and we are continuing to pioneer with the fourth dose as well," he said in remarks relayed by his office, calling on those who meet the criteria to 'Go and get vaccinated'.

A Health Ministry statement noted that immunodeficient people will also be eligible for the fourth shot, which can be

administered to them, elderly and the medical teams at least four months after the third shot.

Bennett's remarks came following a meeting of the country's ministerial coronavirus cabinet which convened amid growing concern over the spread of the Omicron variant.

The Cabinet had issued limitations on eating in shopping malls and instructed that children in communities with high morbidity and low vaccination

rates would learn from home.

Earlier on Tuesday, lawmakers banned citizens and residents from US travel, adding it to a list of more than 50 countries declared off-limits in an effort to contain the Omicron coronavirus variant.

A parliamentary committee voted to approve a health ministry recommendation putting the United States on Israel's 'red list', along with Italy, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Hungary, Morocco, Portugal, Switzerland and Turkey, committee spokeswoman Ronit Gal said.

The ban comes into effect on Wednesday and will remain in force for at least a week.

The United Kingdom, France and Spain were among countries already on the red list, as well as the UAE and much of Africa. Adding the US to the red list was a significant move for Bennett's government, as hundreds of thousands of Israelis hold US citizenship.

AFP

UK to buy millions of COVID pills, cuts isolation period

London, UK - The UK government announced on Wednesday it is buying millions of doses of new COVID-19 treatment pills as the Omicron variant takes hold, while cutting the isolation period for positive cases.

The government said it has signed deals to buy 4.25mn courses of two new antiviral drugs: Pfizer's ritonavir and US rival Merck/MSD's molnupiravir, which will be available early next year.

This comes on top of government announcements in October of the procurement of several hundreds of thousands of doses, and was hailed as a 'mammoth deal' by Health Secretary Sajid Javid.

Molnupiravir, sold as Lagevrio, is being used in a national trial run by the University of Oxford that people can join if they have virus symptoms.

The government said it is also being made available to those who are at high risk of severe illness, such as people with



Pfizer states that antiviral drug Paxlovid can reduce hospitalisations and deaths among at-risk people by almost 90 per cent (AFP)

cancer. The UK was the first country in the world to approve the pill in November this year.

Pfizer's pill, marketed as Paxlovid, has yet to be authorised anywhere in the world.

Pfizer said on Tuesday that clinical trials showed it reduced hospital admissions and deaths among at-risk people by almost 90 per cent, when taken a few days after symptoms began.

The government said it will be rolled out in the same way as molnupiravir very quickly if the UK regulator approves it.

The UK has seen a surge in

infections since Omicron became the dominant variant, with 90,629 cases reported on Tuesday. The country is one of the hardest hit in Europe, with a death toll of 147,433.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has resisted calls to impose stricter virus restrictions over Christmas in England, unlike the devolved governments in other UK nations.

From Wednesday, those infected but feel well can come out of self-isolation after seven days instead of ten.

AFP

Dubai Expo sushi restaurant closes after staff catch virus

Dubai, UAE - A restaurant at the Expo 2020 has closed temporarily after ten employees tested positive for coronavirus, and as the UAE on Wednesday recorded its highest number of infections in three months.

The United Arab Emirates, with the world's highest vaccination rates, has seen a surge in cases in recent weeks amid increased fears over the spread of the omicron variant.

Japan's ministry of economy, trade and industry told AFP on Wednesday that ten workers at the Sushiro restaurant linked to the Japanese pavilion had tested positive for COVID-19.

The restaurant was undergoing 'deep-cleaning and sanitisa-



Japan's ministry of economy, trade and industry said ten workers at the Sushiro restaurant linked to the Japanese pavilion in Dubai Expo 2020 had tested positive for COVID-19

The cases were identified as part of the regular testing of the workforce, participants and volunteers

JAPANESE PAVILION

tion' after a number of staff were found to be infected, the Japanese pavilion had said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The cases were identified as part of the regular testing of the Expo workforce, participants and volunteers, the frequency of which has recently increased in response to the ever changing

global health situation," it said.

"The reopening of Sushiro will be announced in due course."

The UAE, which comprises seven emirates including Dubai, on Wednesday recorded 665 coronavirus cases, the highest number of infections since September 11.

Since the pandemic began, the federation has registered more than 745,500 cases, including 2,154 deaths.

Dubai was one of the first destinations to welcome visitors again last July, alongside a robust national vaccination drive.

It has so far fully inoculated more than 93 per cent of eligible people from its population of

nearby 10mn.

The Expo 2020 Dubai said in a statement on Wednesday it was 'doubling down' on its commitment 'to continue hosting an exceptional and safe World Expo'.

Expo has so far recorded more than 7mn visits since opening on October 1, although 'some close contact events, such as parades and roving entertainers, have been temporarily suspended as a short-term precautionary measure'.

The government is counting on the six-month Dubai Expo 2020 global trade fair to attract millions of visitors and boost the economy after it was hit hard by the pandemic.

AFP

Greek journalists 'under a cloud of fear'?

The country fell five spots in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index and now ranks 70th out of 180

Athens, Greece - A reporter's murder, the prime minister publicly scolding a foreign journalist, and alleged state surveillance. It's been a bad year for media rights in Greece.

The southern European country fell five spots in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index compiled by media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and now ranks 70th out of 180 countries, behind Poland and Mongolia. George Pleios, head of media studies at the National University of Athens, says the deterioration over the past year has been alarming.

"Freedom of the press has become a concern," he told AFP.

Pleios said a raft of press freedom violations in recent years have included journalists being detained or intimidated, and police beating photographers during protests. But in April, a prominent crime reporter, 52-year-old Giorgos Karaivaz, was gunned down outside his home in Athens. The government ordered an investigation, but no arrests have been made.

Over the past year, the government has ignored requests for information on key stories and pressured journalists over unfavourable reports, while parliament in November passed a new law to punish misinformation with up to five years in jail.

People can now go to prison over alleged fake news 'capable of causing concern or fear to the public', in a move Athens newspaper journalists' union Esiea has said is too vague and risks restricting free speech.



Passers-by read the front pages of newspapers hanging at a kiosk in Athens, the capital city of Greece (AFP)

Journalists say that, throughout 2021, police and government ministries have routinely ignored their emails seeking answers on the coronavirus pandemic, police abuses and the migration crisis.

'Self-censorship'

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in November became embroiled in a public spat with a Dutch journalist who accused him of 'lying' after Athens denied carrying out illegal pushbacks of migrants at sea.

"You will not come into this building and insult me... or the Greek people with accusations and expressions that are not supported by material facts," he said during a news conference with visiting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. The journalist, Ingeborg Beugel, later said she had received threats, and temporarily left the country.

On November 13, leftist daily Efsyn published what it said were internal intelligence memos gathering information on anti-

vaxxers and activists helping migrants - but also on a journalist later hired by AFP.

In response to AFP letters, Minister of State George Gerapetritis insisted 'there is no surveillance of journalists in Greece'. "Greece fully adheres to the values of democratic society and rule of law, especially pluralism and freedom of the press," he said.

He later added that media independence was 'sacrosanct'. "Whilst we may not always

agree with what the media writes, we will defend... the right of a free press to report unencumbered by and independent of outside interference," he said.

But Greece has not opened an investigation following the alleged Efsyn leaks.

The Efsyn reporter who broke the story, Dimitris Terzis, accused the government and supporting media of 'trying to bury the case'. In February and in December last year, journalists received complaint letters from the

government after reporting on two instances where Mitsotakis had apparently broken lockdown rules. Fabien Perrier, a correspondent for French-language media in Greece, says his editors received a letter from the culture ministry in May over a piece criticising a new concrete walkway at the Acropolis.

He said journalists in Greece were under pressure to 'practice self-censorship'.

Two journalists working with Greek media resigned last year,

accusing the government of attempted censorship, allegations it denied.

'Cloud of fear'

Athens University media professor Lambrini Papadopoulou says Greece has a long history of collusion between Greek media, and the political and financial elites.

"Problematic relations between media and power are nothing new," she said.

"There is little room for critical and independent journalism in Greece." George Tzogopoulos, a research fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy think-tank, says the coverage of the pandemic in some Greek media consists of simply churning out government announcements.

Dozens of outlets closed during the 2010-2018 Greek debt crisis, leaving the survivors desperate for any form of backing.

Early during the pandemic in 2020, the government introduced a scheme to support media with funds as part of a stay-at-home campaign.

But according to opposition parties, the money disproportionately benefitted government-friendly media. A parliamentary inquest into the issue is ongoing.

All in all, RSF says authorities have taken insufficient measures to protect journalists.

The 2010 murder of another journalist, 37-year-old Sokratis Giolias, also remains unresolved.

Pleios, the academic, says such failings leave journalists 'under a cloud of fear'.

AFP

Libya confirms presidential elections 'impossible' on Friday

Tripoli, Libya - Authorities overseeing war-torn Libya's first presidential election have confirmed that holding it on Friday as scheduled is 'impossible' and suggested a month-long delay.

The vote was intended to mark a fresh start for war-torn Libya, a year after a landmark ceasefire and more than a decade after its 2011 revolt that toppled and killed dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

But speculation of a delay had been mounting for weeks, amid bitter disputes over the vote's legal basis, the powers of the winner and the candidacies of several deeply divisive figures.

On Wednesday, the chairman of the parliamentary committee wrote to the assembly's speaker saying that 'after consulting the technical, judicial and security reports, we inform you of the impossibility of holding the



Interim PM Abdulhamid Dbeibah

elections on the date of December 24, 2021'. It did not propose an alternative to Friday, a date set last year during UN-led peace talks in Tunis.

The election, intended to go hand-in-hand with parliamentary polls, was part of a United Nations-led peace process overshadowed by corruption allegations and the resignation of special envoy Jan Kubis just weeks before the elections.

The process was also mired



Local NGO activists protest against possible election postponement, in Tripoli on December 15 (AFP)

by rancorous divisions over whether controversial figures should be allowed to stand.

Seif al Islam Gadhafi, a son of Moammar, and eastern military

chief Khalifa Haftar were both in the running despite accusations of war crimes. Interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah's candidacy also sparked contro-

versy as he had pledged not to run as part of his original leadership bid. "Every single faction in Libya has an issue with one of these three candidates," said

Claudia Gazzini, a Libya expert at the International Crisis Group.

"So they tried to stop these candidates from running using legal means, but failing that there seems to have been an informal agreement between some factions not to let the elections go forward," she told AFP.

'Anxieties high'

Many analysts have warned that violence could easily flare again surrounding the elections.

The political uncertainty has raised tensions on the ground across Libya, controlled by an array of armed groups, including thousands of foreign mercenaries. Gunmen had deployed in the suburbs of Tripoli on Tuesday, using a tank and machine gun-mounted pickup trucks to block roads in the Fornaj district, although tensions eased later.

Amanda Kadlec, a former

member of the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, said that if the elections were officially postponed but another date was set, 'that could minimise tensions and possibly avert some sort of conflict'. But 'if elections are postponed without any kind of path forward, then anxieties will be high'.

"I could totally envision there being a breakout of conflict at local levels that could erupt and cascade into other parts of the country or within each region," she told AFP.

Analysts had suggested that the delay in announcing a postponement was because no side wanted to take responsibility for the election being cancelled.

The country's electoral board the HNEC later on Wednesday suggested delaying the vote to January 24.

AFP

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PREECLAMPSIA

An ongoing battle



The risks of preeclampsia have been known about for centuries but there is still no cure or prevention and a lack of awareness remains a problem



Sarah Kilpatrick, an obstetrician-gynecologist specialising in preeclampsia at Cedars-Sinai hospital in Los Angeles, says educating women is crucial. “The hard part for women is many times they feel fine,” Kilpatrick said, “so you can’t even believe you have something like preeclampsia.”

Camille Abbey was two months away from giving birth to twins when she sensed something wasn’t right. “I felt strange all week. I had swelled enormously. I had a lot of trouble moving,” said the 33-year-old French journalist.

Abbey’s midwife found her blood pressure spiking and sent her to hospital where doctors confirmed she had preeclampsia, a potentially life-threatening complication.

The risks of preeclampsia have been known about for centuries, but there is still no cure or prevention and a lack of awareness remains a problem.

“Although one in every 12 pregnancies are affected by preeclampsia, many pregnant women have never heard of the disease,” Patricia Maguire, director of the Institute for Discovery at University College Dublin, told AFP.

Doctors made a breakthrough ten years ago that allowed them to develop the first diagnostic test, and Maguire is working on a second one, with trials under way in Ireland.

Early diagnosis is lifesaving because the condition sets in without symptoms.

Once they appear, the only way to stop complications like liver and kidney failure, or death, is to deliver the baby - even if it is premature.

A 2021 study showed that hypertensive disorders of pregnancy have increased in the last nearly 30 years, though better screening and population growth may account for the rise.

The study in the BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth journal also said that most deaths occur in low-income settings where doctors say the toll is likely higher than reported.

An estimated 76,000 women and 500,000 babies die every year due to hypertensive pregnancy conditions like preeclampsia and eclampsia, a rare complication, according to a 2015 study in the Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care.

Sarah Kilpatrick, an obstetrician-gynecologist specialising in preeclampsia at Cedars-Sinai hospital in Los Angeles, says educating women is crucial.

“The hard part for women is many times they feel fine,” Kilpatrick told AFP, “so you can’t even believe you have something like preeclampsia.”

Like ‘lightning’

Emmanuelle Honore survived eclampsia - named after the Greek word for lightning - which can develop if preeclampsia goes undetected and lead to potentially fatal seizures.

Her decision to walk herself to hospital after monitoring her own blood pressure saved her life.

“They didn’t wait for the blood test results to come back to decide to do an emergency cesarean,” said the Paris-based archaeologist, 37.

Immediately after giving birth, she began to convulse.

“It was a question of minutes. The baby and I were incredibly lucky,” she told AFP. “During the seizure I felt myself leaving my own body.”

Today, her son is healthy and turns three in February.

But the eclampsia has left Honore psychologically scarred and unable to give birth again.

“For me, there is a before and an after - it’s two different lives.”

‘Dream of reaching everyone’

The world’s first diagnostic test, developed by kidney specialists Ananth Karumanchi and Ravi Thadhani by linking the levels of two proteins to the disorder’s onset, has been available in Europe for a decade.

It is in clinical trials in the United States, where preeclampsia disproportionately affects Black women due to a higher prevalence of risk factors like diabetes, obesity and stress, the American Heart Association says.

“(The trials) include the diversity of women in the United States



Although one in every 12 pregnancies are affected by preeclampsia, many pregnant women have never heard of the disease

Patricia Maguire

and by the end of this year we will be able to determine whether the diagnostics have just as much benefit and specificity as in Europe,” Thadhani told AFP.

The test developed by Maguire not only detects preeclampsia with a blood sample, it uses artificial intelligence to provide a time-frame for safe delivery, allowing as much time as possible for the foetus to develop.

An article published in May said the test had the potential to be streamlined so that kits could be sent to hospitals with easy-to-collect samples analysed using online information.

“The big dream is to reach every person who needs this test across the world,” Maguire said.

Lifelong consequences

Even after labour, preeclampsia sufferers are not necessarily out of danger.

Kilpatrick said about one in ten women whose preeclampsia was their first time with high blood pressure need to stay on anti-hypertensive medication after giving birth.

When her twins were born in October 2020, Abbey thought her ordeal was over but her blood pressure failed to go back to normal.

She was later diagnosed with the dangerous preeclampsia-related condition HELLP (Hemolysis, Elevated Liver enzymes and Low Platelets) syndrome, which affects some 15 percent of women with severe preeclampsia.

While her premature babies received state-of-the-art care, Abbey said she stayed in a post-op recovery room for days where doctors could do little more than monitor her vital signs and try to control her blood pressure.

Vassilis Tsatsaris, an obstetrician-gynecologist at Paris’ Port Royal hospital, said research on finding treatments for preeclampsia and other complications has been impeded by the risks for the unborn baby.

“We live in an era where therapeutic innovations for cancer, vaccines or gene therapy are advancing very, very quickly,” he told AFP.

“Unfortunately when it comes to pregnancy, things move much more slowly.”

AFP

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

COVID-19 fear grips Aston Villa: Gerrard

London, UK - Aston Villa manager Steven Gerrard said fear of COVID-19 is so heightened that one of his players was reluctant to get out of his car.

An outbreak at Villa saw their match against Burnley last Saturday postponed at short notice, with Gerrard warning on Wednesday that it will be a 'nightmare' if the Midlands club have to tackle two matches in two days with just 14 players available.

"We had a situation at the weekend where one of the players was reluctant to get out of his car because he had some symptoms and he's got a young family, and you can totally understand his view in his situation," Gerrard said.

"This is a guy who's got a young family, it is Christmas time, and that's the situation everyone is in."

The former Liverpool and England midfielder added, "No-one wants to get this virus. Everyone wants to protect their own families. This is our job and your priority is always going to be your family, of course it is."

"Thankfully he was tested after and he didn't have a situation, but that player would not have been available for me on the day, and these are the little



We had a situation at the weekend where one of the players was reluctant to get out of his car

STEVEN GERRARD

situations that people don't see," the team manager said.

"We've got a major responsibility to listen to the players and deal with every situation as it comes your way."

The Premier League announced on Monday its intention to continue with scheduled matches over the traditionally

busy Christmas and New Year period, despite more than 90 confirmed coronavirus cases among players and staff in the last week.

Last weekend, six of 10 scheduled games in England's Premier League were called because of coronavirus outbreaks.

'Nobody takes welfare seriously'

The Premier League is due to hold 'virtual' meetings with managers and captains on Thursday to hear their concerns but Liverpool skipper Jordan Henderson said officials needed to pay more attention to the welfare of players.

"Football to us is everything and we want to be able to perform at the highest level every time we set foot on the pitch," Henderson told the BBC. "And unfortunately, in this period it is difficult to do that."

The 31-year-old England midfielder added, "That has been like this for a few years now and it has been difficult but then, on top of that, you chuck in COVID and it becomes even harder and even worse."

"I am concerned that nobody really takes player welfare seriously." AFP

Premier League to play on during COVID chaos



Chelsea, who have fallen six points behind leaders Manchester City at the top of the table, asked to have Sunday's match at Wolves called off but their plea was rejected despite seven positive COVID-19 cases

Manchester, UK - Premier League clubs have decided against a temporary halt to the season despite a surge in COVID-19 cases that has forced mass postponements and threatened to derail the season.

Just four of the weekend's scheduled 10 games went ahead as Britain battles record numbers of positive COVID-19 cases due to the new Omicron strain.

The Premier League board has been considering applications for postponements on a

case-by-case basis but there has been criticism over the decision-making process, with fears it jeopardises the sporting integrity of the competition.

There had been talk of a potential 'firebreaker', with suggestions that the middle round of the festive fixtures from December 28-30 could be postponed.

But on Monday the English top flight, following a shareholders' meeting involving representatives from the 20 clubs, said games would continue through the busy festive season.

"It was confirmed at a Premier League club meeting today that while recognising a number of clubs are experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks and challenges, it is the league's collective intention to continue the current fixture schedule where safely possible," the Premier League said in a statement.

"The health and wellbeing of all concerned remains our priority and the League will continue to monitor and reflect public health guidance, always proceeding with caution."

The statement also said 84 per cent of players had had at least one dose of vaccination.

"The league continues to work with clubs to encourage vaccination among players and club staff, as well as promoting the Government's public-health vaccination messaging to clubs and the wider public," it added.

The English Football League also confirmed on Monday that its competitions, including this week's League Cup quarter-finals, would proceed as planned. AFP

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Motsepe confirms AfCon is on despite 'enormous challenge'



Patrice Motsepe

Yaoundé, Cameroon - African football chief Patrice Motsepe confirmed that the Africa Cup of Nations (AfCon) will go ahead as planned in Cameroon next month despite the Omicron-variant led surge in COVID-19 cases.

"I am going to watch, on the 9th of January, Cameroon and Burkina Faso (in the opening match)," Motsepe said, dispelling rumours that the already delayed continental showpiece could fall victim to the coronavirus pandemic.

South African mining tycoon Motsepe gave the green-light to the AfCon, originally due to be staged in 2019, after talks with

Cameroon president Paul Biya.

But the 59-year-old was quick to stress the dangers presented by the new variant responsible for record daily numbers of positive cases.

"Omicron is an enormous challenge," Motsepe said, guaranteeing that nobody would be allowed to set foot in the stadiums without a negative PCR test.

Motsepe was joined at the press briefing by the newly elected head of the Cameroon football federation, the country's former football star Samuel Eto'o.

"I will also be there when the trophy is handed over by Eto'o" after the competition's final game on February 6, Motsepe added.

Cameroon were originally due to stage the African football showcase in 2019 but fell behind with preparations and Egypt stepped in as late replacements.

The 2021 tournament dates have changed twice, first because of fears that torrential seasonal rains could affect the tight schedule, and then because of the pandemic.

AFP

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Tottenham to appeal against expulsion from Europe: Conte

London, UK - Tottenham manager Antonio Conte described UEFA's decision to throw his side out of the Europa Conference League as 'incredible' and suggested Spurs will launch an appeal through the courts.

Spurs were handed a 3-0 defeat for their final group stage match against Rennes after the match was postponed due to a wave of positive coronavirus cases among Tottenham players and staff.

A new date before the deadline of December 31 could then not be agreed between the clubs.

Tottenham had needed to win their final game against the French side, who had already secured top spot in the group, to progress ahead of Vitesse Arnhem.

"It is not definitive, but there is another step to confirm or not this incredible decision," Conte said on Tuesday.

"We are very, very confident for the next step and I repeat we deserve to play the qualification on the pitch, not in the court.

"I can't accept this. We are very, very disappointed with UEFA for this decision."

Should Spurs fail to overturn that decision, one chance for Conte to end the club's trophy



Tottenham Hotspur's Italian head coach Antonio Conte gestures during the English Premier League football match against Liverpool at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, in London on Sunday (AFP)

drought stretching back to 2008 will have gone.

But the Italian has another opportunity in the League Cup with Wednesday's quarter-final against West Ham to go ahead despite rising COVID-19 cases

across London that have forced mayor Sadiq Khan to declare a 'major incident' in the English capital.

"To win trophies is always important but I think in this moment, at this period for

Tottenham, it's more good to think it's time to rebuild something important," added Conte, who only joined the club last month.

"If you ask me if trophies are important, they are for every

club. For me it's important to build a solid base, a foundation, to have a team in a short period who can be competitive, to fight for all competitions and fight for all competitions you play."

AFP



Rafael Nadal reacts during his semi-final match against Andy Murray in the Mubadala World Tennis Championship, in Abu Dhabi on Friday (AFP)

Australian Open chief 'confident' of Nadal playing

Melbourne, Australia - Australian Open chief Craig Tiley said on Wednesday he was confident that Rafael Nadal will play in Melbourne despite testing positive for COVID-19, as fresh doubts emerged over Novak Djokovic.

Spanish star Nadal said on Monday that he tested positive after returning home from an exhibition tournament in Abu Dhabi and was experiencing 'some unpleasant moments'.

While the 20-time Grand Slam champion said he was examining all his playing commitments, Tiley believes Nadal will be sufficiently recovered to chase his second Australian Open title in January.

"I'm confident Rafa will be here," the tournament director told reporters in Melbourne.

"Players that are testing positive now will complete a period of time until they are no longer infectious and they'll be fine."

World number one Djokovic, who has won nine of his 20 Grand Slams at Melbourne Park, remains in serious doubt over his refusal to confirm if he has been vaccinated. The 34-year-old has been named on the tournament entry list but his father Srdjan reportedly said his participation is still not guaranteed.

Tiley said 'a small percentage' of unvaccinated players and staff would be granted medical exemptions at the Australian Open, but their identity was protected by strict privacy protocols.

He was not aware of any players informing organisers they had an exemption. "If Novak shows up at the Australian Open, he'll either be vaccinated or he'll have a medical exemption," Tiley said. "Medically, he doesn't talk to anyone about it - I'm not going to ask Novak that, it's none of my business."

AFP

NHL players won't compete at Beijing Winter Olympics

New York, US - National Hockey League players will not compete at February's Beijing Winter Olympics, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman confirmed on Wednesday, due to COVID-19 disruptions.

The league paused its season on Wednesday after 50 games had been postponed due to COVID-19 outbreaks among clubs, with plans to reschedule those contests during the February 6-22 window of the Games in China.

"The National Hockey League respects and admires the desire of NHL Players to represent their countries and participate in a 'best on best' tournament," Bettman said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Accordingly, we have waited as long as possible to make this decision while exploring every available option to enable our players to participate in the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

"Unfortunately, given the profound disruption to the NHL's regular-season sched-

ule caused by recent COVID-related events - 50 games already have been postponed through December 23 - Olympic participation is no longer feasible.'

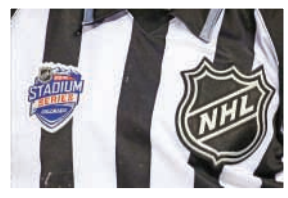
Olympic rosters will now be filled by players from European leagues, colleges and development clubs as they were at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, when the NHL elected not to take part.

Players expressed their disappointment on Tuesday when reports of the NHL's decision began.

"It would have been a great thing for our game to have all the NHL players go," said Chicago Blackhawks center Jonathan Toews, who won gold medals with Canada in 2010 and 2014.

"Players are going to put their own health and their own families and their own clubs' situation as priorities ahead of going to Beijing and dealing with some very unpredictable scenarios. So to me, that's the right way to go about it."

AFP



PSG's French midfielder Eric Junior Dina-Ebimbe (left) and German international defender Thilo Kehrer

Two PSG players test positive for COVID-19

Paris, France - Two Paris Saint-Germain players have tested positive for COVID-19 and a third is in isolation, the club said on Wednesday a few hours before a Ligue 1 match at Lorient.

They are one of several Ligue 1 clubs to reveal positive tests, though not at the same level as England, where a raft of matches have been postponed in the Premier League and lower divisions.

PSG's two positive cases are German international defender Thilo Kehrer and the 21-year-old French midfielder Eric Junior Dina-Ebimbe.

They 'are subject to the appropriate health protocol', said their club.

Argentine international midfielder Leandro Paredes was

placed in isolation on Tuesday 'as a precaution', PSG said.

All three played Sunday in a 3-0 French Cup win over Entente Feignies-Aulnoye.

The evening game at Lorient is not in danger since, under the latest French League protocols, a team can play if it has 20 available players, including a goalkeeper.

Alongside the announcement of the positive tests, PSG also released a list of 22 players who have made the trip to Brittany. They include Lionel Messi and Sergio Ramos.

If the 35-year-old Spanish defender plays it will be the first time since joining PSG from Real Madrid in July that he has been able to appear in two consecu-

tive games. He appeared in one league game in November and played 45 minutes in the cup on Sunday.

Other Ligue 1 sides have also reported positive tests.

Bordeaux's game against Lille will go ahead after they reported no further players had tested positive.

Nine of their squad and six members of the backroom staff tested positive earlier this week.

Reims and Angers have also been affected with the former - who play Marseille - announcing six positive tests: four players and two staff. Angers did not give the number of positive tests but said they would delay their departure for Montpellier.

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Team environment really encourages players: Charlie

Charlie Dean credits England's 'no-fear' environment with putting her on the fast track to becoming an international match-winner after initially being overlooked for a domestic contract.

Dean, the 20-year-old Southern Vipers offspinner, made her international debut against New Zealand over the English summer, playing all five ODIs.

In just her second match at this level, she claimed 4 for 36 to help England to victory in a rain-affected match at Worcester. She added three more before Heather Knight's century sealed a nail-biting victory - and the five-match series - in the fourth fixture at Derby.

After being named in a 17-strong squad to tour Australia for the Women's Ashes in January and February, Dean said, "It was a bit of a shock, really, to be told that I was going to be involved in the squad for the New Zealand series."

"The environment is so

open and welcoming that I felt at home pretty quickly on and off the field. That team environment is something that really encourages people to show what they can do and there's no real fear of mistakes, there's just, 'this is what we want you to do and this is what you can do, so go out there and do it,'" Dean told ESPNcricinfo.

"Whenever I play a game of cricket, I always want to influence the game, whether that's in the field or potentially with the bat and to do that with my main skill is really a big confidence boost. To be able to take four wickets in the second game really cemented the fact that actually, I can do this, I can perform on the big stage, and that definitely helped me in the next couple of games."

While being a relative unknown might offer a small, short-lived advantage in Australia, Dean is under no illusions about the ferocity of the looming contest.

Cricinfo

How India evolved since their last South Africa tour

The team has always had the skill but now they've learned to harness it better to win all over the world

The last time India played a Test series in South Africa, they made an extraordinary start. Within 29 balls of the first morning in Cape Town, South Africa were 12 for 3, with Bhuvneshwar Kumar running rampant.

At the time, Virat Kohli had been India's full-time Test captain for three years. His team had dominated every opposition at home and claimed resounding series wins in Sri Lanka and the West Indies. They were beginning a cycle of tours that would test their skills, their adaptability, and their ambitions to the limit, and they had made one hell of a first impression.

Over the rest of that day, however, Bhuvneshwar, Mohammed Shami and the debutant Jasprit Bumrah demonstrated not just their obvious skill but also a sense of naivety, erring frequently in length and line in their over-eagerness for wickets, and 12 for 3 eventually turned into 286, a winning first-innings total on a Newlands surface that seamed from start to finish.

That chaotic energy pervaded the rest of that South Africa tour, and the tour of England that followed. India won Tests in Johannesburg and Nottingham, but they lost the other six, often from promising or even dominant positions. Their bowlers were world-class, but so too were



India cricket players during training before their Boxing Day Test at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Tuesday (AFP)

those of South Africa and England, whose familiarity with home conditions often translated into better control over longer periods.

On the final day of India's most recent away Test, at The Oval in September, India were bowling stump-to-stump lines with strong leg-side fields, and they occasionally drift too

of their control over the match by the time it came.

In place of the chaotic energy of early 2018, India radiated a sense of knowing calm.

Between the South Africa tour of 2017-18 and the one they've just begun, this is the biggest leap India have made as a Test team. It's a product of their painstaking preparation - two

India's attack has greater depth - which has allowed them to rest their senior fast bowlers and to play four quicks as and when required

straight and concede a single or, on a couple of occasions, a boundary off a leg glance. There's one off-side boundary too, off a defensive shot that's edged through a gap in the slip cordon.

England began the day at 77 for 0 - in good batting conditions. They were waiting for an opening, trusting that it would come, and making every effort to ensure that they relinquished none

ready examples being Ravi Shastri and Bharat Arun devising a 21st century version of leg theory five months before their 2020-21 tour of Australia, and R Ashwin making Steven Smith his 'obsession for about six months' - but also of their bowlers' ability to execute plans.

The Shami of 2021, for instance, is a vastly different bowler to the Shami of early 2018. He

has the same skiddy pace and flawless wrist position, but he's fitter and bowls with a better-grooved action, and is therefore less likely to stray in line or length by accident; through experience and success he has also grown more patient and trusting in his own methods, and is less likely to stray by design.

India's attack has greater depth too, which has allowed them to rest their senior fast bowlers whenever possible, and to play four quicks as and when required, without a massive drop in quality between the new-ball bowlers and the second change.

As with any tour, though, this one begins with challenges. The absence of Ravindra Jadeja will test India's ability to play five bowlers; it remains to be seen if they trust the lower-order ability of Ashwin and Shardul Thakur enough to do so. If they don't, they will need to find ways to manage the workload of four bowlers without compromising on the pressure applied on South

Africa's batters.

The batting unit, meanwhile, is without Rohit Sharma, its form player of 2021. And where Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane were all 29 and in their theoretical prime during the 2017-18 tour, they are now 33 and with averages in the 20s and one century between them in the last two years.

A new coaching group is in place too, and Rahul Dravid and Paras Mhambrey are yet to establish the relationships with the players that Shastri and Arun built over their tenure. The captain is now captain in only one format, and his relationship with his cricket board is at the rockiest it's ever been.

But a Test series is, at its heart, the contest between two bowling attacks, and South Africa are yet to complete the transition away from Vernon Philander, Dale Steyn and Morne Morkel. They have also lost Anrich Nortje to a hip injury.

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Marnus Labuschagne becomes No 1 Test batter; Babar Azam top in T20Is

Marnus Labuschagne and Babar Azam have risen to the No. 1 spot in the Test and T20I rankings respectively following impressive performance in the most recent engagements. For Labuschagne, it's the first time at the top spot, while for Babar, it's a return to the position he had slipped down from only last week.

Labuschagne has had a purple patch in Test cricket since coming on as a concussion substitute for Steven Smith in the Ashes Test at Lord's in 2019 and currently averages 62.14 from 20 Tests. In the ongoing Ashes series at home, he has scored 74 and 0* in Brisbane and 103 and 51 in Adelaide with Australia taking a 2-0 lead over England.

Labuschagne had started the series at No. 4 on the batting chart, but those runs have now given him a career-high 912 rating points, taking him past Joe Root, who has dropped to second spot despite being in decent form - he has returns of 0, 89, 62 and 24 in the series so far. Smith, Kane Williamson and Rohit Sharma complete the top five.

Babar had slipped from the perch among T20I batters after scoring 0 and 7 in the first two T20Is against West Indies at home, but a 53-ball 79 in the final game, which helped Pakistan seal a 3-0 series sweep, has taken him back to the top, tied on points with Dawid Malan. Just below



Australia's batsman Marnus Labuschagne after receiving his Man of The Match Award at Adelaide Oval (AFP)

Joe Root's three wickets in Adelaide, to go with the 86 runs, took him to No. 10, a gain of two spots

them is Babar's opening partner Mohammad Rizwan, whose spectacular run through the year was capped by a match-winning 45-ball 87 in that final game

against West Indies in Karachi.

Those changes at the top have meant a slide to No. 4 for Aiden Markram, while K L Rahul has held on to his spot at fifth place.

Back to the Ashes, and Mitchell Starc has broken into the top ten - at ninth place - for Test bowlers after his match haul of 6 for 80 in the second Test against England, which included a four-for in the first innings. Pat Cummins continues to lead the table, followed by R Ashwin, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Tim Southee

and Josh Hazlewood.

Both Starc and Root also made gains in the Test all-rounders' rankings. Starc hit 39* and 19 in the Adelaide Test, and the runs coupled with the six wickets took him up from No. 7 to No. 6 on that list. Jason Holder, R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Shakib al Hasan and Ben Stokes are above him. Root's three wickets in Adelaide, to go with the 86 runs, took him to No. 10, a gain of two spots.

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