



THURSDAY, 16 DECEMBER 2021

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OMAN SAIL SETS GUINNESS RECORD

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HIS MAJESTY MEETS QUEEN ELIZABETH



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq met Queen Elizabeth II of the Great Britain and Northern Ireland at Windsor Castle as part of his private visit to the UK on Wednesday. During the meeting, the historical relations between the two countries were reviewed and aspects of close cooperation in all fields discussed. His Majesty the Sultan was accompanied by the Honourable Lady (ONA)

Call for caution as 12 cases suspected to be Omicron

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following confirmation of two cases of Omicron in Oman on Monday, the Minister of Health has informed that there are 12 more suspected cases of the variant in the sultanate.

In an interview to Oman TV on Tuesday, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, said, "The Supreme Committee's continuous follow-up on the latest developments regarding COVID-19 indicate that there are 12 suspected cases of Omicron in Oman."

Citing reports from South Africa, H E Dr Sa'eedi said, "There's indication that the Omicron variant is less virulent than others, but what is worrying about this virus is the speed of its spread."

On the recent rise in cases, he



H E Dr Ahmed al Sa'eedi

said, "Cases are slowly rising in ICUs. This rise is not due to Omicron but failure to follow safety measures. We call on citizens and residents to adhere to the precautionary measures and get vaccinated."

H E Dr Sa'eedi informed that the third dose of vaccine will give more protection from the virus. "Those who have received two doses and it's been 6-8 months since the last dose can take the third dose," he said.

Continued on Page 03

Ban on gatherings in public places

The Supreme Committee tasked with dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has decided to ban holding marriage celebrations and mourning at mosques, halls and other public places.

In a statement, the committee confirmed a ban on holding all social ceremonies in public places. "The concerned authorities will take legal action in case of violations," it stated.

NEWS BRIEFS

SAF ASST CHIEF OF STAFF MEETS IRANIAN MILITARY OFFICER
Teheran, Iran - Brig Abdulaziz Abdullah al Manthari, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) for Operations and Planning, met Brig Gen Seyyed Mahdi Farahi, Deputy of Iran's Ministry of Defence for Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) on Wednesday.

The meeting came within the framework of the 16th meeting of the Omani-Iranian Military Friendship Committee currently being held in Teheran.

Brig Gen Farahi valued the good turnout of the committee's meetings since its establishment in serving the armed forces of both countries.

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Asyad Group inaugurates Khazaen Dry Port in Barka

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Saudi goes tough on Iran's nuclear programme

Oman jumps six places in Global Knowledge Index



(Image for illustrative purpose)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has jumped six places in the Global Knowledge Index (GKI) 2021 to 52nd position out of 154 countries. The UAE is ranked 11th globally and first in the Arab world.

Switzerland came first globally for the fifth year in a row, followed by Sweden, USA, Finland and the Netherlands.

GKI is a joint initiative between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation. The index aims to measure the multidimensional concept of knowledge.

In this year's edition, the index includes 155 variables, selected by more than 40 international sources and databases.

With a GKI score of 52.3, Oman, according to the index, is a strong performer in terms of its knowledge infrastructure. It ranks 49th out of the 61 countries with very high human development.

In sectoral indices, Oman ranks 41st in Pre-University Education, 16th in Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 110th in Higher Education, 82nd in Research, Development and Innovation, 49th in Information and Communications Technology,

With a GKI score of 52.3, Oman, according to the index, is a strong performer in terms of its knowledge infrastructure

64th in Economy and 100th in Enabling Environment.

The areas of strength for Oman include in Pre-University Education in the sub-categories of Pupil-trained Teacher Ratio in Primary Education (3rd), Pupil-trained Teacher Ratio in Secondary Education (15th), Schools with Access to Computers in Primary Education (per cent) (1st), Schools with Access to Computers in Secondary Education (per cent) (1st), and Share of Students Enrolled in Post-Secondary Vocational Programmes (1st).

Oman performs well in ICT, too, and is ranked 14th in Households with Internet Access at Home, Skills and Employment (37th), Individuals with Standard ICT Skills (30th) and Tertiary Graduates from ICT Programmes (6th).

Other GCC countries in the GKI include Qatar at 38th place, Saudi Arabia at 40th, Kuwait (48) and Bahrain (55).

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ITEC Day: Strengthening India-Oman partnership

Muscat - The Indian Embassy in Muscat celebrated 'Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation' (ITEC) Day on Tuesday.

The function was attended by about 100 participants, which included ITEC alumni from Oman, officials and professionals from diverse sectors who have participated in various training courses in India under ITEC programmes. The function was also attended by many officials from various Omani authorities/agencies, looking after training aspects of their employees.

H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Obaid al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, the chief guest, in his address lauded historically close relations between India and Oman.

He mentioned that participa-

tion of a large number of Omani nationals in various ITEC courses in India over the years had further strengthened the bonds of friendship between the two countries.

Speaking on the occasion, H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, noted that over the years, the ITEC programme has received a good response in Oman and hundreds of Omani officials have taken part in ITEC courses.

H E Narang conveyed his appreciation to the Ministry of Health, Foreign Ministry and other ministries and organisations in Oman for their support in implementing the ITEC programme in Oman.

H E Narang stressed that the Government of India is a strong

partner in Oman's journey to achieve objectives of Oman Vision 2040 for which the ITEC programme can be a key facilitator. Specialised training, human resource development and skill upgradation is an integral part of this journey for which ITEC is an ideal platform.

He said under the programme, special customised courses can be organised dedicated for Omani candidates in their areas of interest.

The ITEC Day provided an opportunity to the ITEC alumni, who have trained in India under this programme, to get together at the embassy to interact and share their experiences.

They spoke about the benefits of ITEC courses not only in providing knowledge and expertise

but in giving them an opportunity to interact with trainees from other countries and learn more about India, its culture and traditions.

The ITEC programme was launched in September 1964 as a bilateral programme of assistance of the Government of India for capacity building of friendly developing countries. It has emerged as a key vehicle for India's contribution to human resource development of partner countries.

Under the programme, officials from more than 160 countries from Asia, Africa, East Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean as well as Pacific and small island countries are invited to benefit from India's developmental experience.

National Museum opens Iznik ceramics exhibition

Muscat - The National Museum inaugurated the 'Gardens of Paradise: The Language of Flowers in Iznik Ceramics' exhibition in co-operation with the Louvre Abu Dhabi at the Splendours of Islam Gallery on Wednesday.

The inauguration was held under the patronage of H H Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, assistant vice chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University for international cooperation and vice chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum.

Manuel Rabaté, director of the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, attended the ceremony, in addition to a number of officials and ambassadors of Gulf countries in Oman. The exhibition aims to shed light on the art of Iznik ceramics decorated with flowers and the special symbols these embody related to evoking Q'uranic descriptions that recall the gardens of paradise.

The exhibition will continue until December 1, 2022.

Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, secretary general of National Museum, said that the museum is honoured to host an exhibition



from the Louvre Abu Dhabi. "Bilateral cooperation was established in 2017, when a number of Omani museum artefacts were loaned to be displayed in the Louvre Abu Dhabi, to introduce visitors to the civilisation of the land of frankincense and the role of Oman on the Maritime Silk Road," he said.

Rabaté said he was excited to lend six 16th century Iznik ceramics from the museum's collection to the National Museum of Oman. "It is an integral part of our mission to make our permanent collection accessible to

the widest possible audience and to ensure the further development of our ongoing partnership."

Iznik is a small city in Turkey in the Marmara plain that was known during the Byzantine era as Nicaea, about 90km from Istanbul. The city is famous for its ceramics industry and is considered one of the greatest centres of the Ottoman ceramics industries in Turkey. The decoration of pottery with roses and flowers symbolise the bliss that God will bestow upon Muslims in the Gardens of Paradise.

Meet held to revitalise tourism in Musandam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Maitha Saif al Mahrouqiyah, Undersecretary for Tourism in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), met the staff of *Carnival* cruise line and discussed ways to develop and promote

cruise tourism in Musandam governorate.

MHT said that the meeting took place during H E Maitha's visit to the governorate on Wednesday where she also met the officials of the Heritage and Tourism Department in Musandam.

She also visited a number of tourist sites in the governorate.

The ministry also organised a remote workshop in cooperation with Professional Convention Management Association. It aimed to present promotional content about Oman and various tourism products it has to offer.



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specialized Companies in the field of tender shown below and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	No E- Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/21/074 (Re-Tender)	66/2021/MM/QS-18 (Re-Call-1)	Supply of LED Street Light (Re-Tender) (E-Tender)	Rial 25	08/01/2022	23/01/2022	Excellent
PRE/21/093	2021/MM/QS-38	Reconstruction and Maintenance of Culverts In Muscat Governorate 2022 (E-Tender)	Rial 25	08/01/2022	23/01/2022	First
PRE/21/100	2021/MM/QS-39	Consultancy Services for the Study and Analysis of Embankment Slope Failure and the Design of Slope Protection Works on Al Jabal Road at Al Amirat (E-Tender)	Rial 25	30/12/2021	13/01/2022	First
PRE/21/101	2021/MM/QS-40	Consultancy Services for the Study Design and Analysis of Revetment Failure along Al Bahri Road in Muttrah Area (E-Tender)	Rial 25	30/12/2021	13/01/2022	First
PRE/21/088	2021/MM/QS-41	Construction of Box Culverts in Al Udhayba (Wadi Al Khail) (E-Tender)	Rial 25	26/12/2021	04/01/2022	First

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of abond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om) or call (+96824402200).
- For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+96824402200/24402330).



Winners of National Research Award and Upgrade programme announced

Muscat - The winners of the 8th National Research Award and the 5th Upgrade programme were announced at the eighth edition of the Annual Research Forum that took place on Wednesday at the Kempinski Hotel, Muscat.

Organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), the forum was held under the patronage of H E Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, in the presence of H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrooqi, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and a number of innovators, academics and research winners.

Thirteen winning research projects out of the 243 projects submitted this year for the National Research Award (NRA), were announced. The awards are divided into the best published research led by a PhD holder or equivalent (senior specialist or higher in the medical field) category and the best published research led by a young researcher (non-PhD holder) category.

Under the PhD category, 'A Centralised Cloud Services Repository (CCSR) Framework

for Optimal Cloud Service Advertisement Discovery from Heterogenous Web Portals' by Dr Asma al Kalbani from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Ibri, won in the Information and Communication Technologies sector.

In the Energy and Industry sector, the award went to 'Exploring the potential of solar, tidal, and wind energy resources in Oman using an integrated climatic-socioeconomic approach' by Dr Mohamed Hereher from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), while in the Health and Social Services sector, the award went to 'Randomised controlled open label trial on the use of favipiravir combined with inhaled interferon beta-1b in hospitalised patients with moderate to severe COVID-19 pneumonia' by Dr Faryal Ali Khamis (Ministry of Health).

As for the Education and Human Resources sector, 'Organisational pride as an antecedent of employee creativity in the petrochemical industry' by Dr Omar Durrah from Dhofar University was awarded for his project. Two teams won in the Cultural, Social and Basic Sciences sector; 'Management

strategies for supply risk dependencies: Empirical evidence from the Gulf region' by Dr Zainab al Balushi (SQU) and 'Mapping road traffic crash hotspots using GIS-based methods: A case study of Muscat Governorate in the Sultanate of Oman' by Dr Amira al Aamri (MoHERI).

In the Environmental and Biological Resources sector, the award went to 'Investigating the efficiency of greenhouse production in Oman: A two-stage approach based on Data Envelopment Analysis and double bootstrapping' by Dr Nawal al Mezeini. Under the Young Researcher's category, 'Detection and Trust Evaluation of the SGN Malicious node' by Faisal al Yahmadi from Military Technological College took the award in the Information and Communication Technologies sector.

In the Energy and Industry sector, the award went to 'Simultaneous Energy and Environment-based Optimisation and Retrofit of TEG Dehydration Process: An Industrial Case Study' by Dr Zainab al Ani (SQU), while 'A Competitive Nature-derived Multilayered Scaffold based

on Chitosan and Alginate, for Full-thickness Wound Healing' by Saeid Vakilian (University of Nizwa) took the award in the Health and Social Services sector.

Upgrade programme

In addition to announcing the winners of the NRA, the forum also announced the three winning teams of the 5th edition of Upgrade programme, a programme that transforms the best graduation projects in the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies into successful ICT startups to bring socio-economic benefit to Oman.

The winning projects of this year's Upgrade programme were awarded to 'Industrial IoT for Operational Efficiency Improvement' by Ahmed al Ghadani (National University of Science and Technology), 'Development of AI based Arabic Natural Language Processing of sentiment analysis application software for national security and planning' by Ali al Harthi and Safiya al Harthi (Middle East College), and 'Thermal Infra-Red Imaging Assessment of Solar PV Modules' by Al Qaisar al Aamri, Majid al Omairi and Sultan al Shabibi (SQU).

New appraisal system for govt employees

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) will roll out a new programme called Individual Performance Measurement and Institutional Proficiency System (Ejada) starting January 2022 covering 175,000 employees in 57 state units.

The programme aims to improve the quality of services provided to citizens, and enhance the community's confidence in the government's capabilities, in addition to clarifying employees' duties and responsibilities in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Unveiling details on Tuesday, Mohammad bin al Waleed al Hinai, director of Ejada in MoL, said the programme will measure individual performance, annual plans and institutional proficiency. "It is a system for human capital governance, improving performance evaluation systems and linking productivity with incentives," he said.

According to Hinai, evaluation in the new system will be quarterly. Productivity will be measured based on the objectives and key results methodology, which



(Supplied photo)

The new system will not punish under performing employees, but will work to raise their efficiency, develop their capabilities, and address the challenges they face

MOHAMMAD AL HINAI

will be transparent and fair, and those who excel will be rewarded. "The new system will not punish under performing employees, but will work to raise their efficiency,

develop their capabilities, and address the challenges they face."

Hinai said the cycle and system of individual performance measurement and institutional

proficiency will pass through several stages. These will include determining the annual goals of the unit or institution, set goals for employees, direct supervision by managers, review results of end-of-the-year evaluation for all employees, and approve and publish results of performance evaluation.

MoL has 565 trainers to develop job plans in government institutions to achieve the goals of this system and raise performance of employees, and 2,312 training workshops have been organised benefiting more than 130,000 employees.

For individuals, evaluation will be based on set goals and achievements according to indicators, weights assigned and set targets.

To measure institutional proficiency, the main criteria include leadership, strategic planning, human capital, institutional culture, partnership, resources, innovation, customer satisfaction, governance, environment and society. There are 21 sub-criteria to measure institutional proficiency, including job satisfaction, beneficiary satisfaction and reports of other government units.



(Supplied photo)

'Crisis revealed Oman Airports' future is bright'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sheikh Aiman bin Ahmed al Hosni, CEO of Oman Airports, has said it is time to recognise the role of its employees as they have shown exceptional resilience during the COVID-19 crisis.

"Employees at Oman Airports, Transom Ground Handling and Transom Sats Cargo worked on the frontlines and kept our operations running at the same or better efficiency level and made a lot of sacrifices that deserve our sincere respect and appreciation," he said during Oman Airport's CEO Talk held virtually on Wednesday.

He expressed "great pride" in the efforts exerted to promote the company and contribute to the country, and said that across

Oman Airports and its subsidiaries, much has been achieved this year. "The crisis demonstrates that Oman Airports is standing on solid pillars of aspiration, which in turn, inspire us to be ready for the journey ahead regardless of any challenges. Our future looks bright and we will work hard to make it so," said Hosni.

For the sixth consecutive year, Oman Airports held its annual review of employees' achievements and operational challenges as well as new strategic plans and implementation mechanisms for the coming year.

"We are approaching the end of an unusual year, like the previous year, passing through a lot of challenges in all spheres. The moment countries worldwide started locking down their bor-

ders, it was obvious that this crisis will not be easy and that it will be a pivotal turning point in history, especially in the aviation and travel industry. However, I believe that the future will look much brighter for us all," he said. Stressing on Oman Airports' continuous growth, he said, "We will do our best to accomplish our goals."

He informed that there are encouraging indicators for easing of restrictions. "Let's start the new year with optimism and confidence. All employees across all departments and units will be given the necessary support whenever they require."

He also appreciated the role of Oman Airports' partners and customers "as we begin a new year full of aspiration and ambition for a brighter future."

OPAZ sets up artificial coral reef park near Hasat Hamar Island in Duqm

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has launched an artificial coral reef park in Duqm. The project aims to create an environment conducive for marine life and provide a unique diving experience to tourists.

Nasser Mohammed al Rahbi of the Partnership and Development Department in OPAZ, informed that a 250m barrel pipe filled with concrete has been lowered into the sea near the



(Supplied photo)

Hasat Hamar Island.

"OPAZ, in cooperation with a number of government agen-

cies, is managing the project which aims to sustain the marine environment in the region, en-

hance biodiversity, increase fish production, create habitats for marine creatures, and revive di-

ing activity," Rahbi said.

Confirming that the barrel pipe filled with concrete will con-

tribute to a fertile environment to attract many species of marine life, Mohammed Hamad al Mahrouqi, from the Environmental Control Department in Duqm, said the project will present an unparalleled experience for diving enthusiasts as an extension of the rocks scattered around Hasat Hamar Island.

"We urge fishermen to avoid net fishing near the island to avoid damaging the corals," Mahrouqi said.

He informed that the Environmental Control Department will follow up on the project through

diving surveys on the growth of marine creatures and ensure the integrity of the barrel pipe according to the plan prepared.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has implemented large artificial coral reef projects in 14 wilayats of the sultanate. A total of 13,906 artificial reefs were grown at these sites from 2003 to 2019.

The ministry seeks to develop the tourism sector by creating environment ideal for diving and related tourist activities and to carry out scientific studies.

12 cases suspected to be Omicron

Continued from Page 01

The minister added that 86 per cent of the target population has so far received two doses. "There is no excuse for anyone older than 12 to not get vaccinated. Vaccination protects us all."

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Health announced 20 new cases, taking the total number of positive cases in Oman to 304,761. No new related deaths were reported. 'The total number of COVID-19-related deaths stands at 4,113. Three patients recovered in a 24 hour-period on Wednesday, accounting for a total of 300,114 recoveries. A total of ten patients are currently in health institutions, including three in intensive care units,' MoH stated on Wednesday.

Globally, the total number of COVID-19 cases has risen to more than 271.4mn and 5.3mn deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University of America. The US topped the list of countries in the number of deaths due to the virus with 800,343 dead, and a total of 50,233,338 positive cases. Brazil is second with 616,970 deaths and 22,195,775 positive cases, and India third with 475,888 deaths and 3,4703,644 cases.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Internal Tender Committee, Ministry of Labour, invites the following Tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Establishments entitled to subscription and are registered with the board of tenders	Last date for electronic purchasing	Date of tender submission
07/2021	Providing cleaning and gardening services for the General Directorate of Labor building in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate and the office of the joint inspection team in the Directorate	---	28/12/2021 at 02:00 pm	03/01/2022 at 10:00 am
08/2021	Providing cleaning and gardening services for the General Directorate of Labor building in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate	---	06/01/2022 at 02:00 pm	26/01/2022 at 10:00 am

- Specialized establishments can obtain electronic documents from this link below, starting from Tuesday 16/12/2021, 7:30 AM.
<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om/>
- Each bid is to be attached with a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate of (1%) of the value of the tender for the Ministry of Manpower, valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission of the tender.
- Tenders envelopes will be opened at 11:00am .

(The ministry is not bound to accept the lowest price of or any tender)

labour_OMAN

Asyad Group inaugurates Khazaen Dry Port in Barka

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Asyad Group, Oman's integrated logistics service provider, on Wednesday officially inaugurated the Khazaen Dry Port in Khazaen Economic City in Barka.

Khazaen Dry Port, the first integrated land port in the sultanate, is one of Oman Investment Authority's (OIA) investments in the logistics sector in partnership with the private sector.

The dry port will promote the sultanate's economic diversification and consolidate the country's position as a global logistics hub. The port is expected to strengthen the Gulf region's supply chain system.

Asyad Group said the official opening of the Khazaen Dry Port comes in line with the sultanate's National Logistics Strategy which is aimed at integrating logistics solutions provided by different entities and strengthen Oman's position as a logistics centre for the region.

Oman's Ministry of Economy in a tweet on Wednesday said that the Khazaen Dry Port is a link and logistics centre between Oman and the region. The ministry added that the private sec-



tor investment in the dry port project accounts for 60 per cent of the total investment in the project.

The inauguration ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Issa bin Hamad al Azri, Governor of South Batinah, in the

presence of H E Khamis bin Mohammed al Shamakhi, Undersecretary for Transport in the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and a number of their excellencies, officials, representatives of government agencies

and private sector companies.

On the occasion of the opening of the port, H E Shamakhi said the commercial operations of Khazaen Dry Port is a new addition to the logistics system in Oman and it will provide many opportunities to enhance the sultanate's competitiveness at the regional and global levels.

"This port will provide additional advantages and options for the business sector in Oman, which is expected to be positively reflected in raising the country's Ease of Doing Business Ranking," he said.

The current size of the Khazaen Dry Port is 100,000sqm. There are future plans to raise the capacity of the port's logistics area by adding another 150,000sqm during the next five years to keep pace with the expected increase in operations.

The Khazaen Dry Port will serve the needs of shippers as well as logistics service providers. Benefiting from exceptional connectivity with the region, this major component of the Khazaen Economic City serves as a transshipment point and offers customs-bonded services as well as opens up opportunities across the warehousing services value chain.

Omantel selects Hughes for satellite backhaul to extend network reach

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omantel, the sultanate's largest telecom services provider, has selected the Hughes Jupiter System from US-based Hughes Network Systems to extend its mobile networks to serve more customers.

Hughes Network Systems is a global leader in satellite broadband solutions and services, and a leading provider of managed network services and applications.

Omantel will deploy satellite backhaul of cellular network traffic using Hughes' Jupiter System equipment, including a gateway hub and hundreds of remote terminals, Hughes said in a statement.

"Our aim is to connect more subscribers in more places throughout the sultanate, and satellite backhaul helps expand our network into areas where terrestrial backhaul is onerous or cost-prohibitive," said Bernhard Van Der Merwe, vice president - technology, Omantel.

"We chose the Hughes Jupiter System due to its high performance and efficiency, as well as scalability for the future.



This solution will enable us to cover new areas with our broadband services catering to the needs of individual and business customers across the country and enabling our digital society to grow and expand," he added.

Dan Losada, vice president - international division at Hughes, said, "We appreciate the opportunity to support Omantel in extending its cellular network and to bring the many benefits of connectivity to rural and remote communities."

"This project reflects our strategy to help connect the unconnected in partnership with

leading operators, like Omantel, who share our commitment to bridging the digital divide," Losada said.

The Jupiter System is the next-generation Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) platform from Hughes for broadband services over both high-throughput and conventional satellites. In use at more than 12,000 cellular sites across Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Jupiter System offers a low-cost and effective means of interconnecting cellular base stations, regardless of distance, infrastructure or terrain.

Port of Salalah successfully tests Sea-Air cargo connectivity

Salalah - Port of Salalah, in close partnership with ROP customs, has successfully tested Sea-Air connectivity with a priority shipment destined for Qatar during the second week of December.

The shipment, a 40FT Maersk container loaded from Antwerp, upon discharge in Salalah, was successfully moved on customs bond to Muscat airport for air freight to Doha in a record time of 15 hours, according to a press release.

This included tracking the shipment movement process from the seaport to the airport in Muscat at every step.

The ROP extended extraordinary support in making this trial a successful one with seamless operation at both ends.

Sea-Air, a multi-modal transport supply chain solution that combines the ocean freight's cost-effectiveness and air-freight's speed in the supply chain, is more relevant now given the current reliability and high-cost challenges with ocean freight post the pandemic.

The integrated Salalah Ecosystem's solution is also one of the key focus areas of Oman Vision 2040 logistics strategy.

The Port of Salalah is the fastest access point between the Middle East, India, and East Africa and markets in Europe, the Americas, and the rest of the



world. Moving cargo through the largest port in Oman can save days in transit times and cut costs.

With the successful execution of this solution, the Port of Salalah targets offering a viable and cost-effective Sea-Air product via Salalah and Muscat airports, which saves an additional two days in terms of total transit time over regional competitors.

"We were extremely pleased with the seamless operations with our shipment once handed over to Port of Salalah, which helped us exceed our

customer expectations," said Naushad Rehman, managing director, Muscat International Shipping, acting on behalf of the consignee.

"Sea-Air shipments are known for their time sensitivity. The successful execution of the trial shipment of Sea-Air product with the cooperation from ROP customs and Asyad Group, marks a significant step in testing our system capabilities, thereby bringing Salalah on the map of global Sea-Air locations," Mark Hardiman, CEO of the Port of Salalah, said.

Port of Salalah continues to actively contribute to Oman's Vision 2040 and objectives and support 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.



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US averts default with 11th-hour debt limit hike

Washington, US – US lawmakers voted to raise the federal debt limit on Wednesday, eliminating the threat of a disastrous credit default with just hours to spare ahead of the deadline set by the Treasury.

The deeply divided Senate voted on Tuesday to raise the borrowing cap by US\$2.5tn and the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of Congress, followed suit in the early hours of the following morning - staving off the next showdown until at least 2023.

"No brinksmanship, no default on the debt, no risk of another recession: Responsible governing has won on this exceedingly important issue," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the floor ahead of the votes.

"The American people can breathe easy and rest assured there will not be a default."

The vote in both chambers of Congress followed party lines, with Republicans offering just one vote in the House to deliver the country from potential disaster, and no votes at all in the Senate.

Both parties see raising the debt ceiling as politically toxic, although they acknowledge that failure to do so would plunge the US economy into a depression and roil world markets as the government missed debt repayments.

Republicans especially hope to weaponise the extension to campaign against Democratic 'overspending' in the 2022 midterm legislative elections,



although it would only cover commitments already made by both parties.

The two sides agreed last week to create a one-off law allowing Democrats to lift the nation's borrowing authority without help from the opposition Republicans.

The legislative sleight-of-hand circumvented the 'filibuster' rule, so that the required 60-40 margin could be abandoned for this vote only, in favour of a simple majority - allowing Republicans essentially to stand on the sidelines.

'A basic responsibility'
The Bipartisan Policy Center, an independent Washington-based thinktank, predicted the United

States would no longer be able to service its debts sometime after December 21, although Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen set the deadline at the start of the business day on Wednesday.

America spends more money than it collects through taxation, so it borrows money via the issuing of government bonds, seen as among the world's most reliable investments.

Around 80 years ago, lawmakers introduced a limit on how much federal debt could be accrued.

The ceiling has been lifted dozens of times to allow the government to meet its spending commitments - usually without drama and with the support of both parties - and stands at around US\$29tn.

The new borrowing cap will be US\$31.5tn.

Democratic leaders have spent weeks underlining the havoc that a default would have wrought, including the loss of an estimated 6mn jobs and US\$15tn in household wealth, as well as increased costs for mortgages and other borrowing.

'Addressing the debt limit is a basic responsibility of the federal government,' the White House said in a statement.

'Passage of this legislation will allow the Treasury to finance spending and tax cuts Congress has already authorised and to keep its commitments without causing disruption or harm to our economy and American families.'

AFP

UK inflation spikes to 10-year high on eve of BoE rate call

London, UK – British inflation has rocketed to its highest level for more than ten years on broad-based price gains, data showed on Wednesday, sparking fears that wages will fail to keep pace on the eve of a Bank of England (BoE) interest rate decision.

The annual inflation rate surged to 5.1 per cent in November after 4.2 per cent in October, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

That marked the highest level since September 2011, with inflationary pressures driven by jumping fuel costs as the rate accelerated further above the BoE's official target.

The news sparked an outcry from Britain's Unite trade union, which complained many workers faced an effective pay cut with the prospect of below-inflation annual wage increases.

The BoE, whose main task is to keep inflation close to 2 per cent, is however expected to hold its record-low interest rate today due to turmoil over the Omicron variant.

Central banks normally use interest rate hikes to try to damp high inflation, which is weighing on companies and consumers globally.

"A wide range of price rises contributed to another steep rise in inflation, which now stands at its highest rate for



A file photo shows the price in sterling pounds of goods displayed for sale on a stall at Whitechapel Market in east London (AFP)

over a decade," said ONS chief economist Grant Fitzner.

"The price of fuel increased notably, pushing average petrol prices higher than we have seen before."

"Clothing costs - which increased after falling this time last year - along with price rises for food, second-hand cars and increased tobacco duty all helped drive up inflation this month."

Inflationary pressures were also fuelled by the global supply crunch and jumping commodity prices. "The cost of goods produced by factories and the price of raw materials have continued to increase significantly to their highest rate for at least 12 years,"

Fitzner added.

After countries emerged from pandemic lockdowns earlier this year, companies struggled to meet demand for goods, energy and services, sending inflation soaring.

However, the BoE will probably hold its key interest rate at 0.1 per cent due to Omicron uncertainty, analysts say.

The Unite union meanwhile urged companies to grant pay hikes that preserve the buying power of workers' salaries.

"Today's figures mean our members must fight for wage rises above the current rate of inflation," said Unite general secretary Sharon Graham. AFP

Eni and Algeria's Sonatrach sign \$1.4bn oil deal

Algiers, Algeria – Algeria's state oil firm Sonatrach signed a US\$1.4bn exploration and production deal on Tuesday with Italian major Eni, alongside an agreement on renewables.

Under the main deal, they will produce 45,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day from a rich onshore field in the Berkine basin, where the two companies have operated together since 2013.

It is their first contract since a hydrocarbons law was passed in 2019 to make the market more attractive for foreign investors - but which sparked opposition from Algerians, who said it would flog the nation's wealth to multinationals.

Sonatrach said in a press release carried by official news agency APS that the deal was 'another milestone that strengthens the traditional relationship between the two partners'.

Sonatrach chief Toufik Hakkar and his Eni counterpart Claudio Descalzi also signed a coopera-



tion agreement on alternative energy technologies including solar energy, lithium production, bio-fuels and hydrogen, it added.

Eni has operated in Algeria since 1981 and is Sonatrach's main foreign partner in the oil and gas sector.

The two firms jointly operate the TransMed pipeline that exports Algerian gas to Italy via Tunisia, with a capacity of some 32mn cubic metres per year - four times that of the Medgaz pipeline to Spain.

Algeria, Africa's biggest gas exporter, earns some 90 per cent of its state revenues from hydrocarbons.

AFP

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Bank Nizwa participates in Business Year conference as official partner

As the leading Islamic bank in the sultanate, Bank Nizwa has been spearheading several unique initiatives that help raise awareness on various aspects of Islamic Finance. In its most recent endeavour, Bank Nizwa participated as the official banking partner of the The Business Year conference, wherein the Bank's CEO, Khalid al Kayed, participated as a panelist and highlighted the importance of achieving digitalisation in all products, processes and operations, as well as the contribution of Islamic banks in the economic diversification of the sultanate.

The Business Year conference was held on December 12 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the patronage of H E Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and was attended by key officials and top executives from different sectors. The event, titled 'Oman Vision 2040: The Future of Investment', discussed the role of Oman Vision 2040 in driving innovation in Oman's socio-economic transformation.

Speaking as part of the panel, Kayed pointed, "The banking sector plays an important role in the sultanate's economic growth and social development. Its pivotal for the sector to contribute to national agendas of socio-economic development through digital innovation as well as strategic financing, thereby aiding the diversification process. At Bank Nizwa, our Project Finance and Syndication department strongly and dedicatedly supports the government's diversification plan and continues to do so by playing a crucial role in Oman's 2040 vision. Moreover, the Bank understand that all operations and processes in this regard must be automated and transformed to fit latest technological advancements.

"The new normal has given an



impetus to technological innovations and banks need to stay abreast in meeting this demand. It is also important to understand that innovation and diversification are not final targets but a medium to achieve greater socio-economic sustainability."

Under its digital transformation drive, Bank Nizwa has successfully enhanced its customer experiences, achieved greater operational efficiencies and re-defined its business model.

"Our efficient, secure and reliable banking channels have encouraged customers to conduct

business as well as day-to-day transactions online. Providing a seamless online banking interface has helped businesses, whether SMEs or large corporate companies, to focus on their core business while automating regular payments and reducing the time spent on other banking operations," added Kayed.

With several companies moving to an online platform during the pandemic and a resultant surge in online business activity, Bank Nizwa has been at the forefront of supporting these businesses by processing

payment solutions for them. It also encouraged various businesses to consider going online by providing them with secured cloud platforms to host and conduct their business safely.

Setting an example for others to follow, the bank waived off transaction fees during the lockdown. This helped boost online transactions which saw a phenomenal growth of four times its original volume. In addition, to help businesses prepare for VAT implementation in the second quarter of the year, Bank Nizwa played an instrumental role in supporting customers to manage the tax payments and calculations. By providing point of sales (POS) solutions to businesses, the bank also helped them have more control over their cash flows.

"While banks are doing their part in promoting digitalisation, we also appreciate the efforts taken by CBO to further enhance the digital ecosystem. CBO's policies and regulatory framework has given thrust to technology adoption, achieving the digitalization goals as outlined in Oman Vision 2040," added Kayed. "Bank Nizwa has proved that organisations that remain invested in achieving digitalisation can grow faster, enhance their operations and reach new heights of success."



Park Inn Duqm's rooms see a colourful revamp

With Duqm seeing quick growth, Park Inn by Radisson Duqm Hotel & Residence is keeping up by introducing newly designed rooms that emphasise friendliness and vibrancy to deliver a modern experience for new generation travellers. The new 'Adding Colors to Life' concept offers a clean, personalised environment in a bright new decorated rooms.

Park Inn by Radisson Duqm has also added 23 new rooms to its current inventory, bringing combined total between 1-2 bedroom apartments, chalets and hotel rooms to 96 keys. Each room is spacious, bright and functional, fully decked out with wooden flooring, Scandinavian vanities and comfortable beds.

The Park Inn Duqm also fea-

tures a recreation hub with a swimming pool, fitness centre, and pool lounge. The RBG and Ocean restaurants, while keeping with current industry trends, are fully prepped to give guests unmatched dining experiences.

This strategically positioned hotel caters to guests who prefer to stay for a short while to attend meetings or events, long staying guests making it their home away from home, or thrill seekers coming to enjoy wind surfing and the rest of the activities they have to offer.

Park Inn continues to invest in staff development, customer service, local talent and most importantly product and expansion to support growing demand of guests and provide them with the best stays.

OOMCO with ALMS begins operations at Sawadi warehouse

Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) has commenced operations at its new central warehouse in Sawadi, with the support of its long-term partner, Al Madina Logistics Services (ALMS). The 2,900 sqm facility has the capacity for 4,500 pallet positions, serving to accommodate the increasing demand for OOMCO's lubricants across Oman, while helping the company continue to deliver on its 'You Trust We Care' promise.

"The new centralised warehouse in Sawadi will ease our lubricants supply chain processes. With direct access from the main road of Al Batinah Highway and the Expressway, the location will allow us to expand our reach beyond the populated areas in Muscat and permit shorter delivery times," said Talib Omar al Maadi, supply chain general manager at Oman Oil Marketing Company. "We are always work-



ing on building valuable long-term partnerships with local companies and our collaboration with Al Madina Logistics Services is a great addition. Its expertise, equipment and information technology will certainly be an added value to our growing operations."

Nader Hakim, chief operating officer at Al Madina Logistics

Services commented, "We continue to expand our portfolio and we welcome this opportunity with Oman Oil Marketing Company as a demonstration of the trust they have placed in our services. With our versatile and cost-efficient approach to inventory and warehouse management, we place our customers' business requirements first and foremost. Our main goal is to provide the technology and resources to manage and optimise the distribution process."

With the aim to position itself as the most customer-centric marketers in the GCC, OOMCO provides a complete range of lubricant supplies and services in all areas of Oman. Constantly enriching the lives of all those visiting any of its locations, the company continues to offer one-stop-shop experiences as well as build long-term partnerships with various industry leaders.

Spider-Man: No Way Home premieres at Cinépolis Cinemas, Oman Avenues Mall

The latest installment of Marvel's *Spider-Man: No Way Home* was premiered by Cinépolis Cinemas, flagship in Oman Avenues Mall, Muscat on Wednesday.

Directed by Jon Watts, the third installment of the Marvel franchise includes an all-star cast from Tom Holland, Zendaya, Willem Dafoe and Jamie Foxx. The story continues with Spider-Man's identity revealed and the difficulties he faced separating his normal life from being a superhero.

"We've been looking forward to the release of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* as it is one of the most anticipated movies of the year," said Alejandro Aguilera, CEO of Cinépolis Cinemas. He added, "There is no better way than to watch and live the Marvel Universe unfold their unique plot twists and characters than on the big screen in any of Cinépolis Cinemas' unique for-



mats, whether it's the massive Macro XE, fully immersive 4D or the Luxury auditoriums."

The event which showcased the movie for the first time in the MENA region boasted key per-

sonnel and influencers from across the Sultanate of Oman. Guests were welcomed by a majestic setup in-line with the movie and served the unique food offerings from

Cinépolis Cinemas.

For the super *Spider-Man* fans, the brand had also arranged a paid preview, one day before the official release of the movie from 8pm onwards.

Enjoy benefits on versatile performer Nissan Patrol Super Safari

Nissan Oman from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), is offering a wide range of benefits for customers of Nissan Patrol Super Safari as part its new special offer promotion. With its proud heritage, composed of power, determination and strength, the Nissan Patrol Super Safari transcends one's expectations of any vehicle.

The special promotion on offer includes 3 years/ 60,000km periodic maintenance service, free first year insurance, free first year registration and more. The offer, which is available on all models purchased for personal use, will go on till January 9, 2022.

A senior official from Nissan Oman said, "We are delighted to offer the promotion on Nissan Patrol Super Safari which carries on astounding auto enthusiasts because of its legacy and reputation for versatility, capability and

extreme performance. Its legendary capability and its deep-rooted heritage in the region makes it a popular vehicle."

Service package
Customers of Nissan Patrol Super Safari can enjoy free periodic maintenance service package for 3 years/ 60,000km. This offer is valid for 10,000km service intervals.

Free insurance
Customers of Nissan Patrol Super Safari can enjoy free insurance in Oman and UAE for first year for private registration.

Free registration
Nissan Patrol Super Safari patrons can enjoy free registration on Nissan models for the first year.

EMI for models
Customers of Nissan Patrol



Super Safari can avail low EMI rate of RO322 as part of the offer. EMIs are calculated on the basis of 20 per cent down payment and 3.25 per cent rate of interest for six years loan tenure.

Nissan Patrol Safari: The legacy
This legacy of reliability and superior 4x4 capability remains true today, and it is why one can take the Nissan Patrol Safari where others don't dare to go.

Nissan Patrol Super Safari boasts of all the elements that have elevated the vehicle to iconic status such as the rugged design and the off-road capability, while delivering a modern approach that is

complimented by the special upgrades and enhancements that add to its usability and visual appeal

Iconic model
The Patrol Super Safari boasts all-new tan leather seats and door trim with 8-way power seats for the driver and 4-way for the front passenger. New driver aids include a navigation system as well as front and rear parking sensors with rear view camera, Bluetooth, USB, CD, auxiliary input socket and FM/AM radio to complete the in-car entertainment offering. The vehicle comes equipped with automatic climate control and a built-in, refrigerated cool box.

Building on the iconic Super Safari model, the new Nissan Patrol Super Safari enjoys the legendary exterior design which has distinguished it from other Patrol models and made it

one of the most recognized icons of modern off-road vehicles. Distinctive machine cut 17" black alloy wheels, dual-tone body colours, flared fenders, a rear spoiler and a Super Safari body stripe all build on its iconic looks.

The Patrol Super Safari boasts a 4.8L DOHC in-line 6-cylinder engine producing 280hp and a mighty 46kg or 451Nm of torque which allows it to power up dunes or tow heavy objects with ease. The engine is mated to a 5-speed automatic transmission with manual mode.

Dual front airbags, ABS, an immobiliser and cruise control are among the other features contributing to both safety and driver convenience, while the vehicle boasts rear locking differentials, an electric front winch, as well as front and rear tow hooks as standard equipment for desert use.

Oman Sail sets new Guinness World Record in beach clean-up

Oman Sail has set a Guinness World Record for the Most Nationalities Collecting Litter.

Under supervision by an adjudicator from Guinness World Records, participants at the Youth Sailing World Championships, including sailors, Oman Sail officials, staff at Barceló Mussanah Resort and members from the Omran Group broke a new record with 73 nationalities collecting over 344kg of litter at Mussanah public beach on December 15.

Dr Khamis al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail, said, “During the beach clean-up it was clearly evident the global challenge of single-use plastic; Oman Sail encourages everyone to reduce or even eliminate single-use plastic within their daily activities and to take the UN Clean Seas pledge, a life-long commitment to help protect our environment.”

He added, “This record is a



great achievement by everyone involved and also highlights just how much litter there is on beaches and in seas around the world.

“The Youth World Sailing Championships boasts a fleet of over 60 nations, showing how collaboration can help to restore and preserve the environment. Beach clean-ups have been taking place across the country

throughout our Oman Sailing Festival, and now at Barceló Mussanah Resort.

“We are calling on members of the public, residents and tourists across Oman to dispose of their litter appropriately and help out when needed to keep our nation beautiful and clean for future generations.”

Dermot Birchall, general manager of Barceló Mussanah Resort, said, “Mussanah is blessed with a wonderful stretch of beach and incredible clear blue seas. It is our responsibility to maintain the environment and do everything we can to preserve the beauty for others to enjoy.

“To set a new Guinness World Records title whilst hosting the 50th edition of the Youth World Sailing Championships, the first to be held in the Middle East, will be part of our legacy as responsible operators and set a positive example for others to follow.”

Ooredoo holds Nojoom raffle draw

Ooredoo has rounded off another exciting edition of its popular Nojoom raffle draw.

Fourteen lucky winners from across Oman walked away with iPhone 13 handsets, BeIN Ultimate subscriptions, and the grand prize, where five winners will each receive two tickets for matches at the FIFA Arab Cup 2021 in Qatar, including flights and two nights in a four or five-star hotel. Meanwhile, members continue to win loads of GBs of data and local calling minutes. With draws held daily, weekly and monthly, subscribers get more opportunities to win the more they use the programme.

With over two million members and counting, Nojoom is just one way that Ooredoo is pioneering an outstanding customer experience. The exciting reward system offers unmatched value, premium recognition and exclusive rewards for both Shahry postpaid and Hala prepaid, as well as Home Internet customers. Members can earn points simply by paying Ooredoo bills, or using any of the company's services.

Mazda CX-5: Safest car in this year's IIHS crash test

Over the past few decades, IIHS has been improving and making its safety tests more difficult to pass. And this time, it has surpassed the rigour of its previous tests by introducing new parameters to its illustrious side crash safety test.

Out of 20 models that participated in this year's test, only Mazda CX-5 was up to the mark of 'Good', the rest were either average or extremely poor in their safety considerations.

The previous tests simulated an SUV or a pickup truck weighing 3,300 pounds hitting a car at 31 mph. However, the new changes in this test included the barrier weighing 4180 pounds hitting a car at 37 mph.

The crash energy received by the vehicle, in the latest test, was evaluated to be 82 per cent more. This rigorous standard of testing has never been used by any other safety company in the USA.

The newly modified side crash test assesses how well the structure of the passenger compartment remains intact following a collision.

It also evaluates how well the airbags protect the heads of the dummies with the help of the sensors fitted to dummies present in the driver seat and the rear seat.

Well-known for its brilliant outlook and artistic design, Mazda CX-5 is a combination of the thrill of driving a sports car with the security of an SUV.



Great appearance along with comfortable interior sets Mazda CX-5 apart from the rest of the cars.

It is also referred to as the “art that moves”; looking at its structure and features, there is absolutely no doubt about that.

Besides design, CX-5 is just as promising in its safety standards as well. The safety features proved the Mazda CX-5 to be worthy of winning the Top Safety Pick+ award since 2014 for its remarkable safety suite.

The IIHS test score also contributes to proving Mazda's commitment to the safety of its customers throughout the years.

Joe Young, the director of public relations at IIHS, mentioned that the last IIHS test witnessed many “Good” scoring vehicles, but still there were thousands of cases reported of

side crashes, 23 per cent of which ended up in deaths.

This encouraged IIHS to make its test more difficult this time using higher safety protocols.

“We're trying to save lives and prevent injuries,” said Young.

David Harkey, the president of IIHS, says that they developed this new test because they presumed that there was room for improvement and these results confirmed their hypothesis.

“The good rating for the Mazda CX-5 shows that robust protection in a more severe side crash is achievable,” said Harkey.

With yet another safety stamp under its name, now is the time for you to experience the exhilarating drive of the Mazda CX-5.

We have tested it, have you? Book a test drive and enjoy this thrilling ride.

Top ministers highlight Saudi success story at ABLF Talks

The success of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as it marches towards a new era of development and progress through technology, innovation and socio-economic empowerment of citizens was the highlight of the third edition of the ABLF Talks Hybrid, the monthly leadership series that brings together world leaders in conversations and collaborations.

The ABLF Talks, held under the patronage of Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak al Nahayan and in partnership with the UAE Ministry of Economy and Dubai Cares, saw top leaders from Saudi Arabia in a lively discussion alongside inspiring icons from industry in the UAE as they charted the road ahead to counter the grave challenges posed by the pandemic.

The conclave kickstarted with a keynote address by Dr Mohammed bin Ahmed al Sudairy, deputy minister of Education for Universities, Research and Innovation, Saudi Arabia, as he highlighted the various initiatives undertaken by the ministry to ensure that citizens had the required capabilities to compete at a global level.

“Education comes at the heart of the UN SDGs,” he said as he elaborated on measures like the Human Capital Development programme, under Vision 2030, that were designed to promote upskilling, improve gender parity, help develop basic and future skills of students as well as improve the quality of education for



(Clockwise) Reema Juffali, Eng Badr Abdulla al Dulami, Dr Mohammed bin Ahmed al Sudairy, Noor Alnahhas, Sally Mousa and Melda Akin, and Giuseppe Saba

knowledge seekers and teachers.

This was followed by an engaging session on 'The Long Road to Economic Stability' with Eng Badr Abdulla al Dulami, vice minister of Transport and Logistic Services, KSA who enumerated the strategies adopted by the government to make Saudi Arabia a hub for logistics in the world.

Saudi Arabia was also represented by Reema Juffali, the spunky F3 Racing Driver who made history when she became the first female race car driver from the kingdom. Reema, who

was recently appointed the ambassador for the country's inaugural Grand Prix held in Jeddah, shared her inspiring story with the ABLF audiences as she pointed out the importance of education in empowering women. “Education is an important tool to make participation of women and young girls in sports possible,” said Reema.

Another interesting session was by Giuseppe Saba, CEO, International Humanitarian City, where he underscored the need for partnerships in the humanitarian sector especially when it

came to fulfilling the objectives enshrined in the UN SDGs.

The conclave rounded off with a riveting panel discussion featuring two accomplished entrepreneurs - Melda Akin, CEO, D14.A1 and Noor Alnahhas, CEO, Nybl. At their session titled 'The Crisis: A Catalyst for a Tech-led Future', the tech entrepreneurs recalled the challenges in their respective journeys and how they steered their companies through the pandemic that led to an acceleration of digital innovation through Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence.

Children from Oman shine with six Australian innovation patents

An award ceremony was held recently in Oman to motivate young innovators of Oman who have contributed for six Australian innovation patents.

During the event, over 20 children - aged 8 to 16 from Oman - who have contributed for six patents in the past one year were felicitated along with their parents.

The projects that were filed for a patent are as follows: A programmed power load regulator wirelessly coupled with at least one stand alone console unit; IoT-controlled autobot for warehouse management; IoT-controlled tilt indicating device; Artificial Intelligence-based multipurpose cradle system; Artificial



cial neural network-based umbrella for visually impaired; IoT-based student presence notification device for school and school buses.

Three of the above six projects have already been granted a patent and remaining three are awaiting the grant. One of the children granted with a patent,

Jyoshita Datta Juluru said, “Everything we learnt with Arcomm was new and their practical sessions every week were so interesting, which encouraged us

to innovate and excel with patents.”

The event was graced by the presence of Zahir Khalid Sulaimani, chairman of

Arcomm Oman, Mazin Zahir Khalid al Sulaimani, CEO of Arcomm Oman and Dr Arun Raaza, founder CEO & innovations head of Arcomm.

Sulaimani said, “We are on a mission to enable lots of young innovators from Oman with world-class training and make Oman one of the best innovation hubs in the world. I heartily congratulate all the children whose patents have been granted.”

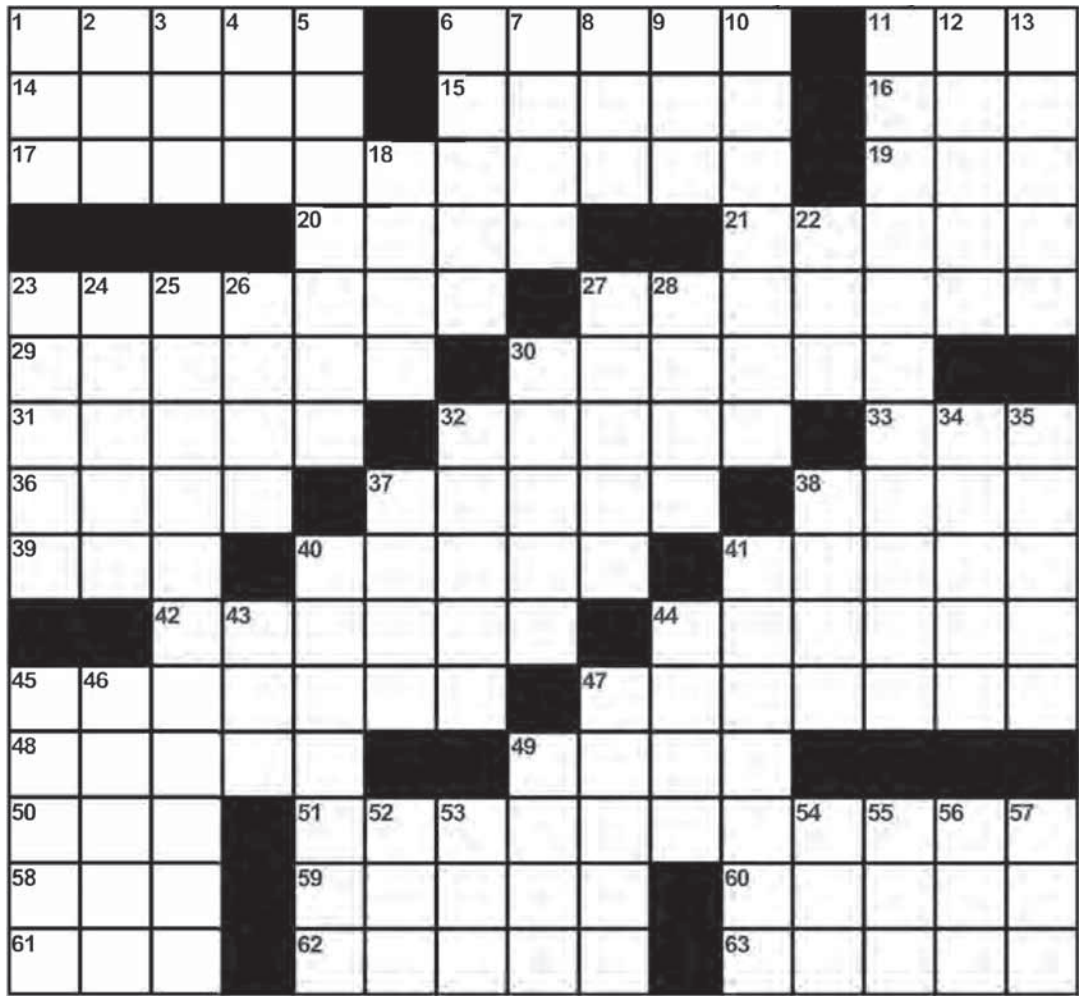
During the event the children presented their patent innovations and explained how they developed those ideas into prototypes and working models. They also explained the importance of the training they underwent in Arcomm which had

kindled and sharpened their innovation skills.

One of the parents who attended the event, Dr Yogeeswari, mother of Nithin Senthilnathan said, “We are extremely happy to be part of the event. Arcomm offers state-of-the-art hands-on training in emerging technologies and apart from the Power Load Regulator Innovation Patent, they guided my child to get first prize in Muscat Science Fest 2020.”

Arcomm offers hands-on practical education to more than 2,000 children globally in emerging technologies like Electronics, Embedded System & Robotics, Internet of Things, Coding and Artificial Intelligence.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Owned apartment, briefly
- 6) Ennead minus one
- 11) "A likely story!"
- 14) Live, as an interview
- 15) Still in existence
- 16) Stat for Zack Greinke
- 17) Free from party affiliation
- 19) Feel queasy
- 20) Salmon variety
- 21) In and of itself
- 23) Source of many unhappy returns
- 27) Tweet platform
- 29) Dental coating
- 30) Tree outgrowth
- 31) Public blights (with "eye")
- 32) Baffled person's attempt, sometimes
- 33) Work unit in physics
- 36) Plays a role
- 37) You live there
- 38) "Lion King" baddie
- 39) A question of identity
- 40) Reclines lazily
- 41) Ring-tailed animal
- 42) Sans secrecy

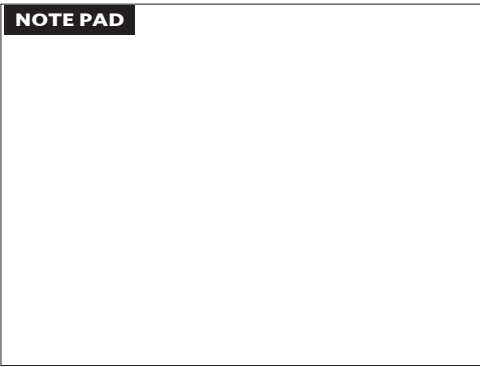
DOWN

- 1) Jailbird
- 2) Musician Yoko
- 3) Bert Bobbey's sister
- 4) Slight depression
- 5) They offer divine insight?
- 6) Scouts take them
- 7) Muse of history
- 8) "... the season to ..."

- 9) Mrs. Peron
- 10) Strike victims?
- 11) Become a minister
- 12) Begin a revolt
- 13) Comparatively fit
- 18) Coin collection?
- 22) Catchall for omitted items
- 23) Make a board even smaller
- 24) Methuselah's father
- 25) Funny drawers?
- 26) Iowa State University locale
- 27) Allowable weights
- 28) Do a laundry chore
- 30) Beefy
- 32) Greatly irritates
- 34) Honey-loving badger
- 35) Crossword puzzle layouts
- 37) Billions of years
- 38) Things one sings?
- 40) Reins cats and dogs?
- 41) Like some cattle
- 43) Plastic pipe material
- 44) "Comin' _ the Rye"
- 45) Stop
- 46) Plant sap-sucker's genus

- 47) One in a class by himself?
- 49) Raised cattle
- 52) Ostrichlike bird
- 53) Valuable blackjack

- card
- 54) "...whiz!"
- 55) Mined rock
- 56) Jar cover
- 57)_Moines



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Some wild news comes your way, but luckily, just about all of it is positive for you. The word should arrive via some higher-up you were positive had never even noticed you, much less thought you were worth thinking about. Once you're past the amazement and you've discovered that you weren't being ignored, you need to make a big decision. A wonderful bolt from the blue should make that a lot easier!



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
You need to stop trying to convince the world that you're unique and decisive. You might even be ready to choose a partner who's just as entertaining and fiery as you are! The disappointment you may feel should they disappoint you is likely to be fierce. Still, that's no reason not to try, and you get over such things pretty quickly anyway.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
You're famous for consistently being game to experience the last thing on earth anyone else might try and then telling everyone you know all about it. Today's nutty energy is perfect for you. An invitation sets you off on a path that includes not just adventure but also a new and improved relationship with a good friend or sweetheart. No matter how subtle the invitation may be, you're up for it.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Some news comes your way that you may not know quite what to do with. It likely puts you in the position of making a sudden decision, so be ready. There are several factors underlying the situation, but the last person on earth you'd ever think of should probably be first on your list of suspects. If you need to make your choice based on your instincts, your intuition can guide you through it nicely provided you listen!



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
After months of wondering why nothing ever seems to happen the way it should when it comes to your relationships, you've reached the point of believing in pure fate. This could mean trying to ignore your friends, some of whom aren't looking out for you, others of whom feel the need to constantly remind you that you're doing this to yourself. You need to remember that the only person you owe explanations to right now is you.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Several big influences conspire to cause some electrical, mechanical, or electronic object in your possession to shirk its responsibilities. Your first impulse might be to go after it with a hammer, since vengeance comes first and simple tools can't fail you. If you avoid that destructive impulse, you should find someone who can actually repair the offending item or maybe show you the manual.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
You're usually one of the last ones to take things seriously, especially if there's any way to have some fun. Right now, though, your keen instincts have informed you that something needs to be done right away and you're the only one equipped to make the decision! Fortunately, it just concerns where to go and who to take along as you head out on some kind of grand adventure.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Your specialty is taking care of others, though more often than not that comes at your own expense without any hope of being reimbursed. Startling news from a family member or an old, dear friend could finally convince you that it's time to start taking care of one person and one person only: you. It might be a brand-new concept, but you need to get used to it quickly.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
Just when you thought you were done informing the world exactly how it should be run, you've discovered that certain key elements aren't cooperating. You might be up for a few days of instructing them in the right way to go about their business, and you should rally if it means convincing them to toss their loyalties aside for the moment. For now, just do what you do best and win them over with pure logic.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Your idea of an ideal relationship involves combining your interests and assembling them to come up with one solid, grounded asset that you and your loved ones can all share. Does this mean that you're meeting new acquaintances who know more about these matters than you? That's likely, but in the meantime, don't worry about making decisions. Once you come up with the groundwork, the rest will be a snap!



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Clear your throat and prepare to make the big announcement. You need to immerse yourself in nothing but the best interests of number one. It's your turn to treat yourself to a stretch of being nice to yourself and no one else. In your case, the deeper side of your mind is what makes you personally happiest. Intimacy, intensity, and maybe just a touch of intrigue are vital.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
You should be more than ready to wear your heart on your sleeve even when you're supposed to be tough and insensitive. Does this mean you're invulnerable at the moment? In a way, but only on the surface. Just in case it only goes skin deep, call and ask someone you trust to come along and chaperone, especially if you're about to venture into unknown, inhospitable territory.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The Law of Natural Selection is associated with

- a. Dalton
- b. Darwin
- c. Kepler
- d. Mendel

2. The Indian space programme began in

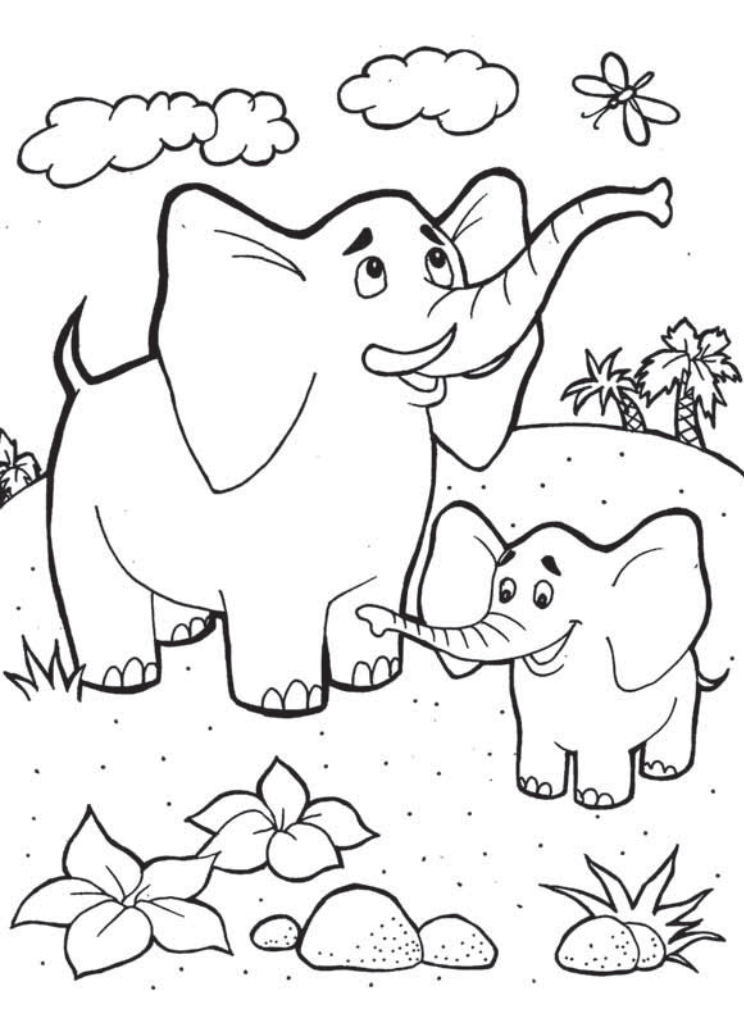
- a. 1961
- b. 1962
- c. 1965
- d. 1969

3. The member states of European Union are

- a. Belgium, Denmark, France and Greece
- b. The Federal Republic of Germany, Republic of Ireland, Italy
- c. Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain
- d. All of the above

Answers: 1. b 2. b 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

U	N	S	E
I	W	H	E
M	L	I	T
S	C	L	N

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

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

WORD BUILDER



You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Saudi goes tough on Iran's nuclear programme

It's important to have a serious approach to Iran's nuclear and ballistic programme: Prince Mohammed

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Tuesday called for an 'effective and serious' approach to Iran's ballistic and nuclear programme, during a Gulf summit in Riyadh.

The de facto ruler was representing his country at the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting, which brought together Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar.

Saudi authorities have not explained the absence of his 85-year-old father King Salman.

"It is important to have an effective and serious approach to Iran's nuclear and ballistic programme," the Crown Prince told the summit.

Last month, the United States and GCC countries accused Iran of causing a nuclear crisis and destabilising the Middle East with ballistic missiles and drones.

They urged the Iranian administration to seize the 'diplomatic opportunity' stemming from the resumption of nuclear talks in Vienna aimed at salvaging a 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and world powers.

In 2018, former president Donald Trump pulled the United State out of the accord, which provided Iran with sanctions relief in return for curbs on its nuclear programme, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

After a five-month pause, the



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman chairs the GCC summit in Riyadh on Tuesday (AFP)

talks resumed on November 29 but are hanging in the balance.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told a press conference after the summit on Wednesday that the evolution of the Vienna negotiations 'is worrying and does not create optimism'.

He said that Saudi Arabia's presence at the talks 'would allow us to be close to solutions since we are one of the countries most threatened'.

"Iran maintains an intransigent position... and that is certainly worrying," he said.

'Multiple challenges'

GCC secretary-general Nayef al-Hajraf said the summit had called for prohibiting Lebanese group Hezbollah 'from carrying out its violent activities and supporting fighting militias that threaten the stability of Arab countries'.

Lebanon's ties with Gulf states have grown increasingly strained in recent years because of the growing influence of Iran-backed Hezbollah.

A Lebanese minister's recent remarks on the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen's war sparked

a row with Gulf countries that has exacerbated Lebanon's multiple crises.

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels have repeatedly targeted Saudi Arabia in cross-border attacks, using drones and missiles.

In a final summit communique, the GCC countries agreed on 'the importance of coordinating to achieve a unified and effective foreign policy that protects the interest of the Gulf peoples'.

They also agreed on the need to 'diversify' their economies, which rely heavily on oil and gas.

The evolution of Vienna talks is worrying and does not create optimism. Saudi presence at the talks would allow us to be close to solutions since we are one of the countries most threatened

FAISAL BIN FARHAN

Prince Mohammed called for 'further coordination of efforts in the face of multiple challenges' and emphasised the need to 'unify positions to strengthen the role' of the GCC on a regional and international level.

The summit came almost a year after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt agreed to restore relations with Qatar, after severing ties with Doha in 2017.

The countries had claimed Qatar was too close to Iran and backed radical Islamist groups, allegations Doha has denied.

Shiite-majority Iran and its Sunni rival Saudi Arabia have held several rounds of talks since April aimed at improving ties since they cut relations in 2016.

The Saudi Crown Prince visited GCC countries including Qatar last week.

AFP

Return to terms of nuke deal: UN urges US, Iran

United Nations - The UN on Tuesday urged Washington to lift sanctions on Tehran in line with the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, while calling on the Islamic republic to return to commitments to limit its nuclear program.

"I appeal to the US to lift or waive its sanctions as outlined in the plan and extend the waivers regarding the trade in oil with the Islamic Republic of Iran," said Rosemary DiCarlo, the UN under-secretary-general for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.

"Also important is the extension of US waivers regarding certain civilian nuclear-related activities," she told the UN Security Council, as negotiations resumed in Vienna on reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, as the nuclear deal is formally known.

She added waiver extensions were also needed for exchanging enriched uranium out of Iran for natural uranium.

The deal has been on life support since 2018, when former president Donald Trump pulled the US out of the accord, which provided Iran with sanctions relief in return for curbs on its nuclear pro-

gramme, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

DiCarlo called on Iran "to reverse the steps it has taken that are not consistent with its nuclear-related commitments under the plan."

In a joint statement, Germany, Britain and France, all signatories of the nuclear deal along with Russia and China, said, 'The diplomatic door is firmly open for Iran to do a deal now.'

'Iran has to choose between the collapse of the JCPOA and a fair and comprehensive deal, for the benefit of the Iranian people and nation,' the statement added.

Iran's UN ambassador, Majid Takht Ravanchi, said that to resume its commitments under the nuclear agreement, his country was not 'imposing any preconditions or new conditions' and that all the measures it has taken since Washington left the accord were 'reversible'.

His US counterpart, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said Washington was 'prepared to return to US compliance and to stay in compliance, so long as Iran does the same'.

AFP



This file photo shows two US Air Force Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets flying over the beach of Houlgate, north-western France (AFP)

US still prepared to sell fighter jets to UAE, says Blinken

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted on Wednesday the US was still prepared to sell F-35 fighter jets to the UAE, which has threatened to scrap the deal over stringent conditions.

The US\$23bn arms package was pushed through by former president Donald Trump in what was seen as a reward for the United Arab Emirates' recognition of Israel, but his successor Joe Biden has pledged greater oversight over the planes.

The Gulf state threatened to dump the agreement on Tuesday over the strict conditions, and it comes as Washington grows concerned about China's involvement with the US ally.

But Blinken said, "We remain prepared to move forward... if that is what the Emiratis are interested in doing."

Asked about the conditions the US has set, he did not give precise details, but said Washington wanted to ensure that Israel maintains its 'military edge'.

"We wanted to make sure that we could do a thorough review of any technologies that are sold or transferred to other partners in the region," he said.

US ally Israel historically objected to Arab states obtaining the F-35s, seeking to maintain its regional advantage, but gave its blessing after the UAE last year became the first new Arab country in decades to recognise the Jewish state.

The Wall Street Journal, which first reported the impasse, said that the United States was insisting on conditions to make sure that the F-35 fighter jets would not be vulnerable to Chinese espionage.

Lawmakers from Biden's Democratic Party unsuccessfully sought to stop the sale, pointing in part to the Gulf state's participation in the bloody Saudi-led offensive in Yemen and its support for Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar.

The F-35s are prized for stealth capabilities and versatility with the capacity to gather intelligence, strike deep into enemy territory and engage in air duels.

Israel and the UAE have found common cause on concerns about Iran, although a top Emirati official this month visited Iran, where officials voiced hope for smoother ties.

AFP

Majority dead in Channel tragedy are Kurds: France

Paris, France - French authorities said on Tuesday they had formally identified 26 out of 27 migrants who drowned last month in a Channel boat accident, with most of them Kurds from Iraq.

A statement from the Paris prosecutor said that there were 17 men among the deceased aged 19-26, seven women aged 22-46, as well as a 16-year-old teenager and a child aged seven.

Sixteen of the victims were Kurds from Iraq, four were Afghan men. Three Ethiopians, a Somali woman, as well as an Iranian and an Egyptian man made up the others.

Authorities often have difficulties identifying dead migrants because they do not carry official documents and their family members frequently have to travel from remote areas overseas to see the bodies.



A torn dingy boat is seen near the beach of Wimereux, on the northern coast of France, from where migrants leave to cross the Channel on inflatable boats in an attempt to reach Britain (AFP)

Afghan photojournalist Abdul Saboor last week told AFP how he met one Iraqi Kurdish family who were among the victims just a week before they died.

Even though they had just been expelled from a camp on

the northern coast of France, they had insisted on sharing with him the few snacks they had, he recalled.

"The boy wanted to become a hairdresser, the [oldest] daughter an arts teacher," he said. They

had asked him questions about the weather in England. "They were very friendly,"

Sharing photos he had taken of them on his Twitter account, he wrote, "Their dreams will remain forever lost between the

two borders."

'It was his choice'

When news of the disaster broke, families rushed to the coroner's office in Lille, northern France to see if their loved ones were among the victims.

One of the dead was Hussein, a 24-year-old from Afghanistan who had only arrived a few days earlier at the Dunkirk home of his 18-year-old cousin, Amanullah Omakhil.

The two were very close, having taken the journey into exile together in 2016. When Hussein said he was going to take his chances on the crossing, said Amanullah.

"It was his choice. he was older than me, I couldn't tell him 'Don't do this, don't do that,'" he said.

AFP

Santa closed: In Beirut, crisis snuffs out Xmas spirit

Beirut, Lebanon - Beirut in December was once a shopping extravaganza, where day-long traffic jams clogged streets decked out with flashing Christmas lights and building-sized billboards advertising champagne and jewellery.

In barely two years of a brutal economic collapse, the lights have gone out on Beirut's commercial heyday and power shortages have left the city's streets shrouded in gloom.

This year, the roadside billboards tell a different, more frugal story: One that reflects the worst financial crisis to ever hit the once free-spending Middle Eastern country.

Steel safes, banknote counters, discounts on money transfers - the offers plastered on the bridges straddling the main highway into Beirut aren't your typical Christmas pleasures.

"Sales of safes and vaults have increased by 35 to 50 per cent since the start of the economic crisis in 2019," a sales representative at Smartsecurity LB, one of the main retailers in Lebanon, said.



Vehicles drive late in the rain past a Christmas tree erected in the district of Ashrafieh in Beirut on Tuesday (AFP)

Alarms and CCTV systems are also selling like hot cakes.

The lack of trust in banks that are blamed for the worst financial crisis in Lebanon's history has raised the estimated amount of cash stashed away in homes to a whopping US\$10bn.

"We're at minus 90 per cent compared to pre-2019 crisis levels," said Antonio Vincenti, chairman of the Picasso out-of-home advertising company, a market leader in Lebanon.

'Last Christmas'

The banks, whose campaigns were once ubiquitous on his billboards, are insolvent, sometimes replaced by money transfer firms offering to funnel the diaspora's dollars into the country.

"Digital screens remain switched off, mostly because of the problems we face in electricity supply," Vincenti said.

The government provides barely two hours a day of mains electricity and the cost of powering the screens with newly non-subsidised diesel would outstrip the income from clients.

In Beirut's long-deserted downtown area, where luxury brands used to be concentrated, one apologetic Christmas sign still flashes at night with the words: 'Despite it all'.

On shop windows, Christmas sale posters are outnumbered by closed signs and beggars have replaced Santa impersonators on the street outside.

AFP

Putin hails ‘model’ Russia-China relations in video call with Jinping

Moscow, Russia - President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday hailed Russia's ‘model’ relations with China in a call with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and confirmed he would attend Beijing’s Olympics, as both countries face increasing criticism from the West.

The video call came days after G7 foreign ministers discussed Moscow’s sabre-rattling against Ukraine and China’s crackdowns in Hong Kong and in Xinjiang.

“In February we will finally be able to meet in person in Beijing,” Putin said in a national television broadcast of the conversation after he said he would attend the Games, calling Xi his ‘dear friend’.

“China-Russia relations have withstood all kinds of stern tests, and are showing new dynamism and vitality,” Chinese state news agency Xinhua reported Xi as saying.

The US, Britain, Canada and Australia are not sending political representatives to the Olympics over China’s abuse of Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

Beijing and Moscow denounced the diplomatic boycott and Putin on Wednesday said both leaders opposed ‘any attempt to politicise sport and the Olympic movement’, a criticism Russia has repeatedly levelled at the West.



Russian President Vladimir Putin holds a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping via a video link, in Moscow on Wednesday (AFP)

Russia was found to have used a state-backed doping programme at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi and was banned from international competitions afterwards.

Russian athletes are allowed to compete as neutrals - without the Russian flag or anthem - if they can prove their doping record is clean.

Russian officials including Putin are banned from attending international competitions unless invited by the head of state of the host country. Xi has invited Putin to attend.

Both China and Russia have seen their relationship with Western nations deteriorate in recent years and have sought to project a more unified front.

On Wednesday, Putin told Xi that ‘a new model of cooperation has been formed between our countries’ that includes a ‘determination to turn our common border into a belt of peace and good-neighbourliness’.

“I consider these relations to

be a real model for inter-state cooperation in the 21st century,” the Russian leader said.

‘Unprecedented’ relations

After the call, the Kremlin’s top foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov said that the conversation between ‘two great friendly states’ had lasted 90 minutes and was ‘very positive’.

“Both stated that the relationship had reached an unprecedented high level,” he told reporters here on Wednesday.

The talks came after both Russia and China were pointedly left out of US President Joe Biden’s democracy summit last week.

The US and its allies have for weeks accused Russia of planning an invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour Ukraine, warning of massive coordinated sanctions should Putin launch an attack.

Tens of thousands of Russian troops are stationed near Ukraine, where the West has ac-

cused the Kremlin of backing pro-Moscow separatists since 2014.

Russia rejects the allegations and blames the West for stoking up tensions.

In calls on Tuesday with the leaders of France and Finland, Putin said he wanted security talks with the United States and NATO to begin without delay.

Russia’s demands included stopping NATO from expanding east and the deployment of weapons in neighbouring states, including Ukraine.

China’s relationships with multiple Western allies, meanwhile, have cratered in recent years over a host of issues - from trade and security to Beijing’s human rights record and vows to seize Taiwan, which it claims.

China, an authoritarian one-party state, responded with fury to being left out of the Biden summit, branding US democracy a ‘weapon of mass destruction’.

Beijing’s diplomats overseas and its state-controlled media ramped up a propaganda blitz criticising Western democracy as corrupt and a failure.

Instead, they touted ‘whole-process people’s democracy’, aiming to shore up legitimacy for the ruling Communist Party, which has swung increasingly authoritarian under Xi.

AFP

Boat sinks in Malaysia; 11 dead, 25 missing

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - At least 11 Indonesian migrants died and 25 are believed to be missing after a boat sank on Wednesday in stormy weather off southern Malaysia, authorities said.

Indonesians looking for work sometimes try to enter neighbouring Malaysia illegally by crossing sea in rickety boats, and accidents happen regularly.

The vessel, believed to be carrying 50 migrants, went down in the morning off Malaysia’s southern state of Johor, the coastguard said, correcting an earlier figure of 60 it released.

Soldiers on patrol discovered the bodies of seven men and four women on the shore, coastguard chief Admiral Mohamad Zubil Mat Som told AFP.

Another 14 people were found alive following the voyage from a nearby Indonesian island, and have been taken into custody, the coastguard said.

Those missing are believed to have fled into hiding or drowned, and authorities have deployed boats and an aircraft to hunt for them.

“We deeply regret this deadly tragedy,” Mohamad Zubil told AFP. “I urge migrants not to enter Malaysia illegally.”

Relatively affluent Malaysia is home to millions of migrants from poorer parts of Asia, many of them undocumented.

AFP

Aid to Syria rebel bastion vital: UN chief

United Nations - Cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria remains vital, the United Nations Secretary-General said in an internal report on Tuesday, as a UN authorisation allowing aid into rebel-held areas in the country’s northwest without approval from Damascus is set to expire.

A rare moment of cooperation between the United States and Russia in July allowed for a six-month extension of activity at Bab al-Hawa, the only border crossing through which aid reaches the rebel stronghold of Idlib province. That authorisation is due to expire on January 10.

“Cross-border assistance remains lifesaving for millions of people in need in north-west Syria,” Antonio Guterres said in a confidential document obtained by AFP, adding that over four million people were in need of crucial assistance across the country.

The United States and several



Children at a camp for Syrians displaced by conflict that was flooded during heavy rains near the village of Kafr Uruq, in Idlib province (AFP)

European nations believe the UN authorisation for the crossing between Syria and Turkey should renew automatically for an additional six months, without the need for a new vote.

But Russia, a key ally to the Damascus regime, has previously opposed the move, invoking Syrian sovereignty.

Moscow has linked any po-

ject for humanitarian operations, this time across the front lines, to reach Idlib.

“If implemented, this plan will make operations across the front lines more predictable and effective,” Guterres noted.

However, he insisted upon the importance of the Bab al-Hawa crossing.

“At this point such cross-line convoys, even if deployed regularly, could not replicate the size and scope of the cross-border operation,” he said.

Guterres said some 4.5mn people in Syria need help this winter, up 12 per cent from previous year, because of the economic crisis and the pandemic.

Only 2.9 per cent of the Syrian population is fully vaccinated, according to the report.

More than three million people live in Idlib province, much of which is controlled by extremists and allied rebels.

AFP

President Macron to meet Mali strongman for first time

Paris, France - French President Emmanuel Macron will next week travel to Mali for his first meeting with transitional leader Colonel Assimi Goita who led the coup last August that ousted the country’s elected president, the French presidency said.

Macron’s meeting with Goita in Bamako on Monday will come at a tense time in relations between France and Mali with the French government deeply concerned over the possibility that Russian mercenaries could be deployed as France begins to draw down its troops.

During his trip, Macron will also pay a Christmas visit to French troops stationed at its base in Goa. French forces earlier this week left the northern



President Emmanuel Macron

city of Timbuktu after a nine-year presence there.

Macron, whose visit will last until Tuesday next week, is also expected to press Goita on sticking to a schedule to hold elections in February.

Goita was sworn into office in June after leading the coun-

try’s second coup in less than a year.

He headed a putsch last August that ousted elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita after weeks of mass protests over corruption and the long-running conflict.

The junta then handed power to a civilian-led transitional government which promised to restore civilian rule in February 2022.

But in late May, Goita, who was vice president under the transitional government, ousted the president, Bah Ndaw, and premier Moctar Ouane, saying they had sought to ‘sabotage’ the handover.

Goita in July then survived an assassination attempt at a mosque in Bamako.

AFP

Canada sets aside billions for indigenous children in foster care

Ottawa, Canada - Canada on Tuesday earmarked C\$40bn to compensate indigenous children who suffered discrimination in foster care, in a fiscal update touting a quicker-than-expected economic recovery from a pandemic slump.

The monies have been set aside to settle a lawsuit that found the government had underfunded indigenous children’s services compared to those for non-indigenous children.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said half of the funds would go to compensate children and their families and the other half would be spent on re-forming the system.

“We know that paying our historic debt to indigenous peoples is paramount and that we must act to ensure these injustices do not happen again,” she said.

A tribunal in 2019 ordered the



This file photo shows people taking part in a walk marking the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Nova Scotia on September 30

government to pay C\$40,000 to each child removed from their parents after 2006 and placed in foster care outside of their indigenous community.

Ottawa asked a federal court of appeal in September to overturn the ruling, while it sought a negotiated deal. Those talks are still ongoing.

Against this backdrop, discoveries of more than 1,300 unmarked graves at former indigenous residential schools - where many students were mal-

nourished and abused - have put a spotlight on a push for reconciliation with Canada’s 1.7mn indigenous peoples.

“Money does not mean jus-

tice,” said Assembly of First Nations National Chief RoseAnne Archibald of the earmarked compensation after it was leaked on Monday. “However, it signals that we are on the healing path forward.”

In the fiscal update, Freeland also outlined a tapering of pandemic aid, noting: “Canada has largely recovered from the economic damage inflicted by COVID-19 and is poised for robust growth in the months to come.”

Three million jobs lost at the start of the pandemic have been recouped and economic growth is near pre-pandemic levels.

After doling out more than half a trillion dollars in COVID-19 aid over the past two years, the government is now proposing to focus aid on hardest hit sectors and on fighting the Omicron variant, while introducing paid sick

leave for workers, as well as funding and tax credits for improved indoor air ventilation to reduce virus transmission.

“Keeping the Canadian economy on life support as we went into COVID-19 hibernation was expensive,” Freeland said.

“Our goal was to prevent economic scarring,” she added.

“We wanted to emerge from this with our economic muscle intact; ready, as a country, to come roaring back.”

Parliament must still have its say on the new outlays.

Opposition parties have raised concerns about government spending fueling inflation.

This year’s deficit is projected to fall slightly from an April budget forecast to C\$327.7bn, while the national debt is set to reach C\$1,048.7bn, or 47.6 per cent of GDP.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Europe kicks off vaccine drive for kids

Frankfurt, Germany - Several European nations started vaccinating children aged five to 11 against COVID-19 on Wednesday in an effort to contain a raging pandemic and keep schools open, while others are still deciding their approach.

Germany, Spain, Greece and Hungary are among those opening up their inoculation drives to younger kids, with doctors reporting strong initial demand from parents.

The EU's medicines watchdog last month approved the Pfizer-BioNTech shot for five to 11-year-olds, an age group experiencing high coronavirus infection rates across the continent.

The vaccine is administered in a lower dosage than the Pfizer jab for over-12s, and comes in a paediatric vial with an orange cap to distinguish it from the purple-capped vials for older ages.

Denmark, which has seen a surge in cases attributed to the highly contagious Omicron variant, and some Austrian regions

already began offering jabs to younger kids in November.

The United States was the first large country to take the plunge and has so far vaccinated more than five million children aged five to 11.

'Small cog'

"As soon as we offered the vaccine appointments, they were pretty much all snapped up," said Jakob Maske, a Berlin-based doctor and spokesman for Germany's association of paediatricians.

But he downplayed expectations of the kids' jabs heralding a turning point in the fight against COVID-19, at a time when Germany is battling a fierce fourth wave.

"Five to 11-year-olds only make up around three per cent of the German population," he told AFP, describing the kids' immunisation impact as 'a small cog' in the battle.

Germany's STIKO vaccine commission has officially only recommended the jab for chil-



Paediatrician Jakob Maske vaccinates an 11-year-old boy in his office at the start of a vaccination campaign in Germany for children under 12 years, in Berlin on Tuesday (AFP)

dren with pre-existing conditions, but even healthy children will be inoculated if the parents request it.

Some German cities plan to administer kids' jabs in museums and zoos, while others are mulling mobile vaccination teams outside schools.

The head of Germany's

teaching union, Heinz-Peter Meidinger, said a high take-up 'would significantly increase the chance of keeping schools open as long as possible'.

In Greece, over 20,000 parents have booked vaccine appointments for their kids from Wednesday.

Spain, which has one of Eu-

rope's highest COVID-19 vaccination rates, said it was launching its immunisation campaign for five to 11-year-olds with the goal of breaking the chain of infection 'in family settings, schools and the community'.

Spain has around 3.3mn children within that age group.

A survey published by Ap-

As soon as we offered the vaccine appointments, they were pretty much all snapped up. Five to 11-year-olds only make up around three per cent of the population in Germany

JAKOB MASKE

More countries following

A number of European countries will launch similar vaccination drives in the coming days, including Italy, Portugal, Poland, the Baltic states and the Czech Republic, while others are still finalising their plans.

In France, vaccination has only been approved for five to 11-year-olds at risk of developing serious illness, but the government has said it is considering extending it to all children on a voluntary basis.

Belgium is awaiting the recommendation of its national health body, with a rollout likely around the new year.

In Switzerland, the country's medical agency has green-lighted the vaccination of kids, but the campaign will probably only start in early January.

British regulators are still assessing whether to approve jabs for children aged between 5 and 11 years with a decision likely before Christmas.

AFP

Germany vows to 'defend itself' as cops raid anti-vaccine groups

Berlin, Germany - Germany vowed on Wednesday to 'defend itself' against radicalised anti-vaccination groups after police launched raids in response to death threats against a top politician backing measures to fight the pandemic.

Police and special forces staged an operation in Saxony after an anti-vaccine group targeted the region's state premier, who has vocally supported national measures against the unvaccinated in one of the areas of the country with the lowest inoculation rates.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who took office last week, said Germany would 'not allow a tiny minority of uninhibited extremists to try to impose its will on the whole of society'.

The security forces earlier launched the operation in the eastern city of Dresden following threats from an anti-vaccine group against state premier Michael Kretschmer.

"Statements from certain members of the group suggested they might have real weapons and crossbows," police said, without indicating if any arrests had been made.

Audio messages called for



A sign on a shop indicates that entry is allowed only to people who are vaccinated against COVID-19, in Berlin on Monday (AFP)

opposing 'if necessary with weapons' the measures in place, targeting politicians and in particular, Kretschmer.

Authorities suspected 'the preparation of a violent crime that threatens the state', police later said on Twitter.

The investigation was opened after journalists from public broadcaster ZDF infiltrated an encrypted Telegram chat and reported on the death threats last week.

Torches and whistles

ZDF revealed the contents of messages allegedly involving a hundred members of the chat

group 'linked by their opposition to vaccines, to the state and the current health policies', police said.

In his first speech to parliament as chancellor, Scholz vowed a zero-tolerance policy against such extremist groups.

Germany will 'use all the means of its democratic rule of law to defend itself against this tiny minority of the hateful attacking the rest of us', he said.

A large, partly radicalised movement has emerged in Germany against health restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

AFP

WHO sees unprecedented Omicron spread, 'probably' in most countries

Geneva, Switzerland - The World Health Organization warned on Tuesday Omicron was spreading at an unprecedented rate and urged countries to act, as drug maker Pfizer said its coronavirus pill was effective against the variant.

Dutch primary schools will close early as Europe battles a fresh wave of infections and hospital admissions, while British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced a major parliamentary test seeking to impose fresh COVID-19 curbs.

Omicron, first detected by South Africa and reported to the WHO on November 24, has a large number of mutations, setting alarm bells ringing since its discovery.

Early data suggests it can be resistant to vaccines and is more transmissible than the Delta variant, which was first identified in India and accounts for the bulk of the world's coronavirus cases.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters the strain had been reported in 77 countries and 'probably' spread to most nations undetected 'at a rate we



A sign displaying an alert on Omicron, in Toulouse, France (AFP)

have not seen with any previous variant'.

Omicron now accounts for around three percent of cases in the United States, a figure that is expected to rise rapidly as has been seen in other countries.

The United States is the nation hit hardest by the pandemic, and it crossed 800,000 known COVID-19 deaths on Tuesday, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

'Dangerous situation'

Although Britain on Monday confirmed what is thought to be

the world's first Omicron death, there is no proof yet that the variant can cause more severe illness.

The WHO on Tuesday provided room for cautious optimism saying Africa had recorded a massive rise in cases over the past week but a lower number of deaths compared with previous waves.

But it urged countries to act swiftly to rein in transmission, protect their health systems and guard against complacency.

WHO expert Bruce Aylward strenuously warned against 'jumping to a conclusion that

this is a mild disease'. "We could be setting ourselves up for a very dangerous situation."

The warning came as Pfizer on Tuesday said clinical trials of its COVID-19 pill reduced number of hospital admissions and deaths among at-risk people by almost 90 per cent.

The American drug maker said its new treatment, Paxlovid, held up against Omicron in lab testing.

Chief executive Albert Bourla called the news a 'game changer' and said he expected approval from the US medicines regulator as early as this month.

"This news provides another potentially powerful tool in our fight against the virus, including the Omicron variant," added US President Joe Biden.

A real-world study from South Africa has showed two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was 70 per cent effective in stopping severe illness from Omicron.

Researchers called the results encouraging, though it represented a drop compared with earlier strains, underlining the threat of the coronavirus.

AFP

Over 65s without booster to lose French health pass

Paris, France - France on Wednesday began implementing a new tightening of rules in the fight against COVID-19, meaning people aged 65 and over will lose the validity of their health pass unless they have had a third booster shot.

The health pass was introduced in the summer and makes full vaccination against COVID-19, a recent recovery or negative test obligatory for visiting any restaurant, inter-city train travel and going to cultural venues like cinemas or museums.

Championed by President Emmanuel Macron as he eyes re-election in 2022, the health pass is seen as being a success, despite initial protests, by encouraging people who were hesitant to become vaccinated.

The government says some 400,000 people aged 65 and over who are eligible for the



People queue up for a dose of vaccine at a vaccination centre in Toulouse (AFP)

booster shot have yet to take it, which is 12 per cent of those aged 80 and above and 10 per cent of those aged 65 to 79.

People in the 65 plus age group who have failed to take up the booster shot will see the QR code in their health pass gener-

ated by a mobile phone app automatically dis-activated.

The rule, which further tightens one of the tightest health

pass systems in Europe, will from January 15 be expanded across all age groups. The only option for people without a booster - other than to get one - will be to have a negative test a maximum of 24 hours old.

France has already carried out almost 16mn booster shots and is confident of reaching its target of 20mn before Christmas. The booster is now seen as a key weapon in defeating the Omicron variant which experts believe spreads faster than previous COVID-19 variants and could become dominant in Europe in the next few weeks.

France reported on Tuesday over 63,400 positive COVID-19 tests, the highest figure since April, while almost 2,800 people are in intensive care with the illness. Over 76 per cent of people have been double vaccinated in France.

AFP

Italy tightens border rules for EU arrivals

Rome, Italy - Italy will tighten restrictions for arrivals from the rest of the EU from Thursday, requiring coronavirus tests of everyone and a five-day quarantine for those who are not vaccinated.

Previously, EU arrivals had to show proof of vaccination, recent recovery or a negative test.

The decree signed by Health Minister Roberto Speranza late on Tuesday 'provides for the obligation of a negative test on departure for all arrivals from European Union countries', a spokesperson said.

"For the unvaccinated, in addition to the negative test, a five-day quarantine is planned."

Unvaccinated people arriving from outside the bloc must already quarantine, and tests are required of those with jabs.

The new measures, valid from December 16 to January 31, come as Europe battles a fresh wave of coronavirus infections sparked by the spread of the new Omicron variant.

Early data suggests it can be resistant to vaccines and is more transmissible than the Delta variant, which currently accounts for the bulk of the world's coronavirus cases.

Italy was the first EU country to experience a major outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020.

In recent months, Italy has sought to control infections through the use of health pass showing proof of vaccination, recent recovery or a negative test for everything from going to work to eating in restaurants or cafés.

AFP

Iranian women at risk as executions rise

Paris, France - More than a dozen women have been executed this year in Iran, activists say, raising concern over a rigid judicial system that automatically seeks capital punishment for a killing without taking into account the circumstances.

Most of the women executed in Iran in recent years have been hanged for murder, the majority of cases over the killings of a husband or partner, rights activists say.

Iran's law of retribution known as qesas - where another life must be taken after a killing unless the victim's family forgives or accepts a payment - means that extenuating circumstances such as domestic violence may not be taken into account by a court.

According to Iran Human Rights, an Oslo-based NGO which closely monitors the use of the death penalty in Iran, one of the women most recently hanged was Susan Rezaeipour, executed on October 27 for the murder of her husband - who was also her cousin.

IHR said she had been in prison for six years and was executed after the victim's next of kin - who was also her maternal uncle - refused to forgive.

A source told the group that Rezaeipour had stated in her confession that her husband was drunk from the afternoon and then would beat her, so "I couldn't stand it anymore".

'Tried to defend themselves'

"Behind the numbers of women executed we see many other issues of grave concern," said Mahmood Amiry Moghaddam, director of the Iran Human Rights, which has counted at least 15 women executed this year and 170 since 2010.

"There have been cases of an



Most of the women executed in Iran in recent years have been hanged for murder, the majority of cases over the killings of a husband or partner



This file photo shows Reyhaneh Jabbari, who was executed for killing a former intelligence officer she said had tried to sexually assault her (AFP)

abusive relationship, of child brides and - in traditional communities - women offered as a

bride as a reconciliation between tribes," he said.

He added that qesas was in-

compatible with international law as it 'puts this responsibility of punishment on the family of the victim' even though the judiciary claims to mediate with the families.

One of the most notorious cases in recent years was the October 2014 hanging of 26-year-old Reyhaneh Jabbari, who was convicted of murdering a former intelligence officer she maintained had tried to sexually assault her.

Jabbari said she had been tortured into making incriminating confessions and there was an international campaign for her life to be spared. But the victim's family insisted she must die unless she dropped her position she

had acted in self-defence.

"It is the weight of the patriarchy, these discriminations that are important to understanding the reason why there can be so many women executed in Iran," said Julia Bourbon Fernandez of Paris-based NGO Together Against the Death Penalty (ECPM). "Many tried to defend themselves against attempted rapes at home or there was an overall context of violence and explosive conditions," she said.

'Very vulnerable'

Most defendants in such cases are also from the most marginalised parts of Iranian society, activists say.

"They are often poor and re-

jected by their own families as well. So, they are very vulnerable and out of our reach," said Roya Boroumand, co-founder of the Washington-based Abdorrahman Boroumand Center.

The centre has counted some 100 cases of women executed for murder or adultery during the Islamic republic and such cases 'often have to do with domestic violence, early marriages and the difficulty in getting a divorce', she said.

There is growing alarm about the numbers of people being executed in Iran across the board - the country is second only to China for the number of executions.

After a decline sparked by a

2017 law change that meant far fewer people were executed for drug-related offences, numbers have ticked up again, with over 100 people executed on drug charges in 2021, including several women.

'Pro-abolition movement'

Among the most recently executed on drug charges was 41-year-old Myriam Khakpour who according to IHR was hanged on November 25 in the city of Isfahan. Her husband had also been convicted but was merely sent to prison.

On December 9, three women were among six executed on drug-related charges in the eastern city of Kerman, said IHR which has counted at least 116 prisoners, including five women, executed on drug-related charges in 2021 compared to 25 in 2020.

Activists complain the judicial system discriminates against women from its very basis, with the criminal responsibility of a girl set at 9 as opposed to 15 for a boy and court testimony from women carrying less legal weight than from men.

Bourbon Fernandez said that aside from the disturbing statistics a brighter aspect was the increasing mobilisation in society inside Iran against the death penalty. This manifests itself in films like 'There Is No Evil', which won the Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlin film festival.

Some intellectuals have spoken out and the hashtag 'edom nakhon' - 'don't execute' - has been a viral trend both inside and outside Iran. "Contrary to what one might think, there is a rather strong pro-abolition movement, which stands in stark contrast to the stance of the authorities," said Bourbon Fernandez.

AFP

Southern Thai dance form 'nora' gets Unesco heritage status

Narathiwat, Thailand - Dancers moved gracefully in a circle, their beaded dress pieces swaying as they struck bird-like poses in a dance-drama known as 'nora' - a southern Thai performance art which was added on Wednesday to Unesco's prestigious heritage list.

The dramatic art form - combining dancing, singing and storytelling - has roots in India, and has been practised in Thailand's Muslim-majority southernmost provinces for centuries.

Performances are usually a dramatic retelling of the tale of a local prince who tries to rescue Manora - a half-human, half-bird princess, whose shortened name gives the art its name.

The ultra-elaborate showcases can last for up to three days.

Unesco on Wednesday officially listed nora as Thailand's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' - a move that could potentially bring more global recognition to a dance typically only seen in



Dancers take part in a 'nora' performance, a form of traditional folk dance, ahead of Unesco's officially listing the art form as Thailand's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage', in Su-ngai Padi district in the southern province of Narathiwat, on December 11 (AFP)

small village gatherings in the kingdom's south.

In Narathiwat province's Su-ngai Padi district - not far from

Malaysia's border - young dancers on Saturday carefully

pulled on their costumes, with lines of beads strung together in

a kaleidoscopic display of colours and patterns.

The backs of their dress pieces swooped upwards, mimicking a bird's tail.

"Nora is important to southerners for two reasons - first, it is for entertainment... the dance conveys messages which teaches people to do good for good karma," said Vichien Rattanaboona, president of the province's dance group.

"And second, it is about ceremony and beliefs. Manora will be performed during ceremonies to show respect to our teachers and parents. It's to show our gratitude," he said.

As a small band played the drums and pi nai - an oboe-like instrument - the five dancers twirled around, their expressive finger movements accentuated by their long silver nail tips.

COVID-19 restrictions over the past 20 months have meant fewer public performances, as large gatherings in hotspots were banned.

"After COVID-19 emerged, there have been no plays... it caused us to have no gigs," said 18-year-old Nitichaya Sooksan, adding that Saturday was their first performance since the pandemic started.

The high school student has been performing for nearly seven years, initially picking it up together with some friends.

Longtime nora performer Saman Dosormi - who is also a graduate student of performance arts in nearby Yala province - said the dance shows off the southern provinces' 'shared culture' of Buddhist Thais and ethnic Malay Muslims.

"It doesn't matter whether you are Buddhist, Muslim or Christian - anyone can perform this dance," he told AFP.

"I am very delighted (about nora's Unesco listing) - I'd like for all Thai cultural arts to be recognised by the world," he said.

AFP

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Sustainable return

While travel stopped and the world locked down, in the dazzling blue waters of Thailand’s idyllic Phi Phi islands, a gentle renaissance was under way.

Mass tourism had brought the archipelago, immortalised in Leonardo DiCaprio movie *The Beach*, to the brink of ecological catastrophe.

Now Thailand hopes to make Phi Phi the standard-bearer for a new, more sustainable model of tourism as the country reopens to visitors after the long COVID-19 shutdown.

Near a coral islet just a few kilometres from Maya Bay - the iconic cove surrounded by towering tree-clad cliffs that was home to the beach paradise of the DiCaprio film - marine biologist Kullawit Limchularat dives through eight metres of crystalline water and carefully releases a young bamboo shark.

His mission: To repopulate the reefs after years of damage caused by uncontrolled visitor numbers, a crisis that got so bad the authorities were forced to close Maya Bay itself in 2018.

Five small brownbanded bamboo sharks are set free, their striped bodies and long tails flickering through the water.

But after being raised in captivity they are reluctant to swim out among the clown fish, barracudas and turtles.

“They need time to adapt. We waited until they reached 30 centimetres to maximise their chance of survival,” says Kullawit, who is working on the project with the Phuket Marine Biological Center.

“The aim is that once they are adults, they will stay and breed here to help repopulate the species.”

Ecological disaster

Before the pandemic, Phi Phi National Marine Park, with its white sandy beaches and coral reefs, attracted more than 2mn

visitors a year.

As a result, dozens of blacktip sharks, green turtles and hawksbill turtles have returned.

And whale sharks, the world’s largest fish and listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), have been spotted off the coast.

“Everything suggests that there is more reproduction, especially among sharks, which particularly appreciate calm waters,” says Thon.

As for the corals, “more than 40 per cent of the fragments replanted in Maya Bay have survived, a very satisfactory figure obtained thanks to the absence of visitors”. But recovery will be slow: at least two decades will be needed to restore the coral reef, Thon warns.

New model

Phi Phi is slowly resuming tourism, still mostly local for now, but foreigners are returning as Thailand eases its draconian rules for visitors, and Maya Bay is due to reopen on January 1.

The government has said it wants to move on from Thailand’s history of hedonistic mass tourism, with Tourism Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn saying the focus would be on ‘high-end travellers, rather than a large number of visitors’.

On Phi Phi, national park chief Pramote Kaewnam insists the mistakes of the past will not be repeated.

Boats will no longer be allowed to moor near the beach and will instead drop tourists off at a jetty away from the cove. Tours will be limited to one hour, with a maximum of 300 people per tour.

“Maya Bay used to bring in up to US\$60,000 a day, but this huge income cannot be compared to the natural resources we have lost,” Pramote said.

The number of visitors will be regulated on other key sites of the archipelago, while boats anchoring on reefs and tourists feeding fish face US\$150 fines.

Some of the first foreign visitors to return to the area are happy with the new more exclusive approach.

“We didn’t just come to dive in the turquoise water. We also want to help,” says Franck, a visitor who has just arrived from Paris.

“It would be fantastic if the island stayed this quiet.”

Local businesses face the challenge of adapting to the new model. For some, the change is welcome.

“We need the revenue from tourism, but we also need to educate them to be good tourists. We all understood that with the pandemic,” says Sirithon Thamrongnawasawat, Singha Estate Vice President for Sustainability and Development.

Singha Estate, which owns a 200-room hotel on the island and has built a marine centre dedicated to the archipelago’s ecosystem, is financing several projects, including the replanting of coral and the breeding of bamboo sharks and clown fish.

But the enthusiasm is not shared by all 2,500 inhabitants of the archipelago, many of whom have built livelihoods around tourism and hope to see visitors return soon.

Pailin Naowabutr has been plying the waters of the archipelago for seven years, ferrying tourists on his longtail boat.

“Before COVID, I was making US\$30 a day. Since then, I’ve had to do a lot of odd jobs for less than US\$10,” he told AFP.

He gazes wistfully across the sea towards Phuket, Phi Phi’s much larger neighbour which used to welcome millions of tourists.

“They will soon come back, everyone wants to visit Phi Phi,” he says.

But the Omicron COVID variant, which has led some countries to reintroduce travel restrictions, could ruin his hopes - and give the islands’ wildlife a little more time to recover.

AFP



Before the pandemic, Phi Phi National Marine Park, with its white sandy beaches and coral reefs, attracted more than 2mn visitors a year.

Until it was closed, Maya Bay’s dazzling beauty and Hollywood fame drew up to 6,000 people a day to its narrow 250-metre long beach.

Inevitably, so many people arriving in noisy, polluting motorboats with so little control over numbers had a huge impact on the area’s delicate ecology.

“The coral cover has decreased by more than 60 per cent in just over 10 years,” says Thon Thamrongnawasawat of Kasetsart University in Bangkok.

As early as 2018, Thon raised the alarm and pushed the authorities to close part of the bay.

Then the pandemic hit and visitor numbers dwindled to virtually nil as Thailand imposed tough travel rules, putting the en-



Muscat - Over 6500 runners have booked their place for the annual Al Mouj Muscat Marathon which is scheduled to take place on February 11-12 next year.

This is a major response since registrations opened at the end of September.

'The positive response is a clear indication that excitement levels are incredibly high for Oman's most popular sporting event,' said a press statement.

There are five different categories to choose from this year, ranging from full and half marathons of 42.5km and 21.1km respectively, to 5km and 10km runs and a kids' run of 1km, 2km and 3km.

Each course has been designed with different fitness and experience levels in mind, ensuring there are opportunities for runners of all ages to be a part of Oman's biggest race.

The 2022 edition of Oman's most popular sporting event is supported by brand ambassadors Ali al Habsi; and legendary Omani goalkeeper and renowned television host, Ibtihal al Zadjali.

'Both of whom will be taking part in the race themselves and encouraging runners from across

The return of this iconic event offers an opportunity to join thousands of others from around the world... community of athletes, friends

SAYYID AYMEN AL BUSAIDI

Mouj Muscat Marathon can support body and mind by setting goals, committing to a routine, and rising to the challenge," said Sayyid Aymen al Busaidi, vice chairman of Sabco Group, organisers of the upcoming edition of the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon.

"The return of this iconic event offers an opportunity to join thousands of others from around the world and reconnect with a passionate community of athletes, friends, and colleagues through sport," he added.

Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, said that his organisation was proud to host Al Mouj Muscat Marathon for the sixth year running. "One of our pillars is to encourage a healthy and active lifestyle, which coincides with this exciting event. We greatly look forward to delivering even more great moments for participants, spectators, and visitors."

Free public training sessions are being held over a 10-week period to help runners improve their fitness, learn warm-up and cool down techniques, and receive nutrition advice. The sessions will take place every Friday until the race.

The organisers said that the registration for the event is open with attractive pricing options available. There are also opportunities for volunteers to help on-site during the two-day event.

For more information and registration, one may visit www.muscatmarathon.om



‘That’s greatness!’ Stephen Curry sets NBA three-point record

New York, US - Golden State Warriors star Stephen Curry eclipsed Ray Allen's all-time record for NBA three-pointers on Tuesday, savouring a 'beautiful moment' at storied Madison Square Garden.

Curry, whose remarkable shooting range has revolutionised the NBA in his 13-year tenure, matched Allen's record with his 2,973rd career three-pointer. It came on his first shot of the clash with the New York Knicks, less than two minutes into the contest, and had the crowd on its feet.

He then missed a chance at breaking the record, but with 7:33 remaining in the opening period, Anthony Wiggins kicked the ball to him from the paint and he swished in number 2,974, letting out a yell as teammates celebrated with him and the New York crowd cheered.

"I can't say it enough, I appreciate so much the way the fans embraced the moment with me and let me just get kind of lost in it"

and let me just get kind of lost in it," Curry (33) said.

"Hell yeah!" teammate Draymond Green shouted as the Warriors called a timeout and photographers gathered around Curry. "That's greatness!"

Curry has been scorching towards overtaking Allen's record for years. He finally surpassed the milestone in his 789th career game; Allen achieved his old benchmark in 1,300 appearances.

Curry exchanged an emotional hug with coach Steve

I appreciate so much the way the fans embraced the moment with me and let me just get kind of lost in it

STEPHEN CURRY

Kerr, who corralled the ball used in the record-setting shot.

Curry then embraced his father, former NBA player Dell Curry, as well as Allen, who was courtside.

"There was a lot of emotion for sure because I know how much work has gone into this, dreaming big from the time I first picked up a basketball," Curry said.

Kerr said the moment was 'more emotional' than he had expected. "It was just an outpouring of love and support for Steph from seemingly everybody in the building," Kerr said. "Beautiful, beautiful moment."

Curry is on pace to make well over 400 three-pointers this season, which would put him at more than 3,200 for his career. He finished the night with five three-pointers as the Warriors pulled away late to beat the Knicks 105-96 and improve their league-leading record to 23-5.

Curry's long-range prowess is such that there was real belief he could break the record with a single-game mark of 16 in a home game against the Portland Trail Blazers last Wednesday.

That didn't happen, but he did not have to wait too much longer.

Electric atmosphere

Curry's 54-point performance against the Knicks on February 27, 2013 at Madison Square Garden was a harbinger of a career that now includes three NBA titles and two Most Valuable Player awards.

"It's been a long week since our last home game, where everybody was talking about 16," he said. "(It) seemed like every shot I took there was another level of anticipation and anxiousness around it."

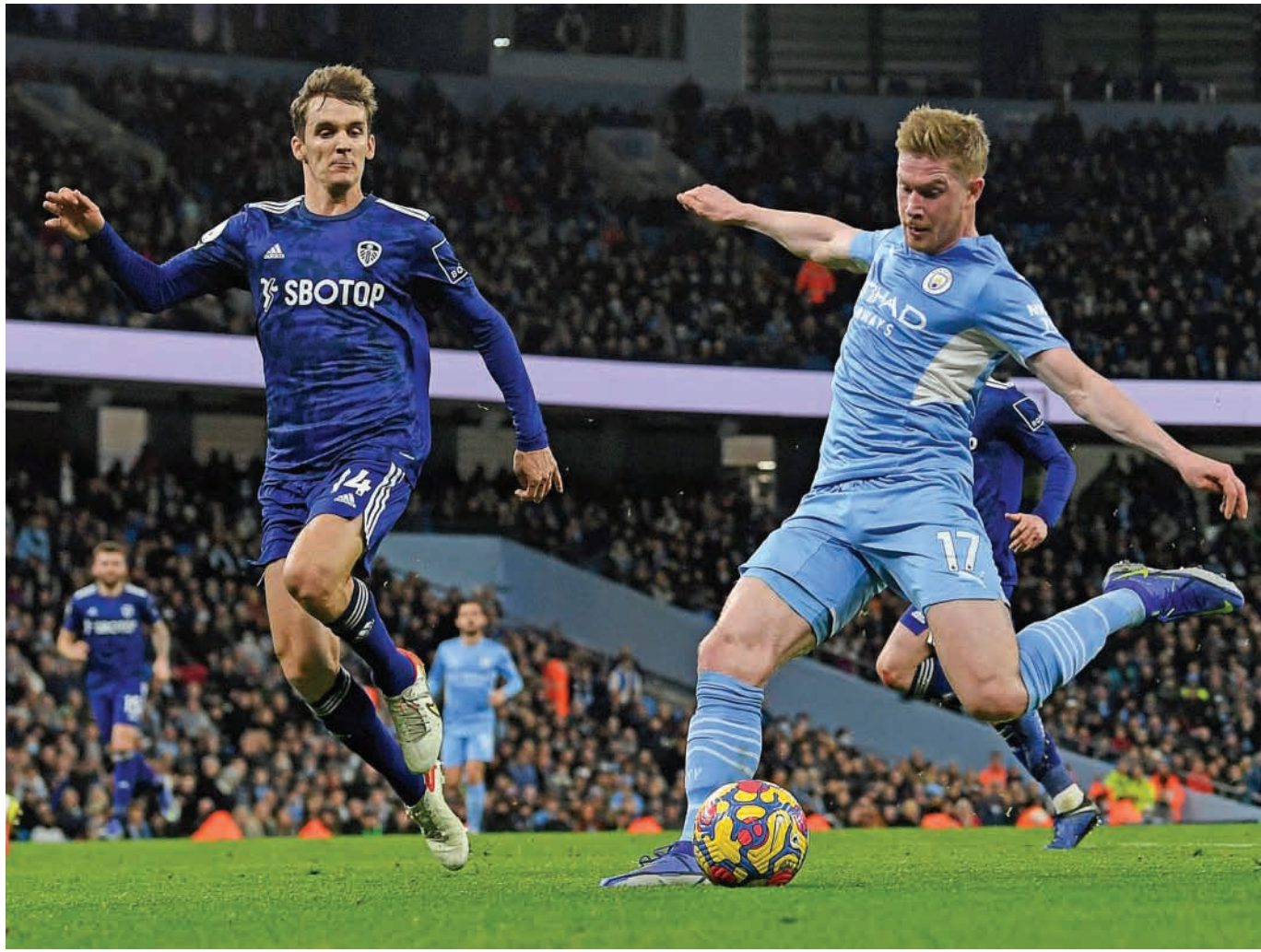
"I was just trying to play my game. Tonight it kind of set up perfectly, made that first one, get that one out of the way and then just let the record-breaker come to me," he added.

AFP



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Man City rout Leeds



Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne scores his team's third goal during the match against Leeds at the Etihad Stadium, in Manchester (AFP)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

London, UK - Manchester City powered four points clear at the top of the Premier League as Kevin De Bruyne inspired a 7-0 rout of Leeds just hours after clubs were given strict new measures to curb the threat of the coronavirus on Tuesday.

De Bruyne delivered an impeccable display including two goals on his first league start since November 6 after the Belgian star recovered from a bout of COVID-19.

Phil Foden, Jack Grealish, Riyad Mahrez, John Stones and Nathan Ake were also on target as Pep Guardiola's side ran riot at the Etihad Stadium.

City's seventh successive league victory put pressure on second placed Liverpool and third placed Chelsea, who face Newcastle and Everton respectively on Thursday.

The champions' biggest win this season equalled Liverpool's 1982 top-flight record of 33 victories in a calendar year.

"We're proud of the way we're playing. When you get these results it is because individually they are brilliant," Guardiola said. "Kevin, in these type of games when it is open up and down, is devastating as he can do what he

wants. He's so important for us."

It was the joint biggest league defeat in Leeds' history and shell-shocked boss Marcelo Bielsa said, "We've never had a performance like this. There is no justification. I have to take responsibility."

City took the lead in the eighth minute when Foden's shot was deflected in via Stuart Dallas' miscued attempt to clear off the line.

It was City's 500th Premier

League goal in 207 matches under Guardiola, setting a new record that surpassed the previous fastest mark by Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool.

Grealish had managed just two goals for City since his British record £100mn transfer from Aston Villa.

In the 13th minute, the 26-year-old headed in Mahrez's

cross to score for the first time since September. De Bruyne marked his return with his first goal since October, converting Rodri's defence-splitting pass in the 32nd minute. Mahrez added City's fourth in the 49th minute when his strike deflected in off Junior Firpo.

De Bruyne made it five in the 62nd minute with a thunderous 20-yard drive into the roof of the net. Stones blasted home in the 74th minute and Ake headed City's seventh four minutes later.

Manchester United's match at Brentford on Tuesday and Tottenham's trip to Brighton last Sunday were both postponed due to virus outbreaks.

United and Tottenham had several unnamed players test

positive, while Brighton, Leicester, Norwich and Aston Villa were also hit by the virus over the last week.

Now all top-flight players and staff will have to take a lateral flow test every time they enter their club's training ground as part of the protocols.

Twice-weekly PCR testing will also be introduced after a meeting of the 20 clubs on Tuesday.

The increased testing sits alongside the other recently introduced emergency measures, including face coverings, limiting time in the treatment room and observing social distancing.

Norwich manager Dean Smith revealed his club had asked the Premier League for guidance over his bottom of the table team's COVID-19 issues prior to Tuesday's 2-0 defeat against Aston Villa.

"It's been a tough few days. We've had a few COVID-related drop outs," Smith said before kick-off at Carrow Road.

Villa were also hit by COVID-19 but they kept their focus to make it four wins from six games under new boss Steven Gerrard.

Smith had hoped for revenge on Villa just 38 days after his sacking.

AFP



Barcelona team members celebrate their team's second goal during a match at El Sadar stadium in Pamplona (AFP)

Barcelona to play Napoli in Europa League knockout

Paris, France - Barcelona will face Napoli in the Europa League knockout round play-off stage after the Catalan giants crashed out in the Champions League group stage for the first time since the 2000-01 season.

Xavi Hernandez's Barca will continue their European campaign in the second-tier competition, with the winner of their tie with Napoli advancing to the

last 16.

"Napoli are a great team of real European pedigree. They've got a lot of experience so we're aware it's going to be really hard," said Barca director of football Mateu Alemany.

"Obviously the draw hasn't been very generous to us but that's how these competitions are."

The first leg will take place at

the Camp Nou on February 17 with the return on February 24 at the Diego Armando Maradona Stadium in Naples.

The late Argentine great played for both Barca and Napoli during his career.

Napoli and Barca met in the last 16 of the 2019/20 Champions League, with Barca advancing 4-2 on aggregate.

AFP



Modeste enjoys revenge over Wolfsburg boss

Berlin, Germany - French striker Anthony Modeste admitted enjoying some schadenfreude after his match-winning goal deepened the crisis at Bundesliga rivals Wolfsburg as he took revenge on their sports director Joerg Schmidtke.

"You always see each other twice in life. I'm happy because we won against Joerg Schmidtke's team. It's nice to send Wolfsburg into a crisis," Modeste told broadcaster ARD.



Shevchenko gets first Genoa win to book slot

Milan, Italy - Andriy Shevchenko got his first win as Genoa coach on Tuesday with a 1-0 success over Salernitana booking an Italian Cup last 16 clash against his former club AC Milan.

Ghana international Caleb Ekuban's 76th-minute header lifted the north-western port side to their first home win this season. Former AC Milan and Chelsea player Shevchenko took over in early November, replacing Davide Ballardini after a miserable start to the campaign.

Tearful Aguero announces retirement from football due to heart problem

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona and Argentina striker Sergio Aguero on Wednesday announced his retirement from football at a tearful press conference, just over a month after the 33-year-old was diagnosed with a heart problem.

"I have decided to stop playing professional football. It is a very hard moment but I am happy with my decision. My health comes first," said Aguero, who enjoyed 10 highly successful years at Manchester City before leaving at the end of last season.

He signed a two-year deal with Barcelona but had made just five appearances, scoring one goal against Real Madrid, before being taken to hospital with 'chest pains' after a match at home to Alaves in October.

Aguero was then diagnosed with a heart condition and forced to accept that he would not be able to play again.

"I took this decision because of problems I had a bit more than



Sergio 'Kun' Aguero (left) and Barcelona's Spanish president Joan Laporta at the press conference, in Barcelona, on Wednesday (AFP)

a month ago. I was in good hands with the doctors who also did their best and told me the best thing to do was stop playing," he said at the press conference at the Camp Nou, which was attended by his Barcelona teammates.

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola and director of football Txiki Begiristain were

also both in attendance at the press conference.

"I did everything possible to keep the hope alive but there wasn't much hope."

Aguero, commonly known by his nickname 'Kun', began his career at Independiente in his native Argentina before moving to Europe in 2006 to sign for Atletico Madrid.

He won the Europa League during his time with the Spanish side and then moved to City in 2011. Aguero left the Etihad Stadium a decade later as their all-time leading scorer with 260 goals, the most famous being his injury-time strike against Queens Park Rangers in May 2012 which won the Premier League title.

"I am very proud of the career I have had," he added. "Everyone knows about the goal I scored for City against Queens Park Rangers to win my first Premier League, but there have been many great moments."

Aguero's retirement comes at the end of a year marked by the collapse of Denmark's Christian Eriksen, who suffered a heart attack playing for his country against Finland at Euro 2020 in June.

Eriksen, of Inter Milan, was later fitted with a pacemaker but is not permitted to play in Serie A as a result.

AFP

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Warner fit, Richardson replaces Hazlewood

THE ASHES

Adelaide, Australia - Dynamic opener David Warner will play through the pain in the second Ashes Test against England, Australia captain Pat Cummins said on Wednesday, as Jhye Richardson got the nod to replace Josh Hazlewood.

Warner scored 94 in the first innings at the opening Test in Brisbane but didn't field or bat in Australia's second innings as he nursed bruised ribs after being pummelled by the England attack.

The 35-year-old padded up in the Adelaide Oval nets on Tuesday evening and made several audible cries of pain, but Cummins said he would play the day-night Test starting Thursday.

"He'll be right, he had a bat yesterday and batted with a bit of discomfort, but knowing Davey he's not going to miss this



Australia's batsman David Warner (centre) talks to coaches about his injury, at Adelaide Oval on Wednesday (AFP)

one," Cummins said. "He'll be fine once the adrenaline kicks in. It's one thing batting in the nets and another when you walk out in front of a packed crowd.

"He's played close to 90 Tests and I'm sure a lot of them have been played in discomfort," he added of the flamboyant star, who will open the innings along-

side Marcus Harris.

The only change Cummins named to the side that crushed England by nine wickets at the Gabba last week was Richardson

as replacement for Hazlewood, who was ruled out this week with a side strain.

Right-arm quick bowler Richardson had been in contention with Michael Neser and will add to his two Tests, spearheading the attack alongside Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Nathan Lyon on a ground where Australia have won all five Tests they have played under lights.

"We just think Jhye is firing and really excited to see him out there," Cummins said.

"Josh is a big void to fill but we feel really confident that Jhye is going to step straight in."

Hazlewood is a huge loss. The paceman boasts a pink-ball record of 32 wickets at just 19.90 and took an incredible 5-8 when India were all out for just 36 at Adelaide in their second innings a year ago.

AFP



L-R: Jimmy Anderson, Stuart Broad and Ben Stokes during day four of the first Ashes Test match, in Brisbane on December 11 (AFP)

Anderson, Broad in England squad

Adelaide, Australia - Bowling great Jimmy Anderson said on Wednesday he wants to play all four remaining Ashes Tests after he and Stuart Broad were included in England's 12-man squad for the second Test against Australia this week.

The two greatest wicket-takers in England Test history, with 1,156 scalps between them, were controversially left out for the series opener at Brisbane, where they crashed by nine wickets inside four days.

But both are back in the frame for the clash under lights at Adelaide starting Thursday, where the pink ball's extra movement should suit their game.

Their return means speedster Mark Wood, who impressed in Brisbane, has been rested with selectors opting instead for fellow pacemen Ollie Robinson and Chris Woakes.

They also kept faith with spinner Jack Leach, who was punished in Brisbane but could come into his own on Adelaide's traditionally spin-friendly wicket.

A final decision on who to omit will be made at the toss after a last look at the wicket on what is forecast to be a fine, dry day.

"I came here wanting to be available for five (Tests) and that doesn't change now, I want to be available for the next four," said a defiant Anderson (39), who has taken a record 632 Test wickets - more than any other seam bowler in history.

"I think the gaps between the next few Tests, it might be a bit easier to get that rest in between and make sure everyone's fresh, but that's something out of my control.

"I've just got to do my best if I get picked tomorrow."

The non-selection in Brisbane of Anderson and Broad, who has 524 Test wickets, sparked disbelief among pundits and cricket fans, with former Australian captain Ricky Ponting among them, saying he was 'staggered'.

Lancashire seamer Anderson admitted to being disappointed at not playing, but also said he understood the bigger picture, given he was in the twilight of his career.

"All I can do is try and prepare as well as I can and stay fit and the last few years I've certainly been managed a bit more, missing the odd game to try and make sure I stay fresh for a long series," said the 166-Test veteran.

AFP

India's Kohli says given 90 minutes notice of sacking

New Delhi, India - Virat Kohli on Wednesday said he was told only 90 minutes before the official announcement that he had been sacked as India's one-day captain.

Kohli quit as T20 skipper after the recent World Cup and last week lost the ODI job too, with India's cricket board saying it wanted Rohit Sharma to lead in both white-ball formats.

The surprise announcement came in one line at the bottom of a press release by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) about the Test squad for the upcoming tour of South Africa.

"I was contacted one and a half hours before the selection meeting on the 8th for the Test series and there was no prior communication to me at all," Kohli said on Wednesday ahead of the team's departure for South Africa, where they will play three Tests and three ODIs. "Before ending the call I was told that the five selectors had decided that I would not be the ODI captain, to which I replied, 'ok fine'," he said.

Kohli will still captain India in the Tests in South Africa but press reports suggested that he had decided to skip the subsequent ODI series in a huff.

But Kohli denied this, saying



Virat Kohli

that he 'was and am available for selection' and hit out at sections of the media for 'writing lies'.

"Nothing can derail me from being motivated to play for India," he said. "I am very focused and mentally prepared and very excited to go to South Africa and do the best that I can for my team."

Kohli said he would support '100 per cent' Rohit and new manager Rahul Dravid, calling him a 'very balanced coach' and a 'great man-manager'.

"Rohit is a very able captain and very, very tactically sound. We have seen that in the games that he captained for India and in the IPL as well," Kohli said.

India have never won a Test series in South Africa, but Kohli said the visitors were motivated by the fact that the last Test they played there, in Johannesburg in 2018, they won.

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