



WEDNESDAY, 29 DECEMBER 2021

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27°C/18°C

MDO ACQUIRES 15% STAKE IN SYNERGIES CASTING OMAN
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(Muscat Daily)

Heavy rains to hit Oman starting today: CAA

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Heavy rains will hit the sultanate starting Wednesday, according to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

Muscat experienced a cloudy day with light rains in some areas, including Al Khuwayr and Seeb, on Tuesday.

The National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre of the Directorate General of Meteorology observed that the sultanate will be affected by a low pressure trough starting Wednesday and last for several days. The low pressure has been named Al Azm.

A statement issued by CAA said, 'The weather will be cloudy in the governorates of

Musandam and North Batinah with chances of rain (50-100 mm), occasional thundershowers, fresh winds, and flash floods in wadis. There is possibility of cloud advection over the governorates of South Batinah, Muscat, Buraimi, Dhahira, Dakhliyah, South Sharqiyah and North Sharqiyah (10-25 mm).'

CAA advised all to be cautious during rains and in flowing wadis, and to check the state of the sea before sailing. The condition of the sea will be moderate along most of the sultanate's coasts with maximum wave height of 2m and become rough during thundershowers along the coastal areas of Musandam. Oman Sea coasts will witness waves of a

maximum height of 3m.

The highest temperature in the sultanate on Tuesday - 31.6°C - was recorded in Mahout, Al Wusta governorate, and the lowest of 8.9°C in Saiq, Dakhliyah.

With many parts of Oman likely to receive rain in the coming days, Royal Oman Police (ROP) warned motorists against crossing overflowing wadis. 'Crossing an overflowing wadi can attract an imprisonment of up to three months and/or a fine of RO500, according to Article 49 of the Traffic Law. Moreover, the act puts others' lives at risk,' ROP said.

'Motorists should be careful when driving on wet roads to avoid losing control and skidding.'

Female illiteracy rate further decreases

Oman's female illiteracy rate decreased to 5.2% in 2020 from 7.3% in 2016

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate has exerted great efforts since 1973/74 to combat illiteracy.

The National Centre for Statistical Information's (NCSI) data shows there were 1,357,405 females, representing 49.6 per cent of the total Omani population, in December 2020. The governorates of North Batinah and Muscat recorded the highest number of females - 40 per cent - compared to the remaining governorates.

NCSI's statistics confirmed that the Omani female illiteracy rate dropped to 5.2 per cent in 2020.

The illiteracy rate in the sultanate decreased to 5.78 per cent in the age group of 15 years and older. The literacy rate was 94.22 per cent at the end of 2018.

Making illiteracy a national issue, the Ministry of Education has set up a number of support projects through partnerships between government and private



(Muscat Daily)

Women contractors can now sponsor expat male workers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani women owning small and medium enterprises (SMEs) engaged in the field of construction can recruit and sponsor an expatriate male work-

force, according to an official in the Ministry of Labour (MoL).

"Many female professionals have joined the contracting and interior decoration market recently. They have offices for architectural design, providing engineering consultancy and

supervising implementation which require expat labour," the MoL official told Muscat Daily.

Omani female owners of SMEs must be registered with the Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises Development to conduct their work.

sector institutions. These include the 'Training Bag Project' that contains basic scientific material to be used to train teaching staff in literacy classes and raise their professional level and teaching skills.

In the academic year of 2020/2021, the total number of

Omani females studying in public schools was 321,690 out of a total of 652,606 (male and female), while the total number of female studies in private schools was 17,127.

Omani females in higher education constituted 53.3 per cent of the total admissions in the ac-

ademic year 2020/2021, a dip of 3.9 per cent compared to 2015/2016.

The percentage of Omani female graduates from higher education institutions in the academic year 2019/2020 increased by 1.4 per cent compared to 2015/2016.

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OMAN'S MOST TRUSTED BRAND

Omani dates branded 'Zaad' to be exported to Singapore

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Nakheel Oman Development Company (NODC) will export a shipment of dates to Singapore in keeping with the current efforts to increase national income and market Omani products.

NODC recently tweeted that a consignment of Omani dates, packaged with the brand name 'Zaad', is being prepared for export to Singapore. The packaging, processing, marketing and export of the dates are being overseen by NODC, the investment arm of the One Million Date Palms Plantation Project of the Diwan of Royal Court.

In February 2021, the first batch of Omani dates, also packaged with the brand name 'Zaad', was exported to India.

NODC is partnering with the Diwan of Royal Court - represented by the Directorate General of the One Million Date Palms Plantation Project - and Oman National Investments Development Company (Tanmia) to export Omani dates.

NODC is the main recipient of the dates, as well as the palm waste, harvested from 11 farms distributed across six governorates that form part of the One Million Date Palms Plantation Project.

Another company, Oman Dates Production and Packing Company, which was established in 2018, has invested in a project to set up an integrated factory in Barka and six collection centres in different governorates.

NODC purchases date products from farmers, and processes



(Muscat Daily)

In February 2021, the first batch of Omani dates, also packaged with the brand name 'Zaad', was exported to India

and packages these to sell in local markets and also for export.

In March 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) announced

the implementation of a project to create model fields for date palms. The ministry has set guidelines for Omani farmers to benefit from the model fields of

date palms project financed by the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund. It has informed that it will provide farmers date seedlings at nominal prices.

MAFWR has announced another project that will look into replacing date palms that produce little or no dates. Under that project, date seedlings will be provided for free.

According to the Ministry of

Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), it received 187,150 tonnes of dates from 65 farmers from across the country in 2020.

'As in the previous years, the ministry is continuing to give subsidies to farmers who supply dates. This is in addition to the subsidy given to farmers who export their crops directly,' MoCIIP stated.



(Supplied photo)

Pact signed to improve agri production

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) signed an agreement with a private company on Tuesday to develop agricultural production in greenhouses.

The agreement aims to facilitate joint research experiments to improve agricultural production using hydroponics technique under greenhouse conditions.

Hydroponic agriculture allows farmers to grow crops in a controlled environment. They can grow crops that are not suited to a particular climate. A key aspect to this is being able to maintain a stable root zone temperature that promotes healthy growth and oxygen retention in the nutrient solution in which crops are grown.

In April 2021, MAFWR started building three hydroponic greenhouses with cooling systems in the Lima area of the wilayat of Khasab in Musandam governorate. These greenhouses are part of the Integrated Farming Project in Lima, which aims to grow various vegetable crops, including cucumber, tomato, pepper and zucchini.

Additionally, in October 2021, the ministry signed five usufruct contracts worth more than RO3mn with private sector companies to enhance food security.

These include a usufruct contract for poultry farming in the wilayat of Khasab in Musandam, and another to raise livestock in the wilayat of Dhank in Dhahirah.

The agreement between MAFWR and a private company aims to facilitate joint research experiments to improve agricultural production using hydroponics technique under greenhouse conditions

One contract was for wheat production in the wilayat of Thumrait in Dhofar, and one more for a fig tree plantation project in the wilayat of Al Kamel W'Al Wafi in South Sharqiyah.

In December 2021 MAFWR signed five agreements worth RO3.581mn with local investors. The projects will be spread over an area of 1.470mn sqm.

The agreements include a project called Desert Oasis for production of non-traditional vegetables and fruits and field crops, a green house project and a banana production project in the wilayat of Suwaiq, an integrated tourist farm in the wilayat of Bidiyah, and a broiler breeding project in the wilayat of Mahdah.

A Food Security Laboratory was held from September 5 to 30 during which MAFWR announced 128 projects worth RO1.3bn. These projects will be implemented in the next five years.

DBBS appeals for urgent donation of platelets

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Department of Blood Banks Services (DBBS) has appealed to people to donate platelets at the Central Blood Bank in Bausher.

A statement issued by DBBS said, 'We appeal to everyone to donate platelets at the Central Blood Bank in Bausher due



(Muscat Daily)

to a high demand currently. Platelets are used in the treatment of many pathological conditions.'

It informed that it can be contacted for appointments to donate platelets via WhatsApp at 94555648.

DBBS also confirmed that preliminary statistics indicate an increase in the number of blood units collected at the Central

Blood Bank in 2021, compared to 2020, despite the disruptions resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the number of blood donors increased by 6.7 per cent between 2016 and 2020. There were 61,679 blood donors in Ministry of Health's centres in the five-year period.



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ANNOUNCEMENT

Invitation No	Subject	Eligible company to Participate	Last Date of Purchase	Qualification Submission Closing Date
1/2021	Pre-qualification to participate in Service of Providing Specialized Professionals from outside Sultanate of Oman to work in Various Health Establishments at The Ministry of Health	Specialized Local Companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board	Thursday 06/01/2022	Wednesday 19/01/2022

Document can be obtain through the Esnad Service on the website <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> until the last date of purchase

Qualification documents must be submitted through the Esnad service on the above-mentioned website before 8 o'clock in the morning of the day specified for bid submission. The document submitted after this date and time will not be considered, whatever the reasons for the delay.

The Ministry of Health is not bound accept any Qualification



(Supplied photo)



Nine infiltrators arrested in two days: ROP

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) arrested nine people trying to enter the sultanate illegally this week in three different incidents. On Tuesday, ROP arrested six people trying to enter Oman illegally and seized two boats. 'The Coast Guard Police seized two boats, one of which was in Muscat with four intruders on-board, and the other off the sea

in North Batinah governorate with two intruders,' an ROP statement said.

On Sunday, the Coast Guard Police Command, in cooperation with the Directorate General for Combating Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, seized a boat carrying three infiltrators of Asian nationality while attempting to enter the Omani territorial sea off Muscat with more than 46kg of crystal meth in their possession.

ROP denies rumours of residence visa fee hike

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) has denied that it will increase the residence visa renewal fee from 2022.

'In reference to the news being circulated on social media that Royal Oman Police will increase the fee of residence renewal from 2022, these reports are not true. We urge everyone to source information from the right source and avoid rumours,' a statement said.

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.27am
Sunrise	6.48am
Duhr	12.14pm
Asr	3.15pm
Maghrib	5.35pm
Isha	6.50pm

Exhibition to support SMEs affected by COVID-19

Our Correspondent
Muscat

East Coast of Organizing Exhibitions, in coordination with the Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises Development, will hold an exhibition - Souq East Coast - to support Omani small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and promote their products.

The three-day exhibition will be held at Mall of Muscat from December 29 to 31.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Khadijah Mubark al Batashi, managing director of East Coast of Organizing Exhibitions, said, "We will hold the exhibition to help SME owners who are affected by the pandemic."

Khadijah said that the exhibition aims to promote Omani products and encourage the culture of entrepreneurship, be-



The exhibition aims to promote Omani products and encourage the culture of entrepreneurship

KHADIJAH AL BATASHI

sides creating trade relations and facilitating exchange of experiences between participants. "The market will include about 50 SMEs who will get an opportunity to sell their products. Souq East Coast will offer



(Supplied photos)

a variety of products, including dates, Omani sweets, perfume, incense, gold and silver jewellery, cosmetics and gift items. There will be sections for real estate and fashion, too," she said.

"Owners of SMEs faced many problems, including lack of markets to buy and sell products and the high price of shipping since the beginning of the pandemic. We held an online exhibition to support SMEs ear-

lier, but it was not enough."

Talking about e-commerce, she said, "Unfortunately, e-commerce and online purchases in Oman are not very popular. Society needs more awareness of the importance of

e-commerce. Physical exhibitions held in shopping malls are very important because these still are in demand. Many people want to see the goods and meet the seller face-to-face. I think e-commerce is the future

but we need to create awareness about it among members of society.

"Private companies must play a vital role in supporting e-commerce and they should also support SMEs in facing any challenges and obstacles that may occur in the future."

Khadijah informed that East Coast of Organizing Exhibitions will continue to promote Omani products and support SMEs to stimulate the economy.

"We will also continue to participate in regional and international exhibitions to promote Omani products and call on people to buy Omani products."

The total number of SMEs registered with the Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises Development till the end of November 2021 was 62,335, compared to 47,802 in the same period of 2020, an increase of 30 per cent.

EA launches studies to protect turtles

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) recently announced it is carrying out several studies in various regions of the sultanate to protect turtles.

"The authority is making concerted efforts to protect turtles, such as organising clean-up campaigns in sea turtle nesting areas and banning camping and driving vehicles in these areas. The authority is also carrying out several studies to protect turtles. The studies aim to enumerate turtles and develop solutions for their protection, especially in Al Wusta and Sharqiyah governorates," an official in the EA said.

"Oman is home to four of the seven species of turtles found in the world, including the world's second largest population of Loggerhead sea turtles. Others include the Green Turtle, Hawksbill Turtle and Olive Ridley Turtle, which all nest in Oman. The Leatherback Turtle, a fifth species, can sometimes be found visiting our waters for feeding or whilst migrating. All of these



(Supplied photo)

species are listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List and face high risk of extinction in the wild," the official added.

The authority is making continuous efforts to protect sea turtles in the sultanate by establishing natural reserves and protecting turtle nesting beaches.

The official said, "Dazzling lights disorient turtles as they leave the sea to lay eggs. Both beach driving and sea-based disturbances such as turtles being caught in fishing nets by mistake (by catch), ghost fishing, plastic pollution and climate change are major threats that impact the turtles as well as their habitat."

Deal inked to open Value Experts Oman for real estate appraisal services

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Asawer Real Estate Development Company, together with Value Experts Company - Saudi Arabia, celebrated the signing of an agreement for the inauguration of Value Experts Oman.

This came during a ceremony held at W Hotel in Shatti al Qurm, in the presence of a large number of Their Excellencies, CEOs and media personnel, to sign the partnership agreement.

During the ceremony, Siham al Harthy, chairperson of the Board of Directors of Value Experts Oman, said, "We are happy today as we and our partners, Value Experts Company, celebrate the opening of the first real estate appraisal company in Oman."

Siham added, "The importance of controlling real estate



appraisal lies in maintaining the vitality of the real estate market and the sustainability and stability of the sector. It also evaluates risks and helps to avoid fraud and money laundering in real estate. It is difficult to revive financing operations without evaluation reports that follow modern scientific standards. Our services will help build investment strategies through calculated risks."

Real estate appraisal is not

only limited to financing, insurance, mergers and liquidation projects, but also include sales, purchases and leasing, through various types of investments. Thus, a transparent database can be created based on investments, and also contribute to attracting more investments.

Value Experts Oman will be the first supporter of Omani cadres in the industry following a scientific methodology. It will support the real estate market

with accredited international residents by providing training services in joint cooperation with accredited Saudi trainers, in addition to its main work, which is providing real estate evaluation services in its various branches and sharing global experiences in the development of evaluation between the sultanate and Saudi Arabia.

Abdul al Busaidi from Value Experts Oman also spoke about the company's vision. "We strive to provide the best practices in real estate appraisal and also contribute to spreading awareness about the importance of valuation in the Omani society by conducting specialised evaluation courses and workshops. We seek cooperation with certified trainers in all branches of evaluation to qualify and train Omani youth to achieve the aspirations of Oman Vision 2040."

Dar al Atta hands over 100th home

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Under the patronage of H E Laila bint Ahmed bin Awadh al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, Dar al Atta handed over a house to a beneficiary family, marking the completion of house No 100 since Dar al Atta started building houses and providing shelter to families in 2003.

Dar al Atta carries on building houses for many families in order to secure a decent life for them. In addition, the association carries out house maintenance work and has maintained about 956 houses for beneficiaries.

H E Laila praised the associa-



tion's achievement of handing over the 100th house and its continuous efforts in community service and contributions to improve the lives of many individuals.

Dar al Atta's chairperson

Maryam al Zadjali said, "The My Home is My Security Programme works on building houses and house maintenance, believing that a home provides security, stability and shelter to underprivileged families."

COVID-19 UPDATE



Muscat - According to figures released by the Ministry of Health, 79 new cases of COVID-19 and no related deaths were registered in a 24-hour period on Tuesday. This takes the total number of cases to 305,253 in the sultanate. The total number of COVID-19-related deaths stands at 4,114.

The ministry stated that 1,359 patients have recovered, accounting for a total of 300,341 recoveries.

A total of eight COVID-19 patients are in healthcare institutions, including two in intensive care units and one new case admitted on Tuesday.



**SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF HEALTH
DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF HEALTH
SERVICES**




ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health - Directorate General of Health Service Al Dhahirah Governorate (DGHS) of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tender: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
852/2021/MO H/DGHS DH-3	Rent Multi-Function Devices To Scan Documents	Wednesday 12/ Jan /2022	At 9:00 Am On Monday 07/ Feb /2022	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25/= Per set

Notes:-

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to the Tender Committee in the DGHS before one day of date submission.
- The DGHS is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accept or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
Any Clarification, you may contact via
Telephone: 24402200
Email etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om

MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,141.09
BSE Sensex	57,897.48

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	194.23
Pakistani Rs	464.45
Bangladeshi Taka	222.87
Philippine Peso	131.38
Sri Lankan Rs	527.04

*Rates as on December 28

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Iraq pays final Kuwait war reparations

Iraq has paid its last war reparations to Kuwait more than 30 years since the invasion of the Gulf country by former autocrat Saddam Hussein, officials said.

"Iraq has closed the file of the Kuwait war reparations, having paid the last of its dues," Mozher Saleh, the prime minister's economic advisor, was quoted as saying by the official Iraqi News Agency.

In total, Iraq has paid US\$52.4bn in reparations, he said. "This is not a small amount," he added. "The sum would have been enough to construct an electricity network that would have served Iraq for many years."

Despite being rich in hydrocarbons, Iraq's electricity infrastructure has suffered from years of negligence and successive wars, facing regular power cuts.

The central bank announced last week the payment of the final portion of the reparations, valued at US\$44mn.

MDO acquires 15% stake in Synergies Casting Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Minerals Development Oman (MDO), the flagship company of Oman's mining and mineral processing industry, has established a strategic partnership with Synergies Casting Oman to acquire 14.8 per cent stake in the company's shares.

Synergies Casting Oman was established in 2017 as joint venture between Synergies Castings India and Omani investors to produce aluminium alloy car wheels for automotive industry.

Synergies Casting Oman is planning to operate an alloy wheel manufacturing plant in Suhar Industrial Estate.

The manufacturing plant, which is currently under construction, is expected to start commercial operations in the



first quarter of 2022.

The RO42mn project is expected to produce 1.2mn tonnes of alloy wheels, being the first plant in Oman that makes high-end aluminium alloy wheels for automobiles industry.

The project's shareholders also include Oman Development Fund, Synergies Castings India, Sultan Special Force Pension Fund, Al Jeel Al Saeid for Business and Sohar International Bank.

As per the terms of shareholding agreement, MDO has hired 100 Omanis in a number of technical and administrative jobs within Synergies Casting Oman, increasing the Omanisa-

Omanisation rates in Synergies Casting Oman is an achievement that we are proud of. This project is an essential element within MDO's vision to promote Oman's mining sector."

Eng Ahmed al Mazrouei, executive director of Synergies Casting Oman, said, "We are pleased to welcome MDO as a partner in this leading project as it represents a valuable addition to our expansion plans."

Globally, alloy wheels' demand is estimated to increase from 219mn wheels in 2015 to 296mn wheels in 2023, and then to 326mn wheels in 2028.

Established in 2016 with a capital of RO100mn, MDO is as a partnership between Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and Oman National Investment Development Company (Tania).



CBO issues treasury bills worth RO73mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills (issue number 158) was issued this week by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

Total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO73mn, for a maturity period of 182 days, from today until June 29, 2022. The average accepted price reached RO99.615 for every RO100 bill, while the minimum accepted price stood at RO99.610.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.7728 per cent and 0.7757 per cent, respectively.

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

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

Foreign exchange reserves rise to \$18bn

Muscat - The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) held its fourth board of governors meeting on Monday. At the meeting, the CBO board reviewed a report elaborating on the state of CBO's reserves and the performance of its foreign investments.

The CBO's board of governors expressed their profound satisfaction with the state of CBO's 2021 foreign exchange reserves, which have reached an impressive level of US\$18bn.

The board opined that prominent growth achieved in the foreign exchange reserve numbers has been supported by stable cash flows witnessed throughout the year in view of the rise in oil prices and economic recovery.

The board observed that the total demand for foreign currency in the local market has remained at reasonably comfortable and satisfactory levels. This has brought the foreign exchange reserves of the CBO in

equation with the value of nine months of country's imports, they mentioned.

The foreign exchange reserves position ensures a stable purchasing value for the Omani riyal and conforms to the recommendations of international organizations, the board noted.

The CBO board also commended the concluding report on the credit rating of Oman prepared by Fitch Ratings and applauded the efforts made in this

regard by the competent authorities. Fitch Ratings recently revised its outlook on Oman to stable, while confirming the credit rating at 'BB-'. The board also examined the progress made with regard to the implementation of the monetary policy enhancement project, in addition to reviewing a report on the financial safety indicators of banks.

The CBO's board of governors urged the banking sector to enhance its contribution to promoting development, supporting and facilitating lending to the private sector in light of stimulating economic indicators and the recovery witnessed by the national economy.

The board reviewed the progress on the implementation of CBO's strategic plan initiatives for the year 2021 and commended the steps taken in this regard.

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MSX gains 0.9% as volumes rise

Our Correspondent Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) increased 0.88 per cent on Tuesday to close at 4,141.1 points. Market turnover, however, continued to remain weak.

The gains in the main index were supported by all sectoral indices. Financial, Industrial and Services indices rose by 0.71 per cent, 0.45 per cent and 0.73 per cent, respectively. MSX Sharia index also increased 0.11 per cent to close at 536.69 points.

Total trading volume increased by 75 per cent to 11.59mn shares on Tuesday compared with 6.64mn shares on Monday. Market turnover increased by 39 per cent to RO2.08mn against RO1.49mn recorded in the previous trading session.

Market breadth of the MSX remained positive with 20 advancing stocks to four declin-

ers. As many as 12 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Among top gainers of the day were United Finance (5.36 per cent), Al Sharqia Investment (4.55 per cent), Al Anwar Ceramic Tiles (4.48 per cent), Muscat Finance (3.64 per cent) and Renaissance Services (2.36 per cent).

Losers were Al Maha Ceramics (-2.05 per cent), Al Omaniya Financial Services (-1.64 per cent), Raysut Cement (-0.8 per cent) and BankDhofar (-0.79 per cent).

AQUAFINA

ONLY WHAT'S ESSENTIAL

Alizz Islamic Bank sharia'a board holds sixth meeting



Sharia'a supervisory board of Alizz Islamic Bank held its sixth meeting of year at the main branch of Central Business District at Ruwi, headed by Sheikh Dr Essam Khalaf al Anzy. Members of the Sharia'a supervisory board including Sheikh Dr Ahmed Subhi Ahmed Ayadi and Sheikh Nasser bin Youssef al Azri, attended the meeting.

Sulaiman al Harthi, chief executive officer and Issa bin Salim al Riyami, head of Sharia'a Audit and Compliance, chief internal auditor, chief risk officer and several other officials were present.

In his presentation Harthi highlighted performance of the bank during the fourth quarter of the current year and the challenges faced by it. He also focused on the action plan to be pursued by the bank during the forthcoming year.

The meeting discussed several issues of interest including Sharia'a audit and compliance reports during the fourth quarter of 2021 following which Sharia'a supervisory board suggested appropriate guidelines with regards to the subjects of discussion. Sharia'a supervisory board also approved the audit and training plan for the next year 2022 in addition to numerous meeting

agendas which were adequately addressed.

The meeting commended Azri, SSB member, for his valuable contributions to the bank during his nine-year tenure with Alizz Islamic Bank.

The board of directors praised the role played by Sharia'a supervisory board in spreading and promoting awareness about the role of Islamic banking and community initiatives in various media.

From time to time, the bank generates and develops innovative ideas to consolidate the experience of Islamic banking and make it a success story.

The general assembly also endorsed the proposal of the BOD to appoint Sheikh Dr Ibrahim al Sawafi as a member of the board.

The Sharia'a supervisory board at Alizz Islamic Bank reviews and studies all Islamic banking products and services launched by the bank.

The board includes in its membership scholars who are distinguished by deep knowledge of Islamic Sharia'a and the jurisprudence of transactions, as well as to spread reassurance among shareholders and depositors whose trust is undoubtedly one of the most important suc-

cess factors for the bank.

The Islamic banking in the Sultanate of Oman is growing rapidly and steadily with an average growth rate of 30.3 per cent between 2013 and 2020.

The assets of the Islamic banking sector in the Sultanate reached RO5bn and RO676mn which is an equivalent to US\$14.1bn till the end of June 2021 with a market share of 15.3 per cent.

The market share of the Islamic banking sector in finance and deposits sector was 16.9 per cent and 16.8 per cent, respectively.

This growth was substantiated by high quality assets since financing default did not exceed 1.93 per cent in December 2020.

Other financial stability indicators have already exceeded the prudential requirements as the average capital adequacy ratio (CAR) hit 15.61 per cent compared to the ratio required by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) standing at 12.25 per cent.

This is in addition to the liquidity coverage ratio (LCR) which were 116 per cent and 119 per cent respectively compared the prudential requirements of 100 per cent.

During the recent years, the

Central Bank of Oman has consolidated its partnership with the international institutions and organisations responsible for setting Islamic finance standards.

This scenario rendered the bank to become a member of the main committees and working groups branched out of these entities.

This partnership enabled the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to host the capacity building event, the awareness and training programs and the meetings for policies development organised in the Sultanate of Oman.

It is to be noted that the CBO is currently engaged in developing a new strategy for the development of the Islamic banking sector to achieve sustainable growth and ensure the effective contribution of this sector to the Omani economy in general and banking and financial sectors in particular.

This strategy is geared towards the enhancement of the existing regulatory and prudential systems and the consumer protection frameworks; the diversification of products offered by this sector and enhancement of coordination between all stakeholders.



CCED partners with MoH to cultivate a culture of health

In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Wali Office of Adam, CC Energy Development (CCED), along with its partners in Blocks 3 and 4, Mitsui E&P Middle East B.V. and Tethys Oil Block 3 and 4 Limited, have partnered with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) to build a dialysis unit in Adam to support the demand in Al Dakhiliyah governorate.

sponsibility and health programmes, while partnering with local communities to further cultivate a culture of health. The agreement was signed by H E Dr Fatma bint Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs in the Ministry of Health, and Badar al Sariri, HR and external affairs director from CCED.

In another collaboration to support the healthcare system in Oman, CCED and its partners in Blocks 3 and 4, Mitsui E&P

Middle East B.V. and Tethys Oil Block 3 and 4 Limited are supporting Sultan Qaboos University Hospital in providing a laser device that is mainly used in lithotripsy, prostate pathology and alternative medicine conditions.

An active player when it comes to building healthier workforces and communities, CCED's CSR programme is built to provide meaningful contributions to the lives of its employees, partners, and communities.

Zubair Electric hires new engineers

The Zubair Electric Group, one of the subsidiaries of The Zubair Corporation, recently announced the appointment of newly graduated Omani electrical engineers to meet the company's diverse needs. This recruitment is in line with the Zubair Corporation's strategy to enhance national competency, raise proficiency with on-the-job trainings, and provide the graduates with the opportunity to prove themselves to take up future leadership positions.

Commenting on this appointment, Qasim Talib al Bourai, assistant general manager- Human Resources and Administration Affairs, at the Zubair Electric Group said, "The appointment of these young graduates comes in the context of the role entrusted to the group in the field of developing the leaders of tomorrow, in line with the efforts made by the government to provide job opportunities for qualified citizens within the private sector. Also, the company seeks to appoint



young Omanis in various fields in line with its forecasted development plans."

A reception was organised for the new employees, during which Bourai welcomed the new engineers to the Zubair Electric Group, wishing them success in their future endeavours. He also confirmed the company's determination to continue the programmes to empower national cadres in various disciplines.

The Zubair Electric Group, established in 1968, is one of the

leading companies in the sultanate in the field of supplying equipment, devices, electrical and mechanical products, lighting project materials, lighting control devices, power generation products, and decorative lighting products. The company offers a range of smart and modern solutions that employ the latest technological systems worldwide. It also provides technical support and follow-up service for all electrical products it supplies within Oman.

Metaverse: World's first virtual mega city just opened in Dubai

Metaverse Dubai is becoming the first global virtual platform based on real-world map.

The newly-launched gateway allows people to buy, sell, and own non-fungible digital tokens (NFTs) lands using blockchain technology and digital innovation.

Investors, business owners and consumers can now create their own digital identities, build communities and engage in various business and networking activities on Metaverse Dubai.

With META chain system and enhanced Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies, users of Metaverse Dubai will be able to do business in the same 'old-fashioned way' - but in a better way.

MVP coin holders and others marked earlier last week the first Dubai Metaverse private sales of land NFTs - two sessions were organized, each lasted for 30 minutes with 1000 Hexs maximum purchase limit for each participant.

According to an official spokesperson at Metaverse Dubai; one (1) Hex on Metaverse Dubai is now worth 3,000 MVP Coins/ 100 BUSD.

The Public sales is now avail-



able with minimum purchase order of nine Hexs in the first week (22nd-28th December, 2021), then the user would only need pay seven (29th December -5th January 2022), five (6th-13th January 2022) , and one (14th-21th January 2022) respectively.

Interested parties can join at 12pm, 5pm and 8pm (GMT +4) everyday Dubai Time and each

session will last 30 minutes.

Commenting on the launch - a spokesperson at Metaverse said, "Our world is diving into the Metaverse Era (Web 3.0) especially during the COVID-19 period when contactless economies are prevalent. The main goal of this virtual megacity, a GameFi platform that combines NFTs and blockchain technology, is to address the per-

sistent issues arising from the centralisation of Web 2.0 such as poor security, data controls, and, most importantly, the imbalance of creator economics.

The soft powers and cultures are critical components of establishing a strong virtual community and we intend to make this virtual megacity a reflection of real-world Dubai city, which is open to vast cultures and diver-

sity. It shall be a collaborative and user-driven space where people can truly communicate, interact, and virtually express their real-world and imaginative activities.

"Imagine you could hangout by a beach with your friend in a cartoonish version of yourself before joining a business meeting and then attend a concert. with AR/VR wearables, all of

these can be done from the comfort of your own bedroom or from anywhere in the world. I am confident that the Metaverse could provide numerous benefits and allow people to interact and transfer knowledge from afar in the blink of an eye. Another sign is how tech behemoths such as Facebook or Microsoft are expanding into this realm. However, it is not about size or

dominance of the creators when it comes to building a long-lasting virtual community. It is about how users can feel in a decentralised and collaborative environment, as well as how convenient and safe it is for users to conduct transactions using digital currencies on the platform." He added.

Unlike platforms in Web 2.0, Metaverse Dubai is a 3.0 platform that empowers users with the true ownership of digital lands and items.

These lands can be customised or developed further to generate value outside of the gaming sphere; users can open their virtual retail stores, host events, or establish digital art galleries within their digital estates.

With blockchain technology, these digital assets can be exchanged safely across different marketplaces, with many features available such like voting and VR/AR. More features will be introduced in the future to ensure sustainable and vibrant community.

Note: Land purchased on Metaverse Dubai do not constitute rights over real-world properties.

Bank Muscat's Floosi account a suitable choice for youth

In line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and its commitment to improving financial inclusion across Oman, Floosi account from Bank Muscat which is designed to youth in the 15-17 age group, offers a suite of benefits and offers to customers.

This account is one of its kind in the sultanate as it was designed to work well with this age group's financial needs and raise their awareness in the importance of learning personal finance skills.

It can help youth as well to start saving and planning for the future.



The bank launched this product in line with its commitment to improving financial inclusion across the sultanate after extensive market research in response to customer feedback.

This account is designed to give youth the chance to depend on themselves and enjoy certain benefits like ATM withdrawals and e-commerce transactions. It is highly popular with both Omanis and expatriates.

The Floosi account helps young people to make savings a regular habit in their lives.

The Floosi debit card comes with a daily limit of RO50 per transaction and a monthly cumulative limit of RO200 for Point of Sale (PoS).

Youth in the 15-17 year age group may apply for a Floosi account by visiting their nearest branch along with their parent (or legal guardian) and submitting their application and copies of important documents like their National ID card (for Omani citizens) or Resident Card and Passport (for expatriates).

The parent / guardian must sign the form and will be the authorised signatory.

Floosi accounts can be converted into Shababi accounts when they turn 18, following which young people can operate the account independently.

A great advantage of the Floosi account is that young customers are not charged for not maintaining a minimum balance.

HOPE Consortium to ship 65 ultra-cold freezers to Africa

Following the UAE's multilateral in-kind contribution and commitment to Unicef to support Covax in its global vaccine distribution efforts, the HOPE Consortium and Unicef have entered into an agreement to support delivery of 65 ultra-cold freezers to Africa. The freezers are necessary for COVID-19 vaccines requiring ultra-cold storage and to enable African nations to efficiently absorb incoming vaccine supplies recently donated by the United States of America.

The delivery stands as a testament to the HOPE Consortium's commitment to contribute to the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Facilitated by HOPE Consortium partners and other logistics providers, the shipment will reach 21 African nations, including Benin, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Eswatini, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Sao Tome, and Zambia.

H E Sultan Mohammed al Shamsi, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for International Development Affairs, United Arab Emirates, said, "The UAE remains committed to doing our part to mitigate the effects of the pandemic by helping countries overcome the logistical and technical challenges associated with the delivery of large-scale vaccination programmes. Our partnership with Unicef plays a vital role in helping implement an effective global response to COVID-19, particularly within Africa. We are proud to support international efforts such as Covax by dedicating the unique services of the HOPE Consortium."

The Covax mission seeks to ensure that vaccine supplies are equitably distributed to the world's population. However, many nations face logistical limitations in their capacity to receive and safely store the temperature-sensitive vaccine supplies. To that end, the 65 ultra-cold freezers are a necessary preparatory strategy to enhance cold chain capabilities within recipient countries in anticipation of incoming deliveries of vaccines requiring storage at ultra-cold temperatures.

Etleva Kadilli, director of Unicef's Supply Division, said: "These deliveries of ultra-cold freezers mark an important step towards equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. This critical infrastructure will boost the capacity of African countries to scale COVID-19 vaccine roll-out and will also support the management of other vaccines that may require ultra-cold storage temperatures. Unicef is pleased to work with partners like the HOPE Consortium to support governments to strengthen health systems for the COVID-19 response and beyond - making them resilient for the future."

Capt Mohamed Juma al Shamisi, chairman of the executive committee, the HOPE Consortium, and managing director and group CEO, AD Ports Group, stated, "Abu Dhabi's strategic location as a medical and life sciences hub coupled with the HOPE Consortium's ultra-cold chain capabilities make us a natural partner to support Covax's global mission. Since no one is safe until everyone is safe, it is imperative to ensure that all nations across the world possess the capabilities required to store and administer a wide array of vaccines globally available. By working with Unicef, Etihad and our logistics partners together, we are committed to do our part in helping establish the necessary cold chain infrastructure needed to deliver hope and the necessary supplies to communities in need and help chart a path towards a lasting recovery"

The HOPE Consortium, along with its partners, has developed one of the most extensive end-to-end vaccine supply chains, capable of delivering millions of vaccines from the point of manufacture to the point of immunisation in support of its global efforts against the pandemic. In addition, it has developed a vaccine hub in Abu Dhabi that can accommodate over 120mn vaccines at temperatures of +8°C to -30°C at any time, and hosts the UAE's largest 'Freezer Farm,' which can store over 11mn vaccine doses requiring the ultra-cold temperature of -70°C.

Oman Air participates in ICAO security Webinar

Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, recently participated in ICAO's Regional Security Culture Webinar under the theme 'Year of Security Culture.' The webinar provided an opportunity for key aviation stakeholders to explore the principles, importance and benefits of a strong and effective security culture in aviation, with a focus on some of the challenges and subsequent solutions adopted by stakeholders in the Middle East region.

Speaking on behalf of Oman



Air, Alauddin al Ali, senior manager of Airline Security, explained how a strong security

culture is embedded into Oman Air's operations and forms the foundation of a pro-active safety-first mindset across the airline. "In aviation, a well-entrenched security culture must never be adopted as an afterthought, but rather as a priority that guides all facets of the business. At Oman Air, our security culture comes before any other operational culture to ensure optimal safety for our passengers and employees at all times."

In his keynote address during

the AVSEC Global Symposium 2021 held in October, the Secretary General of the International Civil Aviation Organization, Juan Carlos Salazar said, "The pandemic has posed many challenges, and taught us new lessons, driving us to adapt and evolve to maintain secure operations under very demanding circumstances. As operators continue to recover from its impact, we have been presented with another opportunity to rethink our approach and update our strategies, and above all to

stay flexible and responsive as international air transport recovers to redefine itself as threats continue to evolve. ICAO is proud to serve as a nexus of strategic global partnerships and effective government and industry cooperation in support of these important efforts."

The 5th edition of AVSEC Global Symposium highlighted ICAO's 'Year of Security Culture', which seeks to holistically promote security across all aspects of aviation operations as the industry recovers.

Ring in the New Year with OPPO's Reno6 Pro 5G

As we celebrate the start of a new year, the Reno6 Pro 5G is the only smartphone needed to capture fireworks, festivities and memories made with family and friends

Equipped with a mighty 50 MP AI quad camera and a host of innovative features, amateur photographers can capture professional-like images with ease.

Packed into the eye-catching design are cutting-edge photo and video features including the industry's first Bokeh Flare Portrait Video and upgraded AI Highlight Video enable users to create memorable videography content, with a cinematic effect that will capture lasting memories Available on both the front and rear cameras, the DSR-like Bokeh effects can be applied to videos with just one click.

The Reno6 Pro 5G's ultra-powerful imaging sensor behind



the main camera, Sony IMX766, heightens a picture's dynamic range especially in low-light conditions, creating professional-level nighttime shots of the celebrations from fireworks in perfect clarity.

In addition, the phone's advanced auto focusing capabilities ensure that the main subject in video always remains in focus, perfect for group and family photos.

The Reno6 Pro 5G also provides creative post-production tools such as AI Palette for

easy editing and fine-tuning to bring.

Users need not worry about running out of battery and missing the new year's countdown with OPPO's reliable and incredibly fast SuperVOOC Flash Charge, giving a full charge in just 30 minutes. Heading from celebration to celebration?

The sleek design ensures the smartphone is lightweight and dynamic at just 7.99mm thick and weighing only 188grams, the perfect size for a purse or pocket.

OPPO started its journey in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) region in 2015 after setting up its regional office in Egypt. Following the immense success of the brand's sales centre in Cairo in the first year, OPPO accelerated its expansion plan across the MEA region and inaugurated its country operations in Oman in 2019.

Within the last year, OPPO has started to adjust its product line in the Middle East region specifically. This has included the launch of its flagship OPPO Find X Series and the introduction of the OPPO Reno Series

Chevrolet Silverado Trail Boss: Legendary off-road prowess with safety, comfort

If you are looking for a pick-up truck, there are very few options that match the power, safety capabilities or comfort of a Chevrolet Silverado.

The different configurations and trims ensure there is one that fits your requirement to the T.

The Silverado offers exceptional refinement without compromising on the off-road prowess and towing ability that is its hallmark. It ticks all the boxes from rugged looks to safety features, onboard technology, and convenience, making it difficult to pass it up and settle for anything less.

Adding to its appeal is a six-year extended warranty, 50,000km service and registration that is all included in the price.

The Silverado is available with option of 2 engine/2 transmission choices. Powered by 5.3ltr and 6.2ltr V-8s, it is equipped



with an industry-first Dynamic Fuel Management System that actively shuts off any number of cylinders to improve fuel economy for optimum performance and efficiency.

Key features include 2-inch suspension lift that is standard on all Trail Boss models, 18-inch black alloy wheels fitted with Mud-Terrain Goodyear Wrangler DuraTrac blackwall tyres, and standard trailering package. Keyless start and leather seating with 10-way power adjustment for the driver are some of the other attributes that make for a comfortable experience.

Several design enhancements offer seven per cent more aerodynamic efficiency than before. Other than a robust safety cage, the Silverado Trail Boss features several standard and active safety features such as six air bags across all trims, HD rear vision camera, blind spot indicator, rear cross traffic alert and front and rear park assist.

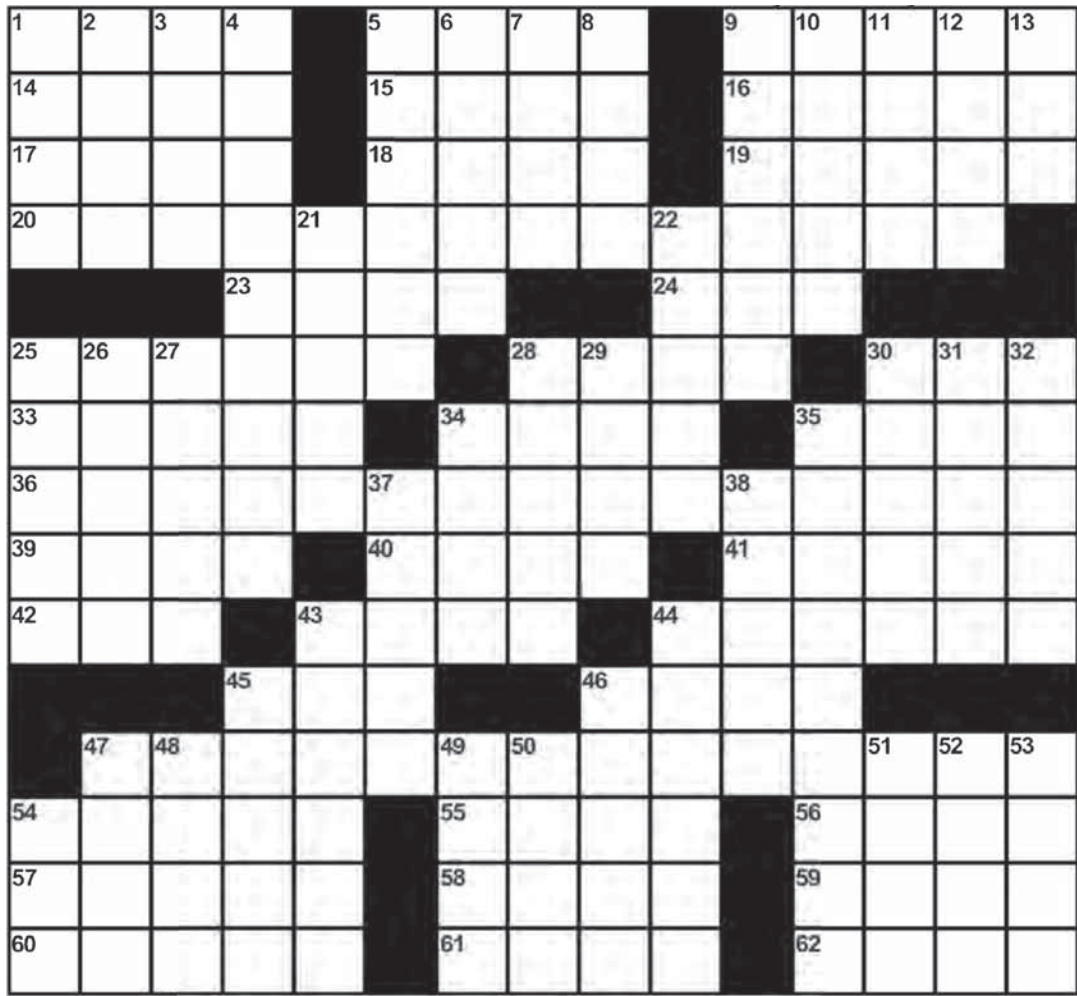
Ensuring ease of connectivity always, it allows for several vehicle functions to be controlled by voice command in addition to wireless phone charging. Standard Apple CarPlay/Android auto allows smartphone connectivity to make calls, send messages and stream music using voice commands.

Chevrolet Infotainment 3.0 is available on the Silverado Trail Boss along with a standard 8-inch screen and 7-speaker Bose sound system.

"The Chevy Silverado is among the most impressive and reliable pickup trucks on the road that does what is expected of it, and much more," says Mandeep Singh, general manager, exclusive distributors of Chevrolet in the sultanate.

Customers can check out the Silverado at any of OTE Group's Chevrolet showrooms around the sultanate.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Get the opinions of others
- 5) Act the mother hen
- 9) Briquets, post-barbecue
- 14) Tenor's standout performance
- 15) South Seas land?
- 16) Reside
- 17) Cousin of Sven?
- 18) Close by
- 19) O'Gill in a Disney movie title
- 20) Light-haired one
- 23) Prepare a gift for presentation
- 24) Cartridge contents
- 25) Pago Pago denizen
- 28) "The Lord of the Rings" creatures
- 30) Blubber
- 33) Like pieces in need of assembly
- 34) Chinese nanny
- 35) Plumlike gin flavoring
- 36) Popular apple
- 39) Fine follower
- 40) Absolutely first-rate
- 41) What spin doctors spin

- 42) D and C, in D.C.
- 43) Sound from an angry cat
- 44) Conjures up
- 45) Ending to some Web addresses
- 46) Three monkeys' subject
- 47) Bling component, sometimes
- 54) Show-stopping place?
- 55) Too dry for growth
- 56) Pledge of Allegiance, e.g.
- 57) "Peter, Peter, pumpkin_"
- 58) Event ending
- 61) Old "Heck!"
- 62) Interpret a barcode
- 8) Timoth E. Parker 8 10 11 12 13 51 52 53

DOWN

- 1) Insect's sense organ
- 2) One type of college exam
- 3) Old Milan money
- 4) "Famous" sentences
- 5) _ baddie (smoked had-dock)

- 6) Deplete
- 7) Four-RBI hit
- 8) Particular Slav
- 9) Accessories
- 10) Ritzy
- 11) Elephant group
- 12) Dresden's waterway
- 13) Covert
- 21) Not at all happy
- 22) Chinese fruit (var.)
- 25) Long, heroic tales
- 26) Toward the left, when floating
- 27) Ice cream shop orders
- 28) Harbingers
- 29) Breathing abnormality
- 30) Dagger's go-with
- 31) Cheek reddener
- 32) Affirmative responses
- 34) Commotions
- 35) Dollars, in old slang
- 37) Easy to deceive
- 38) Word with "pride" or "duty"
- 43) Levitates
- 44) Gave the slip
- 45) Pastes
- 46) "All My Children" character
- 47) Char, as a steak
- 48) _ the wild blue yonder
- 49) Order to a chef,

sometimes
50) Speak arrogantly
51) Worldly rather than spiritual

52) Peak in Sicily
53) Not now
54) Act the couch potato (with "out")



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Finishing up all your routine tasks isn't that important today, but starting new projects is. Put off the filing, grocery shopping, or car maintenance. These things can wait. But when an opportunity or invitation lands right in your lap, you have to take it! There's no tie to wait around. Don't let the day-to-day routine make you forget that life is an adventure. Go down an unexplored path today.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Saving money always sounds like a good idea, but it's seldom any fun. If you're feeling a pinch in your wallet, today you'll be able to find the creativity and energy you need to start making little alterations that will make a big difference in your bank account. Join in with friends and pool your resources. Group outings can help you save some money and have a lot of fun in the process.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Today, any secrets you learn are to be kept, not shared! You could be the recipient of a lot of privileged information from a few very influential people. This sudden trust people are putting in you could be a sort of test, and the stakes are high. Don't betray them or disappoint their high expectations by letting some confidential stuff leak out. You have to be vigilant about it because it could be very easy to slip up!



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You might be surprised to discover that one of your dreams is close to becoming a reality. All it takes is vision and a plan for how to proceed. You need someone to give you a little push, but you can keep yourself swinging after that. If you've been in a thick fog about how you're going to approach this goal, have a short conversation today with someone who's been there before. They will help get a few ideas percolating. You'll see a pathway!



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You've worked hard to get where you are, and you should feel proud of that. Just don't be surprised if guilt creeps into your mind. Not everyone is as lucky as you are, and this fact is becoming clearer to you every day. It's time you got involved in a charity or volunteer effort. Doing something for others will make you feel socially useful. Even if you just drop off unneeded clothes at a local shelter, helping others is important.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Controversy could be a helpful shield for you today. It can create a nice loud, distracting noise that will keep everyone busy and out of your hair! Today is the perfect day to put your new ideas to work, so you'll need all the elbow room and autonomy you can muster. Get in any planning or organising you need to do as early in the day as possible. By late afternoon, people could be hovering around you again.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Family problems are fading now as the people you're related to are realising you are your own person. This elevated level of respect is starting to gain momentum, and it's seeping into other areas of your life. Expect even your most judgmental friend to take a live-and-let-live attitude about what you choose to do in life. This is a new period of harmony, so enjoy it. It doesn't come around as often as you'd like it to.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Every time you get rid of an old idea, assumption, or unwanted item, you make room for a new influx of energy and growth. Today, you could use a big dose of freshness, so see what you can do to empty a few closets (emotional and bedroom). Whether you toss out a relationship, a grudge, or an old sweater, you'll immediately feel a sense of freedom and relief. The truth is you already have everything you need.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Be careful about how you approach any deals today, and try not to let your emotions get the better of you. Someone could try to push your buttons. Don't let them. They're bringing up issues to get a rise out of you, not to make any real or valuable points. A well-phrased comment made at the right time will be more effective than any threats they could ever make. Respect other people's arguments, and take notes of their behaviour.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Details, details, details! Facts and figures are swarming all over you today, and they could create quite a buzz in your brain. Save yourself some stress by getting some advice from the voice of experience. Admit defeat when it's appropriate, and don't suffer a bad outcome just because you are too embarrassed to ask for help. You can turn a day of frustration into a day of enlightenment if you just swallow your pride.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your charm is going to be so effective today that doors won't just open a little bit so you can elbow your way in. No, doors will fly open, revealing a great big sign that welcomes you to come on in! Getting comfortable in a new situation will take you nanoseconds, so it's a perfect day for a big-time job interview or a trip to an unfamiliar place. Your career could take a giant leap forward if you just relax and let your inner brilliance shine.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Some of the people around you are moving into exciting changes, and their happiness is contagious. Volunteer to help them with any finishing touches and get in on the good karma they're enjoying. You're as happy for them as you would be for yourself in this situation, and your generous spirit is helping them enjoy their success. Not everyone can be this bighearted, and they appreciate your support.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

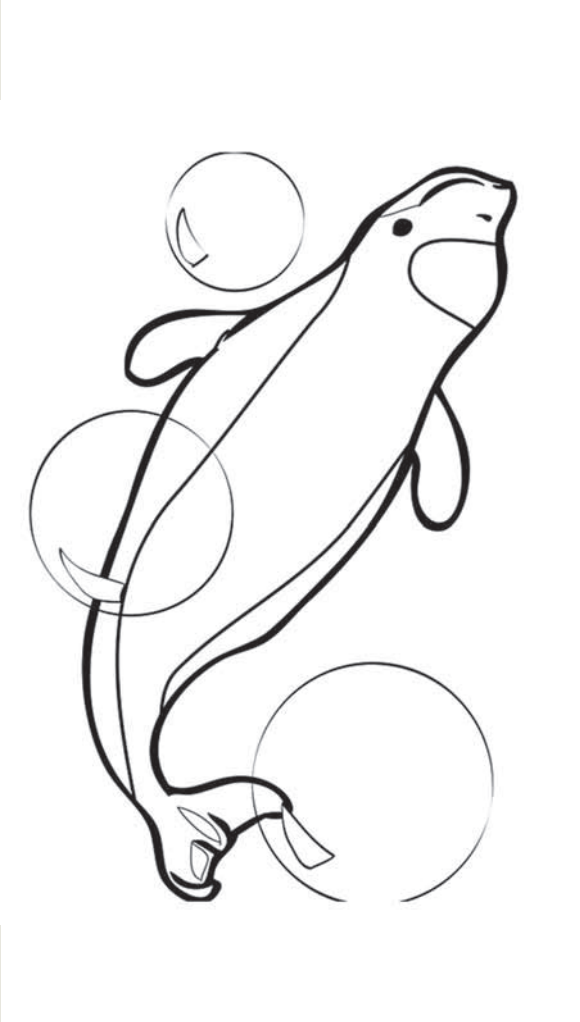
- 1. The ozone layer is being destroyed by chlorofluorocarbons. In this regard which do you consider as the most harmful?
a. Carbon atom
b. Chlorine atom
c. Fluorine atom
d. The entire compound

- 2. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was created in
a. 1945
b. 1947
c. 1949
d. 1951

- 3. The name of Ronaldo is associated with the game of
a. football
b. hockey
c. gymnastics
d. badminton

Answers: 1. b 2. c 3. a

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

G	B	D	L
E	N	E	I
L	T	A	D
S	I	O	Qu

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

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

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

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

Israel airstrike hits Syrian port of Latakia

The strike that lit up the Mediterranean seafront is the second such attack on the cargo hub this month

Beirut, Lebanon - An Israeli airstrike hit Syria's Latakia port before dawn on Tuesday, sparking a fire that lit up the Mediterranean seafront in the second such attack on the key cargo hub this month, Syrian state media reported.

Since the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, Israel has routinely carried out airstrikes on its strife-torn neighbour, mostly targeting Syrian government troops as well as allied Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah fighters.

But it is only the second time it has hit the port of Latakia, in the heartland of President Bashar Assad's minority Alawite community.

"At around 3:21 am, the Israeli enemy carried out an aerial aggression with several missiles from the direction of the Mediterranean... targeting the container yard in Latakia port," Syrian state news agency SANA cited a military source as saying.

The strike caused 'significant material damage', it added.

Asked about the strike, an Israeli army spokesman said, "We don't comment on reports in foreign media."

Pictures released by SANA showed firefighters training hoses on stacks of blazing containers that lit up the night sky.

The news agency said the containers were carrying engine oil and spare parts for cars and



Firefighters battle the blaze at Syria's Latakia port after an Israeli airstrike early on Tuesday (AFP)

other vehicles'.

But Britain-based war monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the cargo was 'arms and munitions', which had detonated in 'powerful explosions that were felt across the city of Latakia and its suburbs'.

It said it was unclear whether the arms were from Iran or some other supplier.

Latakia governor Ismail Hilal said firefighters had brought the blaze under control by midday and were dousing the embers, SANA reported.

It is the second time this month that Israel has attacked the container yard at Latakia port.

The Syrian government's other major ally, Russia, oper-

ates a naval base in the port of Tartus, 85km to the south.

Shadow war

So far this year, Israel has targeted Syria nearly 30 times, killing 130 people including five civilians and 125 loyalist fighters, according to Observatory figures.

On December 7, it carried out

a strike targeting an Iranian arms shipment in Latakia, its first on the port since the start of the civil war. While Israel rarely comments on individual strikes it carries out on its northern neighbour, it has acknowledged mounting hundreds since 2011.

According to a report by the Israeli army, it hit around 50 targets in Syria in 2020.

In the deadliest operation since the strikes began, Israel killed 57 government troops and allied fighters in eastern Syria in January this year.

The Israeli military has defended the strikes as a necessary measure to prevent its arch-foe Iran from gaining a foothold on its doorstep.

Israel's head of military intel-

At around 3:21 am, Israel carried out an aerial aggression with several missiles from the direction of the Mediterranean... targeting the container yard in Latakia port. The strike caused significant material damage

SYRIAN NEWS AGENCY

ligence, Major General Aharon Haliva, has accused Iran of 'continuing to promote subversion and terror' in the Middle East.

In a shadow war, Israel has targeted suspected Iranian military facilities in Syria and mounted a sabotage campaign against Iran's nuclear programme. Iran has been a key supporter of the Syrian government in the decade-old conflict.

It finances, arms and commands a number of Syrian and foreign militia groups fighting alongside the regular armed forces, chief among them Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah group.

AFP

Yemen rebels allow aid flights to resume into capital Sanaa

Sanaa, Yemen - Yemen's Huthi rebels said on Tuesday they have allowed the temporary resumption of UN aid flights into the capital Sanaa, a week after a halt due to Saudi-led coalition air strikes. "The civil aviation authority announces the resumption of UN and other organisation flights into Sanaa airport on a temporary basis," the rebel-run Al-Masirah television reported.

"The (rebel administration's) foreign ministry was contacted to notify the UN and all international organisations that Sanaa airport was ready to receive flights."

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the government - supported by the Saudi-led coalition - against the Iran-backed Huthis who control much of the north. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, in what the United Nations has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Flights into the rebel-held capital have been largely halted by a Saudi-led blockade since August 2016, but there have been exemptions for aid flights that are a key lifeline for the population.

The Huthi rebels had said UN aid flights into Sanaa had been halted by Saudi-led airstrikes last week but the coalition said the airport had already been closed two days earlier and blamed the insurgents.

Coalition spokesman Turki al Maliki said on Sunday the Huthis were 'militarising' Sanaa airport and using it as a 'main centre for launching ballistic missiles and drones' towards the kingdom.

He also accused Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah group of helping the Huthis launch missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia, where two people were killed last week.

No guarantees

On Saturday, the coalition launched what it called a 'large-scale' military operation against the Huthis after the fatal rebel



Saudi-led coalition spokesman Turki al Maliki speaks at a press conference in the Saudi capital Riyadh, on Sunday (AFP)

attack. The coalition raids killed three civilians, including a child and a woman, Yemeni medics said.

The coalition maintains its operations are carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law and has repeatedly accused the Huthis of using civilians as human shields.

UN special envoy Hans Grundberg said the uptick in fighting 'undermines the prospects of reaching a sustainable political settlement to end the conflict in Yemen'.

"The escalation in recent weeks is among the worst we have seen in Yemen for years and the threat to civilian lives is increasing," Grundberg said.

He renewed a longstanding UN call for Sanaa airport to re-open permanently for commercial as well as humanitarian flights. "Any targeting of civilians and civilian objects as well as indiscriminate attacks by any actor is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and must stop immediately," the UN envoy said.

Saudi Arabia has long accused Iran of supplying the Huthis with sophisticated weapons and its Hezbollah proxy of training the insurgents.

Tehran denies the charges, while Hezbollah on Monday dismissed Saudi charges as 'ridiculous'.

The US Navy said last week it

seized 1,400 AK-47 rifles and ammunition from a fishing boat it claimed was smuggling weapons from Iran to the Huthis.

The Huthis on Tuesday accused the coalition of preventing the entry of "communication and navigation devices... into Sanaa airport to replace the old ones".

"The UN and international organisations have been informed that the long-term operation of these devices are not guaranteed, given how old they are," they added. The rebels also warned they will 'hold the UN and international organisations responsible for landing and take-off operations in the event of a sudden device failure'.

The Iran-backed rebels have repeatedly launched missile and drone strikes against neighbouring Saudi Arabia, targeting the kingdom's airports and oil infrastructure.

While the UN and US are pushing for an end to the war, the Huthis have demanded an end to the coalition blockade of Sanaa airport before any ceasefire or negotiations.

The UN estimates Yemen's war will have claimed 377,000 lives by the end of the year through both direct and indirect impacts.

More than 80 per cent of Yemen's population of about 30mn is dependent on humanitarian aid.

AFP

Rocket fired on Chinese company in Iraq

Nasiriyah, Iraq - A rocket and gunfire targeted the premises of a Chinese oil services company in southern Iraq at dawn on Tuesday, without causing any casualties or damage, officials said. Six people have been arrested as part of the investigation into the attack, said a security official in the restive, poverty-stricken province of Dhi Qar.

"The headquarters of the Chinese company ZPEC, which operates in the Al-Gharraf field north of Nasiriyah, was targeted with a rocket and live ammunition," said Karim al Jandil, spokesman for the state oil company in Dhi Qar.

Another security official said the rocket failed to explode and



Iraq is the second-largest producer in the OPEC, and oil accounts for more than 90 per cent of its revenues (AFP)

that the only damage to the site was bullet holes on a nearby trailer. The Chinese company is

in charge of drilling wells in the Al-Gharraf oil field.

The attack was motivated by

'blackmail' to put pressure on the company and secure jobs for locals, an official of the state oil company alleged.

The province of Dhi Qar, including its capital Nasiriyah, has been hit by bloody protests against corruption and unemployment since the second half of 2019.

Iraq is the second-largest producer in the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, and oil accounts for more than 90 per cent of its revenues.

In November, the country exported more than 98mn barrels of crude that brought in more than US\$7.6bn, the oil ministry says.

AFP

Egypt 'digitally unwraps' famed Pharaoh

Cairo, Egypt - Egypt has 'digitally unwrapped' the mummy of famed Pharaoh Amenhotep I, revealing its secrets for the first time since it was discovered in 1881 without disturbing his funerary mask.

Thanks to the advanced digital 3D imagery, researchers unearthed new mummification techniques used for the pharaoh whose rule dates back more than 1,500BC.

The research was led by Sahar Saleem, a professor of radiology at Cairo University, and the renowned Egyptologist Zahi Hawass, a former antiquities minister, the tourism and antiquities ministry said in a statement AON Tuesday.

"Saleem and Hawass used advanced X-ray technology, CT (computed tomography) scanning, as well as advanced computer software programmes to digitally unwrap the mummy of Amenhotep I in a safe non-invasive method without the need to touch the mummy," it said.

"The Egyptian study revealed for the first time the face of King Amenhotep I, his age, health condition, in addition to many secrets about the mummy's



This file photo shows an employee walking past an ancient Egyptian period's (525-332 BC) stone sarcophagus in the Egyptian Museum in the centre of the country's capital Cairo on October 27 (AFP)

unique mummification and reburial.'

Analysis showed Amenhotep I was the first pharaoh to be mummified with arms crossed and the last not to have had his brain removed from the skull.

The tomography scan revealed the pharaoh, who conducted several military

campaigns during his 21-year rule, had died at the age of 35, apparently of injury or illness.

The mummy discovered in Luxor, southern Egypt, is the only one not to have had its tight bands unrolled by archaeologists, in order to preserve the mask and garlands of flowers that surround it like hair.

The same method of 'technical unwrapping', as described by Saleem, revealed in 2012 the 'harem conspiracy' in which Ramses III had his throat slit, a conspiracy hatched by a wife seeking to have her son on the throne rather than the first-born of a rival.

AFP

Afghan women protest against killing of ex-soldiers by Taliban

Kabul, Afghanistan - A crowd of women marched through the Afghan capital on Tuesday, accusing Taliban authorities of covertly killing soldiers who served the former US-backed regime.

Around 30 women gathered near a mosque in the centre of Kabul and marched a few hundred metres chanting ‘justice, justice’ before they were stopped by Taliban forces, an AFP correspondent saw.

The Taliban also tried to prevent journalists from covering the march, organised against the ‘mysterious murders of young people, particularly the country’s former soldiers’, according to social media invitations.

Taliban fighters briefly detained a group of reporters and confiscated equipment from some photographers, deleting images from their cameras before returning them.

Since the hardliners returned to power in August they have effectively banned unsanctioned protests and frequently intervene to block demonstrations against their austere brand of Islam.

The protest comes weeks after separate reports by the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said there were credible allegations of more than 100 extrajudicial killings by the Taliban since their takeover.

“I want to tell the world to tell the Taliban to stop killing. We want freedom, we want justice, we want human rights,” said



Women protest demanding an end to the extra-judicial killings of former officials, in Kabul on Tuesday (AFP)

Turkish, Qatari companies to run airports

Istanbul, Turkey - Private Turkish and Qatari companies have agreed to jointly operate five airports in Afghanistan, although they are still waiting to reach a final deal with the Taliban, officials said on Tuesday.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Monday that a ‘memorandum of understanding’ had been inked in Doha earlier this month, covering Kabul and four other airports in the war-ravaged country.

Cavusoglu said the United Arab Emirates, which operated the civilian part of Kabul airport

before the Taliban stormed back to power after two decades of civil war, also expressed an interest in joining the Turkish and Qatari companies. He said the issue was discussed during Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed’s visit to Ankara in late November.

“They said ‘maybe we can run work trilaterally’ but there was never any concrete proposal,” said Cavusoglu.

“We haven’t presented any proposal to them either. But operating the airport briefly appeared on the agenda.”

Turkish and Qatari officials have said little about the details of the memorandum of understanding, refusing to say which companies were to be involved.

Responding to mounting speculation that a deal may be imminent, Afghan civil aviation ministry spokesman Imamuddin Ahmadi told AFP on Tuesday that ‘no deal has been signed yet’.

The Taliban have already rejected Turkey’s offer to provide security for Kabul airport, which offers an escape route for civilians.

AFP

I want to tell the world to tell the Taliban to stop killing. We want freedom, we want justice, we want human rights

NAYERA KOAHISTANI

protester Nayera Koahistani.

In a statement read aloud by protester Laila Basam, the demonstrators called on the Taliban ‘to stop its criminal machine’.

The statement said former soldiers and government employees of the old regime are ‘under direct threat’, violating a general amnesty announced by the Taliban in August.

The protesters also aired objections to the ratcheting restrictions women are facing under Taliban rule.

The government issued new guidelines at the weekend banning women from travelling long distances unless escorted by a close male relative.

“Women’s rights are human rights. We must defend our rights,” said Koahistani.

Video footage posted online on Tuesday showed another women’s protest held elsewhere in the capital that also called for women to be allowed education and work opportunities.

AFP



Russia’s Supreme Court judge Alla Nazarova reading out the order on Memorial International during a hearing in Moscow on Tuesday (AFP)

Russian court orders closure of Memorial

Moscow, Russia - Russia’s Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered the closure of Memorial, the country’s most prominent rights group, which chronicled Stalin-era purges and symbolised post-Soviet democratisation.

Judge Alla Nazarova ordered the closure of Memorial International, the organisation’s central structure, and its regional branches for failing to mark all of its publications with a label of ‘foreign agent’ as required by law.

The ‘foreign agent’ legislation, which carries Stalin-era connotations, brands organisations receiving funds from overseas as acting against Russia’s interests.

“Disgrace! Disgrace!” some supporters shouted in court after the ruling.

The authorities also accused the group of denigrating the memory of rehabilitating ‘Nazi criminals’, with one prosecutor telling Tuesday’s hearing Memorial ‘creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state and denigrates the memory of World War II’.

The court decision is the hardest blow yet to the organisation founded in 1989 by Soviet dissidents including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov.

Lawyer Maria Eismont said the shutdown was a ‘very bad sign’ but added that Memorial would appeal and press ahead with its work.

“This is not the end,” she told reporters.

‘Tragedy for Russia’

Dozens of supporters gathered outside the courthouse in freezing temperatures and several people were detained. After the ruling, police demanded that members of the public and journalists disperse.

Memorial is a loose structure of locally registered organisations, with Memorial Interna-

tional maintaining the network’s extensive archives in Moscow and coordinating its work.

The group has spent years cataloguing atrocities committed in the Soviet Union, especially in the notorious network of prison camps, the Gulag.

The move against Memorial caps a year that has seen authorities jail President Vladimir Putin’s top critic Alexei Navalny, outlaw his organisations and crack down on independent media and rights groups.

But the ban against Memorial International stands out even in the current climate and would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

Supporters say its closure signals the end of an era in Russia’s post-Soviet democratisation process, which began 30 years ago this month.

Supporter Maria Biryukova said Russia needed Memorial to make sure the country did not repeat mistakes of the past.

“Memorial tells the truth, in no way does it denigrate the country,” she told AFP.

Another supporter, author Leonid Bakhtov, whose grandfather was executed at the peak of Stalin-era purges in 1937, said the group’s closure was ‘a tragedy for Russia’.

“What a wonderful New Year they arranged for us,” he said bitterly. Memorial’s founders have denied any serious violations, saying that only an insignificant number of documents may have been missing the tag.

Tuesday’s hearing was one of two cases brought against the group. Prosecutors have also demanded a court close Memorial’s Human Rights Centre, accusing it of condoning ‘terrorism and extremism’ in addition to breaches of the ‘foreign agent’ legislation.

On Wednesday, a Moscow court will hold a new hearing in that case.

AFP

Indonesia rejects Rohingya refugees, mostly women

Bireun, Indonesia - Dozens of Rohingya refugees intercepted after their boat ran into trouble off the coast of Indonesia’s Aceh province were being sent into Malaysian waters, authorities said on Tuesday.

At least 100 mostly women and children aboard a wooden vessel said to be taking on water were denied refuge in Indonesia and instead pushed into the neighbouring Southeast Asian country.

Despite calls from non-governmental organisations and the United Nations agency for refugees, Indonesian authorities are attempting to send the group back after providing supplies, clothes and fuel, as well as a technician to fix their damaged boat.



Bireuen Regent Muzakkar A Gani (centre in black hat) hands over supplies for Rohingya refugees aboard a wooden vessel off the coast of Indonesia’s Aceh province, in Bireuen on Tuesday (AFP)

“We hope (the supplies) can help the Rohingyas to continue their journey to Malaysia as they planned and intended,” Winardy, an Aceh police spokesman who, like many Indonesians, goes by only one name, told AFP.

“We will monitor them until they reach their destination,” he said.

The wooden boat was first sighted two days ago, stranded about 70 nautical miles off the Indonesian coast, according to a

local navy commander.

Indonesian authorities have not pushed back Rohingya refugees as strongly as Malaysia or Thailand, instead reluctantly accepting them upon arrival by sea.

But Amnesty International and the UNHCR have called on the government to let the stranded group of Rohingya refugees land.

“This is about life and death. There are women and children, we must pay attention to their health,” executive director of Amnesty International Indonesia Usman Hamid said in a statement.

The UNHCR also called on Jakarta to let the boat’s passengers disembark, pointing to the unseaworthiness of the boat.

Badruddin Yunus, a leader of the local fishing community, told AFP that fishermen who had visited the boat reported there were 120 people on board, including 51 children and 60 women.

AFP

United States, Russia to hold talks on Ukraine conflict in Geneva in January

Moscow, Russia - The United States and Russia will hold much-anticipated talks in early January on European security and the Ukraine conflict after Moscow demanded NATO halts its eastward expansion.

A spokesperson for the US National Security Council told AFP late on Monday that the talks with Russia will take place on January 10.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on Tuesday confirmed the date and said that the talks will take place in Geneva, where US President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin met for their first summit in June.

The Kremlin has grown increasingly insistent that the West and NATO are encroaching dangerously close to Russia’s borders.

Moscow earlier this month presented the West with



Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces, the military reserve of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, holding replicas of Kalashnikov rifles, take part in a military exercise near Kiev on Saturday (AFP)

sweeping security demands, saying NATO must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics.

“The United States looks forward to engaging with Russia,” the National Security Council spokesperson said.

“When we sit down to talk, Russia can put its concerns on

the table and we will put our concerns on the table with Russia’s activities as well.”

Moscow and NATO representatives are then expected to meet January 12, while Russia

and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which includes the United States, will meet January 13, the spokesperson added.

The talks come after weeks of heightening tensions, with Washington accusing Russia of massing tens of thousands of troops around ex-Soviet Ukraine and plotting a winter invasion.

The January 10 meeting will be held as part of the Strategic Security Dialogue initiative launched by Biden and Putin at their June summit.

While that format is mostly consecrated to resuscitating post-Cold War nuclear arms control treaties, the talks will also cover the standoff over Ukraine, where Russia has deployed a large combat force on the border, a senior White House official said.

The NATO-Russia Council meeting and the talks between

Moscow and the OSCE’s Permanent Council are slated to focus on Ukraine.

The OSCE was founded during the Cold War as a forum between Russia and the West.

No concessions

Ryabkov said that Moscow expects the talks with the United States to focus on Russia’s security demands.

“January 10 will be the main day for bilateral Russian-American consultations, which, we hope, will transform into negotiations on our draft agreements,” Ryabkov said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Moscow in the talks would take a ‘hard line’ aimed at defending its interests and avoiding ‘concessions’.

Ukraine has been seeking to break from Moscow’s sphere of influence and eventually join the NATO alliance.

Russia already occupies a swath of its neighbour in the Crimean peninsula and is accused of fomenting a separatist pro-Moscow rebellion in the industrial east of the country.

Deployment by Russia of thousands of troops to the border sparked fears in Kiev and among its Western allies of a wider war, including further seizures of Ukrainian territory.

Putin denies planning to attack the neighbouring country, saying the troop movements are to defend Russia against an encroaching Western military.

The US and its European partners have threatened to impose harsh economic sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine, while also offering to hold negotiations.

The National Security Council spokesperson said Ukraine’s interests would not be ignored in cutting any deal with Russia.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

China expands lockdowns as virus surges in United States, Europe

Beijing, China - China put hundreds of thousands more people under lockdown on Tuesday to try and stamp out a worsening coronavirus outbreak, as infections hit new highs in multiple US states and Europe.

COVID-19 surges have wreaked havoc around the world, with many nations in Europe and North America trying to strike a balance between economically punishing restrictions and controlling the spread of the virus.

The United States halved the isolation period for asymptomatic cases to try and blunt the disruptions, while France ordered firms to have employees work from home for at least three days a week.

Despite facing a much smaller outbreak compared with global virus hotspots, China has not relaxed its 'zero COVID' strategy, imposing stay-at-home orders in many parts of the city of Xi'an.

The hundreds of thousands of affected residents there joined the 13mn people in the city of Xi'an, who entered a sixth day of home confinement as China battled its highest daily case numbers in 21 months.

'I'm about to be starved to death,' wrote one Xi'an resident on the Twitter-like Weibo platform. 'There's no food, my housing compound won't let me out, and I'm about to run out of instant noodles... please help!'

Many Xi'an residents have similarly complained on social



Health workers take swab samples from people to be tested for COVID-19 in Beijing on Tuesday (AFP)

media about the restrictions, which include a ban on driving and only one member of a household permitted to go outside for groceries every three days.

This lockdown is the most sweeping in China since the similarly-sized city Wuhan was cut off from the world in the early days of the pandemic.

Travel chaos

The surges in many countries have been propelled by the highly transmissible Omicron virus variant, hammering vul-

nerable sectors such as travel.

Some 11,500 flights have been scrapped worldwide since Friday, and tens of thousands more delayed, during one of the year's busiest travel periods.

Multiple airlines have blamed staffing shortages caused by spikes of Omicron cases.

The surge in the United States has been fuelled by the Omicron variant, as well as large pockets of unvaccinated residents and a lack of access to quick and easy testing.

President Joe Biden said

Monday some US hospitals could be 'overrun' but that the country was generally well prepared. He stressed that Omicron would not have the same impact as the initial COVID-19 outbreak or the Delta variant surge this year.

"Omicron is a source of concern, but it should not be a source of panic," Biden said.

In an effort to prevent mass labour shortages during the surge, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday cut the isolation period for asymptomatic cases from 10

to five days. The United States is the nation hit hardest by the pandemic, and is closing in on its daily high of 250,000 cases recorded last January.

New measures in Europe

Governments worldwide are scrambling to boost vaccinations, stressing that the overwhelming majority of COVID-19 hospitalisations and deaths are occurring among the unvaccinated.

Many nations have also been forced to bring back un-

popular and economically painful restrictions.

Germany will introduce new restrictions from Tuesday.

Private gatherings will be limited to ten vaccinated people - two for non-vaccinated people - and nightclubs will be closed. All sports competitions will now be held behind closed doors.

"Something has to be done to bring the infection figures down," a Berlin resident said.

Facing record-high infections, France stopped short of issuing a stay-at-home order but called on employers to make staff work from home three days a week where possible.

The new measure, in place for at least three weeks, is one of several announced after a crisis cabinet meeting on Omicron, which is threatening to overwhelm hospitals.

However, similar to the United States, Prime Minister Jean Castex said France will announce by the end of the week a reduction in quarantine and isolation periods for COVID-19 cases and their contacts.

Denmark and Iceland also reported record daily cases.

The new COVID-19 wave has, once again, also caused chaos in the sporting calendar.

England's Premier League announced that a record 103 players and staff had tested positive in the past week. So far in December, 15 games have been postponed.

AFP



Sourav Ganguly

Ex-Indian cricketer Ganguly tests +ve

Kolkata, India - Former Indian cricket captain Sourav Ganguly has been admitted to hospital after testing positive for COVID-19, a senior doctor said on Tuesday.

Ganguly, who underwent minor heart surgery in January, was admitted on Monday suffering from a mild fever, a senior doctor of the Woodlands Hospital in Kolkata said. "His condition is stable. There is no cause for alarm at the moment," the medic told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"Ganguly has been advised by a team of medical experts of the hospital because of some pre-existing health condition."

The India Today news website reported that his samples had been sent for genome sequencing to confirm whether he had contracted the Omicron variant or not.

AFP

US halves isolation for asymptomatic

Washington, US - US health authorities on Monday halved the recommended isolation time for people with asymptomatic COVID-19, as President Joe Biden warned Americans not to panic amid a surge of cases threatening wider social disruption.

Speaking about the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, Biden said some US hospitals could be 'overrun', but the country is generally well prepared to meet the latest surge.

The coronavirus continued to punch holes in airlines' busy Christmas holiday schedules on Monday, with multiple airlines saying spikes in cases of the Omicron variant have caused staffing shortages.

The CDC recommendations, which cut isolation for asymptomatic cases from ten to five days, open the way for people to return to work sooner - minimising the prospect of mass



A young girl receives a self-administered coronavirus test kit at a medical centre in South Los Angeles in California (AFP)

labour shortages in key parts of the economy.

The recommendations, which are non-binding but closely followed by US businesses and policymakers, further suggest that the five-day isolation period be 'followed by five days of wearing a mask when around others'.

The agency said the new

guidelines were 'motivated by science', which had demonstrated that the majority of COVID-19 transmission occurs early in the course of illness, generally one to two days prior to the onset of symptoms and in the two to three days after.

In a virtual meeting hosted by the White House with several state governors and top health

advisors, Biden stressed the Omicron variant would not have the same impact as the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 or the Delta surge this year.

"Omicron is a source of concern, but it should not be a source of panic," he said. Testing is more widely available and mass vaccinations mean that for many people infections do not lead to serious illness.

'More work to do'

With Omicron now the country's dominant strain, more than 200,000 daily cases were recorded over the past two days, quickly approaching records set last January.

Biden acknowledged that despite ramping up testing capacity, it's 'clearly not enough'.

"Seeing how tough it was for some folks to get a test this weekend shows that we have more work to do," he said.

AFP

Qatar suspends leave for medical staff as virus surges

Doha, Qatar - Qatar's main healthcare provider has suspended leave for all medical and administrative staff dealing with COVID-19, as infections surge across the Gulf.

The six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Qatar - have been recording their highest numbers of new cases in months.

"Due to the recent increase in the number of people infected with COVID-19 in Qatar... the difficult decision has been made to put on hold all approved and future employees' leave requests for clinical and admin staff who are working in COVID-19 activities," the state-owned Hamad Medical Corporation said in an internal memo circulated on Monday and seen by AFP.



Healthcare staff at the Hazm Mebareek General Hospital, which has been treating COVID-19 patients since March 30, 2020

"This decision comes into immediate effect and until further notice."

It said staff would be compensated for working overtime, as the country gears up to host the 2022 World Cup.

Since the pandemic began, Qatar has recorded more than 248,000 infections, including 616 deaths. Monday's tally of 343 infections was the highest

since May.

Altogether, the six-members of the GCC have recorded more than 2.5mn cases, among them over 19,000 deaths.

Despite having the world's highest vaccination rate, the UAE has recorded the largest number of infections among Gulf countries at more than 753,000.

AFP

Disabled need extra legal protection: German constitutional court

Berlin, Germany - Lawmakers must draw up rules to protect people with disabilities from being discriminated against if hospitals are forced to carry out triage in the coronavirus pandemic, Germany's constitutional court ruled on Tuesday.

With the health emergency which began in early 2020 headed for its third year and the Omicron variant raging, fears have grown that hospitals will be pressed to decide who they can save for lack of resources such as ventilators.

Nine people with disabilities or who are chronically ill brought the case to Germany's Federal

Constitutional Court, seeking firm rules should health institutions be forced into triage.

Currently, medical staff have only guidelines to work with.

And a determining factor among the guidelines is physicians' assessment of which patient has the best 'clinical prospect of success', in other words, who has the higher probability of survival.

While prioritisation on grounds of disability or inherent illnesses is outlawed under the guidelines, the court acknowledged that there is a risk that they could influence decisions on who has the better chance of



A medical staff in the room of a COVID-19 patient in the University hospital in Bochum, Germany (AFP)

Decisions should be made solely on the basis of the current and short-term probability of survival

CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

surviving. "It must be ensured that decisions are made solely on the basis of the current and short-term probability of survival," said the court.

"The legislature must ensure ... that any discrimination on the

grounds of disability in the allocation of pandemic-related scarce intensive treatment resources is prevented with sufficient effectiveness," it ruled.

"It is required to comply with this duty to act without delay by taking suitable precautions."

As new COVID cases soared through November and December, German hospitals have repeatedly warned that they could be overwhelmed.

While none has had to undertake triage, some in the worst-hit regions have had to send patients to other parts of the country for treatment.

AFP

South Africa's other pandemic: Rape, abuse

The country has the notoriety of having some of the world's highest levels of violence against women

Johannesburg, South Africa - Donning orange bibs, a group of women fan across a Johannesburg township notorious for crime, knocking on doors and stopping anyone they come across on the streets, including teenagers returning from school.

They are called gender-based violence brigades and their mission is herculean: To confront South Africa's plague of femicide and violence against women and children.

The cases are gruesome, and the numbers are dizzying.

A law student was murdered, her body chopped into pieces and stuffed into a suitcase. Another university student was raped, bludgeoned to death with an industrial weighing scale inside a post office. An eight-months pregnant woman was hanged from a tree.

"We can't just ignore what we (see) until justice takes its course," said Juliet Ngonyama (52), her orange bib hanging from her shoulders.

Orange is a symbol of revolution in South Africa.

In this case it symbolises the activists' determination to curb the violence that has worsened since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the women speak with residents, they unearth cases that would have otherwise gone unreported.

Walking in pairs, they engage whoever they come across - male or female.

"Gender-based violence is abusing women, children and men emotionally physically, financially and psychologically," is their opening refrain.

South Africa has the unenviable reputation of having some of the world's highest levels of violence against women.

100 rapes daily

More than 100 rapes are reported daily, while on average a woman is murdered every three hours, according to official data.

The latest quarterly crime statistics showed a 7.1 per cent increase in rapes, with 9,556 women raped between July and September.

"These statistics are shameful," an exasperated President Cyril Ramaphosa said in November. He has characterised violence against women as a 'second pandemic' since the COVID-19 outbreak.

"We are in the grip of a relentless war being waged on the bodies of women and children that, despite our best efforts, shows no signs of abating.

"If a nation's character can be judged by how it treats women and children, then we are falling desperately short," he said.

The Gauteng provincial government started the women's brigades in August last year 'to ensure that victims are reached out to in their household through a door-to-door campaign', said the campaign's coordinator, Senosha Malesela.



Gladys Mmadintsi, the manager of Nisaa centre, a shelter for abused women, in the lounge of the shelter, on the outskirts of Johannesburg (AFP)



Some pottery made by women at St Anne's Home in Cape Town (AFP)

"Overall we are seeing an increased number of... cases being opened in police stations," he said. On that day in Rabie Ridge township, neighbours alerted the brigades to a 22-year-old woman who had been repeatedly abused by her brother.

She was too petrified to dis-

cuss the details because her brother was nearby. Instead, she gave her phone number for the brigades to follow up later that evening. Women like her, trapped within the same space as their abusers, often end up at shelters. But South Africa only has about 100 such shelters to

serve the entire country, and not all provinces fund them well.

The Nisaa centre in Johannesburg's southern Lenasia township is as old as South Africa's democracy.

Its manager Gladys Mmadintsi does not remember a single day when the centre did not

house a victim since it opened its doors in April 1994.

"Instead of going down,... it's worse now," said Mmadintsi, 57.

St Anne's Home in Cape Town has also seen an increase in abuse since the pandemic.

When AFP journalists visited, one woman had arrived the night



Before, people in abusive relationships could escape by going to work. (But due to the pandemic) the intensity of the violence has grown

JOY LANGE

before, and another with a baby and toddler in tow arrived that morning.

Pandemic restrictions, especially limits on movement, have caused more women to seek shelter, said St Anne's director Joy Lange.

"Before, people in abusive relationships could escape by going to work," she said, adding that the 'intensity of the violence' has grown.

'Violence normalised'

Parliament in September passed three bills to tighten its laws on gender-based violence, but advocates say that will not address

the causes of the problem.

South African men often grow up without fathers, and have also suffered from violence, said Craig Wilkinson, founder of non-profit organisation, Father A Nation.

With false notions of masculinity and rampant unemployment, men are in 'a perfect storm', he said.

"No amount of law enforcement can fix broken and wounded men," he said. Legislation alone is "like putting a lid on a pressure cooker. There's going to be an explosion. You have got to deal with the pressure".

"We need to re-father our men, validate them, restore them, teach them how to use their strength."

Violence targeted at women is so normalised that 'it's a lot more difficult for people to come out and seek help and to try to help other survivors', said Nisaa programs manager Sima Daii.

It took Nathalie (40), who has been at Nisaa for two months, a decade before she sought help. She recounted endless bouts of abuse, being hit with a crowbar and suffering three broken ribs.

Jacqueline (29) has been at St Anne's for nine months. She recalls 'that guy beat me so badly, I hated myself for letting that happen'.

She's not laying charges against her abuser, but is glad she survived 'because you have a story to tell'.

AFP

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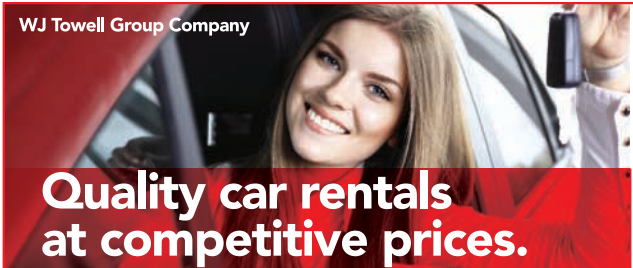
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Tsuyoshi Hachisuka (left) has a restaurant in Hamamatsu city in central Japan that boasts of making unaju or eel on rice (on the right).



Tsuyoshi Hachisuka gently places skewered eel on a grill, preparing a much-loved Japanese delicacy that is now so endangered it commands eyewatering prices and the attention of international traffickers.

Consumed worldwide, eel is particularly popular in Asia, and perhaps nowhere more so than Japan, where remains found in tombs show it has been eaten on the archipelago for thousands of years.

Despite its enduring popularity, much about the eel remains a mystery. Precisely how it reproduces is unclear, and coaxing it to do so in captivity without intervention has proved unsuccessful so far.

Pressures on wild stocks ranging from pollution to overfishing mean supplies have dwindled dramatically in recent decades.

While the writhing snake-like creature is repellent to some, it is a mainstay of Japanese cuisine, and since the 17th century has most often been prepared kabayaki-style: Skewered, grilled and basted in a mixture of soy sauce and mirin rice wine.

In central Japan's Shizuoka, 66-year-old Hachisuka's restaurant in Hamamatsu city has used the same basting sauce base for four decades.

"I adjust it as I go. It mustn't be too sweet or too salty," he told AFP.

But while his recipe has stayed the same, his product has not. The annual catch in Japan of young known as glass eels has fallen to 10 percent of 1960 levels.

That has driven prices sky-high, even in a country that has battled for years to achieve inflation.

"A dish of unaju (eel on rice) is today nearly three times more expensive than when I started," said Hachisuka.

There are 19 species and subspecies of eel, many of them now threatened.

In 2014, the Japanese eel was listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which cited factors including habitat loss, overfishing, pollution and migration barriers.

Enduring mysteries

Protecting the animal is complicated by their complex life cycle, which unfolds over a vast area, and the many unknowns about how they reproduce.

The mystery of eel reproduction has fascinated scientists for thousands of years, with even ancient Greek philosopher and naturalist Aristotle puzzling over it.

He theorised eels must simply emerge spontaneously in mud because he could find no traces of their larvae.

"We think that the eel emerged approxi-

mately 60mn years ago, near the island of Borneo," explains Mari Kuroki, assistant professor at Tokyo University's aquatic biosciences department.

"As continental drift affected marine currents and the distance grew between the areas where eels lived and laid eggs, the creature has adapted," she told AFP.

It is now present in every ocean except the Antarctic.

But despite their ubiquity, it wasn't until the early 20th century that European scientists discovered that European and American eels are born somewhere in the Sargasso Sea near Cuba, with their larvae then carried by currents to different regions.

And the precise location of eel spawning sites remained an enigma until 2009, when a scientific mission pinpointed the breeding grounds of the Japanese eel, west of the Mariana Islands, some 2,000-3,000 kilometres from Japan's coasts.

'Appreciate each eel'

With stocks falling and prices rising, eel consumption in Japan has changed, and the dish is now seen as a treat rather than a regular meal.

A record 160,000 tonnes was consumed across the country in 2000, but that figure has fallen by two-thirds.

"In the past, all the meals sold at grill places and local hotel restaurants had eel in them," says Senichiro Kamo, a seafood wholesaler on Lake Hamana.

"It was also in the bento boxes sold at stations. But since the price has tripled, that's no longer possible," adds Kamo, half of whose sales are of eel.

Eels of all types are notoriously resistant to breeding in captivity, and since the 1960s, Japanese researchers have worked to coax them into the mood, but without success.

Researcher Kuroki believes the best way to protect the species is to make consumers more mindful.

"We need to appreciate each eel we eat," she said, "keeping in mind that this is a precious natural resource."

AFP

THE COMPLEX WORLD OF THE JAPANESE EEL

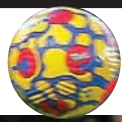
adored and endangered



A dish of unaju (eel on rice) is today nearly three times more expensive than when I started

Hachisuka

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



Watford's midfielder Juraj Kucka attempts an overhead kick at goal during the match against West Ham United, in Watford on Tuesday (AFP)



Spurs held by Saints

West Ham sink Watford 4-1

London, UK - Tottenham dropped two precious points against 10-man Southampton on Tuesday as West Ham hammered Watford 4-1 to turn up the heat in the race for a coveted Premier League top-four spot. Elsewhere on a truncated day

of action due to coronavirus postponements, Crystal Palace cruised past bottom side Norwich 3-0 while Liverpool prepared to take on Leicester in the pick of the day's matches. Spurs are still unbeaten in the league since Antonio Conte took

the helm early last month but they failed to make a man advantage count at St Mary's, drawing 1-1. Southampton took a deserved lead in the 25th minute with a stunning goal from James Ward-Prowse, who lashed home a first-time effort following a throw-in, leaving Hugo Lloris helpless. Tottenham had failed to make

the most of their limited openings but the game was turned on its head when Mohammed Salisu brought down Son Heung-min in the penalty area shortly before half-time. Salisu was sent off for a second yellow card and Harry Kane made no mistake from the spot. Kane had the ball in the net again early in the second half following

a delightful floated pass from Harry Winks but the goal was ruled out for a marginal offside. Tottenham had another goal disallowed after Southampton's Fraser Forster spilled the ball under pressure, with referee Anthony Taylor judging that the goalkeeper had been fouled despite limited apparent contact. The home side were on the

ropes for most of the rest of the game but Spurs failed to find a killer touch and left the south coast frustrated.

West Ham comeback

West Ham brushed off the disappointment of conceding an early goal at Vicarage Road to strengthen their push for a Champions League place. Watford took an early lead when Emmanuel Dennis was played in by Joshua King for his eighth goal of the season. West Ham were level in the 27th minute when Tomas Soucek fired past Daniel Bachmann after being found in space in the box by Jarrod Bowen. Two minutes later the visitors took the lead when Michail Antonio, on his return to the side, played in Said Benrahma, whose shot found the net via a deflection off Adam Masina. David Moyes' men increased their lead from the penalty spot just before the hour mark when Mark Noble scored after Bowen was fouled by Bachmann. Nikola Vlasic completed the rout with a goal in stoppage time to make it 4-1. West Ham rise to fifth in the Premier League on 31 points after 19 games, four behind Arsenal and one ahead of Spurs, who have two matches in hand. Crystal Palace made the perfect start at home to struggling Norwich, with Odsonne Edouard scoring from the penalty spot in the eighth minute. AFP

Luxemburgo leaves Cruzeiro

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - Former Brazil coach Vanderlei Luxemburgo has left Brazilian side Cruzeiro, the second division club announced on Tuesday, just ten days after World Cup winner Ronaldo said he was buying it. 'Given the budgetary reality of the club, the technical staff will not be retained,' Cruzeiro said on Twitter, adding a successor to Luxemburgo would be announced in the coming days. Luxemburgo, who won the Copa America with Brazil in 1999, only joined the club in August. Back-to-back champions as recently as 2013-14, Cruzeiro finished a pitiful 14th in the Brazilian Serie B last season. On December 18, Brazil great Ronaldo, a three-time world player of the year and two-time Ballon d'Or winner, announced he was buying a majority share in Cruzeiro, his first club. Although born in Rio de Janeiro, the 45-year-old made his professional debut for Belo Horizonte-based Cruzeiro in 1993, aged 16. AFP

Orlando Pirates face exhausting CAF Confederation Cup schedule

Johannesburg, South Africa - South African club Orlando Pirates face an exhausting CAF Confederation Cup group schedule after the draw was made in Cairo on Tuesday. The Soweto Buccaneers were placed in Group B with JS Kabylie of Algeria or Royal Leopard of eSwatini, JS Saoura of Algeria and Al Ittihad of Libya. Although trailing 1-0 after the first leg, 2021 runners-up Kabylie are expected to eliminate Leopard when a return match delayed by COVID-19 travel complications is staged in Algeria. Assuming Kabylie succeed, Pirates must travel three times from the bottom of the continent to the top during February and March while their rivals need make the long journey only once. Travelling in Africa is often challenging and there are no direct flights between Johannesburg and either Algiers or Tripoli. Arriving in the north African capitals will not be the end of the road for Pirates as Kabylie play in eastern city Tizi Ouzou, Saoura in western city Bechar and Ittihad in eastern city Benghazi. Competition rules state that when a journey within a country is 500 or more kilometres, the visiting team must be flown to the match venue. However, this rule is sometimes ignored by hosts hoping to gain a psychological advantage



DRAW	
Group A:	Pyramids (EGY), CS Sfaxien (TUN), Zanaco (ZAM), Al Ahly Tripoli (LBA)
Group B:	JS Kabylie (ALG) or Royal Leopard (ESW), Orlando Pirates (RSA), JS Saoura (ALG), Al Ittihad (LBA)
Group C:	TP Mazembe (COD), Coton Sport (CMR), Al Masry (EGY), AS Otoho (CGO)
Group D:	Renaissance Berkane (MAR), Simba (TAN), ASEC Mimosas (CIV), US Gendarmerie Nationale (NIG)
Group winners and runners-up qualify for quarter-finals	
Matchdays: February 13, 20, 27, March 13, 20, April 3	

by forcing rivals to travel by road, often in cramped vehicles lacking basics like air conditioning. Mazembe's second chance Pirates overcame Diables Noirs of Congo Brazzaville 1-0 on aggregate in a qualifier thanks to a goal from captain and centre-back Happy Jele. They then won 2-0 away to LPRC Oilers of Liberia, who withdrew from the second leg of the play-off believing it would be an expensive, fruitless journey. TP Mazembe from the Democratic Republic of Congo were demoted to the Confederation Cup after a shock CAF Champions League qualifying loss to South African side AmaZulu. The Congolese then struggled to overcome another South African club, Marumo Gallants, in a play-off with the two-leg tie settled by an own goal. Mazembe are in Group C with AS Otoho from neighbouring Congo Brazzaville, 2021 semi-finalists Coton Sport of Cameroon and Al Masry of Egypt. Pyramids of Egypt, runners-up and semi-finalists in the last two editions, face three-time Confederation Cup winners CS Sfaxien of Tunisia, Zanaco of Zambia and Al Ahly Tripoli of Libya in Group A. Renaissance Berkane of Morocco meet Simba of Tanzania. AFP

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Black Jack competes with Law Connect (left) as SHK Scallywag 100 (right) and Stefan Racing follow during the Sydney to Hobart race (AFP)

Black Jack wins Sydney to Hobart yacht race

Sydney, Australia - Supermaxi Black Jack won the prestigious Sydney to Hobart yacht race on Tuesday.

Owned by Australian Peter Harburg and skippered by Mark Bradford, Black Jack took line honours after a tight tussle with LawConnect on the River Derwent after two days 12 hours 37min and 17sec of racing.

For Harburg it was his first win in the race after several times falling short and comes in a boat named after Australian Formula One legend and three-time world champion Jack Brabham, who was also a friend of his.

Harburg's decision to stay on shore for the first time and not be on the boat paid off handsomely.

It is the second time the boat itself has won the race having triumphed in 2009 under the name of Alfa Romeo - Harburg subsequently bought it and changed the name.

It was one of the slowest Sydney to Hobart races ever with harsh conditions forcing withdrawals due to damage or minor crew injuries.

On Tuesday morning, Black Jack had regained a six nautical mile lead on LawConnect.

Weather is critical in the 628-

nautical-mile (1,200km) race down Australia's east coast to Hobart, one of the world's most challenging ocean events.

Six men died, five boats sank, and 55 sailors were rescued during the 1998 event when a deep depression exploded over the fleet in the Bass Strait.

But this year, organisers also faced the trials of a global pandemic, which already nixed last year's edition - cancelling the event for the first time since it began in 1945.

Several yachts were also unable to compete because of COVID-19, including favourites

Comanche and Wild Oats XI.

Before the start, four yachts were forced to retire, leaving 88 entrants at the starting line, including 17 two-handed crafts, which are allowed to take part for the first time.

It was a sharp reduction from the 157 boats that set out in 2019.

Though the first yacht to reach the finishing line grabs most public attention, the main prize for sailors is regarded as the handicap honours, which take account of the size of the yachts.

AFP

Djokovic mystery deepens as stars arrive ahead of AO

Melbourne, Australia - Novak Djokovic has not withdrawn from the ATP Cup despite claims he was almost sure to do so, Tennis Australia said on Tuesday, as other top players led by Naomi Osaka began arriving ahead of the Australian Open.

There has been serious doubt as to whether men's world number one Djokovic would travel to Australia, having refused to confirm if he has been vaccinated against the coronavirus.

An unnamed member of his team told Serbian newspaper Blic that they were '99 per cent' sure that he would not play in the ATP Cup, which comes ahead of the Australian Open, adding to the intrigue over whether Djokovic would be at the first Grand Slam of the year.

But Tennis Australia told AFP the Serbian had yet to pull out of the teams event, which is due to start on Saturday in Sydney with Djokovic drawn to play Norway's Casper Ruud on the opening day.

"We haven't heard of any withdrawals from Team Serbia



We haven't heard of any withdrawals from Team Serbia for the ATP Cup

TENNIS AUSTRALIA

for the ATP Cup," a spokesperson said.

Tennis Australia has organised charter flights to bring international stars into Melbourne and Sydney, with the first arriving on Tuesday. Defending women's

Australian Open champion Osaka was among those to touch down, but Djokovic was not on board, TA said. Players can also opt to fly commercial.

Nine-time Australian Open champion Djokovic could win a record 21st Grand Slam title if he plays at Melbourne Park, but to enter Australia he and members of his entourage have to be vaccinated.

The 34-year-old has previously expressed his opposition to the vaccine and his father Srđjan said in late November that Djokovic would probably not play the Australian Open, accusing the organisers of 'blackmail'.

The ATP Cup has already been hit by several players testing positive for COVID-19, including Russian world number five Andrey Rublev and Canada's Wimbledon semi-finalist Denis Shapovalov. Spanish superstar Rafael Nadal, who was due to play a warm-up event in Melbourne next week, also contracted the virus.

AFP

Dominic Thiem to miss Australian Open

Vienna, Austria - Dominic Thiem said on Tuesday he would miss next month's Australian Open, delaying further his plans to rejoin after injury 'to have a good return to competition'.

The 28-year-old 2020 US Open champion, who has been out for six months with a wrist injury, said

he now planned to start at the Cordoba Open in Argentina, which begins on January 31. "My team and I

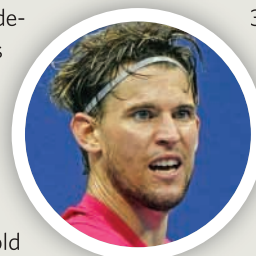
have assessed all matters and we have decided to make some changes to my initial tournament schedule... We believe this is the right decision in order to have a good return to competition," said the

28-year-old in a statement.

The Austrian, ranked 15th in the world, has already pulled out of the ATP Cup, which starts next week.

Despite pushing back his return further, Thiem, who reached the 2020 Australian Open final, said his wrist was now 'in optimal condition' allowing him to practice 'normally with a very good intensity'.

AFP



Italy's Dominik Paris competes in the men's FIS Ski World Cup Downhill event in Bormio, Italy, on Tuesday (AFP)

Italy's Paris sweeps to sixth Bormio downhill win

Bormio, Italy - Italy's Dominik Paris won the men's downhill race in Bormio for the sixth time on Tuesday ahead of Swiss Marco Odermatt who takes the overall World Cup.

The 32-year-old Paris dominated the race down the icy Stelvio piste in northern Italy to finish 0.24 sec ahead of Odermatt with Swiss Niels Hintermann third at 0.80.

Odermatt's first podium finish in the downhill extends his lead in the overall World Cup standings to 286 points on Austrian Matthias Mayer,

who finished 12th on the day, with two Super-G races on Wednesday and Thursday.

Meanwhile Paris added to his impressive run of victories in the Lombardy ski resort after wins in 2012, 2017, 2018 and twice in 2019.

No skier has won a downhill race on the same piste as many times.

Paris has missed out just once on the Stelvio, finishing fourth last year as he made his comeback following ruptured ligaments in his right knee.

AFP

France's Tessa Worley wins giant slalom in Lienz



Tessa Worley celebrates on the podium after winning the Women's Giant Slalom of the FIS Ski Alpine World Cup, in Lienz on Tuesday (AFP)

Lienz, Austria - France's Tessa Worley won the World Cup giant slalom in Lienz on Tuesday, a race which US star Mikaela Shiffrin missed due to testing

positive for COVID-19.

Two-time giant slalom world champion Worley, claimed a 15th World Cup victory in the discipline, finishing 0.30 sec

ahead of World Cup overall defending champion Petra Vlhova of Slovakia. Sweden's Sara Hector, who won the event at Courchevel last week, was third fastest at 0.38 sec.

Worley (32) set the fastest time in the first leg and was fourth fastest in the second.

For Worley it was a first win of the season before the Winter Olympics in Beijing in just over a month's time where she will hope to secure her first ever medal at the quadrennial showpiece event.

The race is taking place without spectators after the Austrian ski federation decided it was wisest in the wake of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 taking hold.

Shiffrin, who leads Italy's Olympic downhill champion Sofia Goggia by 93 points in the overall World Cup standings, revealed on Monday she had tested positive. Two-time Olympic gold medalist Shiffrin (26) is one of several female ski stars to have tested positive.

AFP

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Boland's six-for leads Australia to Ashes glory

England blown away in little more than an hour on third morning for third Test rout

Melbourne, Australia - Scott Boland's six-wicket haul on his Test debut allowed Australia to wrap up the Ashes 3-0, by lunch on the third day at the MCG.

Australia's quicks continued their demolition job on England, with Boland adding to his two wickets from three balls during a devastating final hour on the second day, with four more on the third morning to seal an innings victory as the hosts retained the urn.

Boland took six wickets in 21 balls in all while Mitchell Starc, who had a big hand in reducing England to 31 for 4 in a cauldron-like atmosphere on day two, added the wicket of Ben Stokes inside the first 25 minutes of the resumption, to end with 3 for 29.

Pat Cummins, whose pressure was instrumental in keeping England's beleaguered batters under Australia's thumb, went unrewarded in England's second innings, having helped restrict them to a first-innings total of 185 when he and Nathan Lyon claimed three wickets apiece.

But the day - as short as it was - belonged to Boland, who was selected as an MCG specialist after his performances for Victoria and who became the fourth Indigenous Australian to play Test cricket. After taking 1 for 48 in England's first innings, he was simply unplayable for a side with its confidence beaten and its batting in disarray.

In a historic moment, Boland won the Mullagh Medal as Player of the Match, named after Johnny Mullagh, who toured England as part of the Australian



Australia's paceman Scott Boland (right) celebrates the wicket of England's Mark Wood (not pictured) during the third day of the third Ashes Test match, in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

SCOREBOARD

England 1st Innings 185
Australia 1st Innings 267

ENGLAND 2nd INNINGS

H Hameed	c Carey b Boland	7
Z Crawley	c Carey b Starc	5
D Malan	lbw b Starc	0
J Root	c Warner b Boland	28
J Leach	b Boland	0
B Stokes	b Starc	11
J Bairstow	lbw b Boland	5
J Buttler	not out	5
M Wood	c & b Boland	0
O Robinson	c Labuschagne b Boland	0
J Anderson	b Green	2
Extras:	(lb 5)	5
TOTAL:	68 all out in 27.4 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-7, 3-22, 4-22, 5-46, 6-60, 7-61, 8-65, 9-65, 10-68		
Bowling: M Starc 10-3-29-3, P Cummins 10-4-19-0, S Boland 4-1-7-6, C Green 3-4-0-8-1		

Aboriginal team in 1868.

With players from both sides cleared to resume after returning negative tests following a COVID scare the previous morn-

ing, England's task always looked insurmountable, even with Stokes and Joe Root still in. But the emphatic way in which Australia rammed home their advantage consigned England to new lows, their 68 all-out the lowest Ashes total in Australia since 1936 and England's lowest total in Australia since 1904.

Starc rattled Stokes' middle stump with a rapid, fuller ball that sailed through the gate as the batter moved forward in defence to remove the man still remembered for his heroics at Headingley in 2019 but who is in a much different place now after taking an extended break from the game.

Boland entered the attack and struck with his fifth ball of the day, trapping Jonny Bairstow lbw for 5. Bairstow, dropped by

Cameron Green at gully on the first ball of the over, reviewed the lbw decision, but it was upheld on umpire's call on impact and hitting the stumps.

Root must have wanted to disappear when a Cummins delivery struck him in the groin - the third time Root has suffered such an injury in just over a week.

He shook it off more quickly than he did Starc's effort in Adelaide, which came off the back of a serious knock in the nets which had sent him to hospital for scans earlier that day.

Root hung around long enough to be England's top-scorer - yet again - with just 28 this time, but he fell driving at Boland and edging to David Warner at slip. After scoring 1708 runs in 2021, Root ended the calendar year two runs shy of

second-placed Viv Richards and 80 off Mohammad Yousuf's record.

England brought up another less-coveted record, however, when Mark Wood and Ollie Robinson departed in the space of three Boland deliveries without scoring, taking their side's tally of ducks to 54 this year and equalling their worst performance in that department of 1998. Wood spooned a return catch to Boland to give him his five-for and then Robinson fenced at one outside off stump, stabbing a catch to Marnus Labuschagne at third slip.

It was Green who bowled last man James Anderson for 2 to seal the result on a day that Australia - and Boland - will long remember. Cricinfo

Cummins warns even more to come after emphatic win

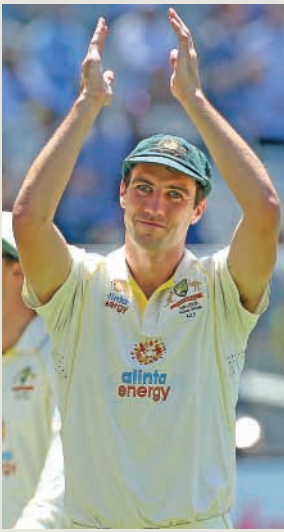
Melbourne, Australia - Skipper Pat Cummins said the way his team ripped England apart to retain the Ashes on Tuesday showed the strength of Australian cricket - and warned they were only just getting started.

The Australian attack destroyed tourists England for 68 in their second innings of the third Test, with Scott Boland taking an incredible 6-7 off four overs on his debut.

It equalled the record for the fastest five-wicket haul, in 19 balls, and came after Jhye Richardson - a late replacement for injured regular Josh Hazlewood - took five wickets in the second Test at Adelaide.

"A great sign of the strength of Australian cricket. We were really confident Scotty would do a great job. Maybe not six for seven!" said Cummins.

"Outside of the actual results, there have been so many other positives - a couple of debutants, a strong squad. These three victories



Australia's captain Pat Cummins applauds the crowd after team's victory (AFP)

really feel like we're setting ourselves up for the next few years and on."

Along with Boland, wicket-keeper Alex Carey also made his debut this series, in for Tim Paine, who stood down as captain and player in the weeks before the Ashes over a lewd text-message scandal. AFP

Root ends '21 with 3rd-most calendar-year Test runs

Melbourne, Australia - England lost the Ashes in humiliating style on Tuesday but for Joe Root it has been an incredible 2021 with the bat, the skipper ending the calendar year with the third-most Test runs in history.

His dismissal on day three of the third Test in Melbourne for 28 left him with 1,708 runs for the year, at an average of 61.00, behind only Pakistan's Mohammad Yousuf (1,788 in 2006) and West Indian legend Viv Richards (1,710 in 1976).

More questions will be asked of his captaincy after England were well beaten again by Australia, but Root has been in brilliant form with the bat this year.

He moved past the likes of Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar to chalk up 1,600 runs at the second Test in Adelaide, and then edged South Africa's Graeme Smith (1,656 in 2008) in Melbourne.



England's captain Joe Root (AFP)

Root, however, had far more innings to compile his total - 29 to the 19 of both Yousuf and Richards.

"I obviously feel like I'm playing really nicely at the minute but I would obviously swap it all for Test match wins," he said after England's thrashing in Melbourne. "Any player will tell you that there's no better feeling in cricket than winning a Test match." AFP

India secure big lead on day of 18 wickets

Mohammed Shami's five-for negates India collapse to Lungi Ngidi on full day of cricket

Centurion, South Africa - With the whole second day lost to rain, Centurion practically made up for the time lost with the most wickets it has produced in a day of Test cricket, 18. India lost their last seven wickets in 69 balls, which is not usually considered ideal, but it was just the result they needed as it suggested the pitch had significantly more life in it than on day one.

Mohammed Shami then led India's bowling - missing Jasprit Bumrah for 49 overs because of an ankle injury - with his second first-innings five-for in Test cricket to give India a lead of 130.

India now held all the keys to dominance in the Test, provided no further weather interruptions in the remaining two days. Things looked similar at the end of day one, but the washed-out second day left them needing an innings win or a transformed pitch if they were to force a result.

The Centurion pitch, which usually gets quicker after the first day, responded with both pace and uneven bounce for the new

ball. What resulted was the second-quickest collapse in Test cricket (where fall-of-wicket information is available) in terms of number of balls, when the first four wickets of a team had batted 90 overs or more.

India's first new ball looked just as lethal with four wickets falling in the first 13 overs before the pitch settled down enough for South Africa to recover from 32 for 4 to end up with 197.

Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi caused the havoc early doors, hitting the pitch hard and drawing the inconsistent bounce. Ngidi ended with his second six-wicket bag in Centurion.

Once the overnight batters, KL Rahul and Ajinkya Rahane fell, both to extra bounce, the approach of the rest of the batters suggested they felt safe with what they had on the board in practically a four-day Test.

They probably fancied bowling out there instead of taking time out of the Test by merely surviving. There was good reason for it: after just 60 false response in the



India's Mohammed Shami (second from left) celebrates with a teammate after dismissing South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (left) during the third day of their first Test match at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Tuesday (AFP)

first 90 overs of the Test, 28 came about in the next 15.3 overs. India took 55 runs in those overs, and unleashed their attack.

As early as the first over, Bumrah produced an unplayable delivery to send back captain Dean Elgar: A full ball that shaped in and then nipped away just enough after pitching to take the edge. In the half hour that India had before lunch, they looked to swing the ball, but

didn't find much. They came back a mean machine: Repeatedly bowling the fullest length that can't be driven, mixing in the odd lifter into the ribs.

Keegan Petersen responded with an error immediately as soon as India changed the lengths. Still looking for the drive, he was well away from the pitch of the ball, which seamed back to take the inside edge and knock over his stumps.

When Aiden Markram had his off stump pegged back by one that held its line, it wasn't the first unplayable ball he was facing. This was an interrogation of the highest order.

After Bumrah twisted his ankle and walked off in the 11th over, Mohammed Siraj cleverly checked Rassie van der Dussen out on the drive with two sucker balls. One edge fell short of second slip, and the second went

straight to gully, a dismissal that should leave the batter disappointed.

As the ball began to grow softer, it began to misbehave less, allowing Temba Bavuma and Quinton de Kock to build a partnership. They applied themselves well, and took toll every time India overpitched.

They added 72 for the fourth wicket, the only stand of 50 or more, but this is where India's decision to play five bowlers came in handy. The duo saw off R Ashwin's first spell and also a Shami spell, but Shardul Thakur came back to have de Kock play on the first ball of a new spell. This was just before tea, Bumrah had come back on the field, but there were still close to two hours to go before he could bowl again.

It was hard work post tea too with the ball not doing much. This is when Shami put in a spell of 4-0-19-2 to take out both Bavuma and No 7 Wiaan Mulder. They both looked comfortable at the wicket, Bavuma even reached his half-century, but they both made errors against the impeccable accuracy of Shami. Mulder played a loose drive to a half-volley, and Bavuma defended a wide one outside the line of his head. Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD

INDIA 1ST INNINGS

KL Rahul	c de Kock b Rabada	123
M Agarwal	lbw b Ngidi	60
C Pujara	c Petersen b Ngidi	0
V Kohli	c Mulder b Ngidi	35
A Rahane	c i de Kock b Ngidi	48
R Pant	c van der Dussen b Ngidi	8
R Ashwin	c Maharaj b Rabada	4
S Thakur	c de Kock b Rabada	4
M Shami	c i de Kock b Ngidi	8
J Bumrah	c Mulder b Jansen	14
M Siraj	not out	4
Extras:	(b 4, lb 4, nb 11)	19
TOTAL:	327 all out in 105.3 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-117, 2-117, 3-199, 4-278, 5-291, 6-296, 7-296, 8-304, 9-308, 10-327		
Bowling: K Rabada 26-5-72-3, L Ngidi 24-5-71-6, M Jansen 18-3-4-69-1, W Mulder 19-4-49-0, K Maharaj 18-2-58-0		

SOUTH AFRICA 1ST INNINGS

D Elgar	c Pant b Bumrah	1
A Markram	b M Shami	13
K Petersen	b Mohammed Shami	15
R van der Dussen	c Rahane b M Siraj	3
T Bavuma	c Pant b M Shami	52
Q de Kock	b Thakur	34
W Mulder	c Pant b M Shami	12
M Jansen	lbw b Thakur	19
K Rabada	c Pant b M Shami	25
K Maharaj	c Rahane b Bumrah	12
L Ngidi	not out	0
Extras:	(lb 4, nb 7)	11
TOTAL:	197 all out in 62.3 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-2, 2-25, 3-30, 4-32, 5-104, 6-133, 7-144, 8-181, 9-193, 10-197		
Bowling: J Bumrah 7-2-2-16-2, M Siraj 15-1-3-45-1, M Shami 16-5-44-5, S Thakur 11-1-51-2, R Ashwin 13-2-37-0		

INDIA 2ND INNINGS

KL Rahul	not out	5
M Agarwal	c de Kock b Jansen	4
S Thakur	not out	4
Extras:	(b 1, nb 2)	3
TOTAL:	16 for one in 6 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-12		
Bowling: K Rabada 3-0-7-0, L Ngidi 2-1-4-0, M Jansen 1-0-4-1		



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