



'Intakheb' makes voting a breeze

VOTER TURNOUT 39.42% OF VOTERS PARTICIPATED IN SUNDAY'S MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

AL WUSTA	DHOFAR	SOUTH SHARQIYAH	MUSANDAM	NORTH SHARQIYAH	NORTH BATINAH	SOUTH BATINAH	DAKHILIYAH	BURAIMI	MUSCAT	DHAHIRAH
9,988 79.3%	59,149 69.7%	35,070 46.3%	5,162 43.5%	22,042 34.7%	51,432 34.5%	27,815 30.23%	20,419 24.5%	4,061 24.32%	24,074 23.15%	7,788 20.15%

Our Correspondent Muscat

Elections for the municipal councils concluded on Sunday evening with 288,469 voters exercising their franchise. Voting, which was conducted via mobile application 'Intakheb' for the first time, saw a quick declaration of results soon after the voting closed at 7pm.

Talal al Saadi, rapporteur of the main committee for the elections, said, "Intakheb application reduced the number of election workers from 8,000 to 500. The whole electoral process can now be organised within a week compared to three to four months it required in the past."

According to the Ministry of Interior, 731,767 Omani voters had registered to elect 126 representatives from among 727



e-voting is a fruitful outcome of the government's efforts to expand the base of society's participation in decision making
TALAL SAID AL MAMARI

valid identity card for voters listed in the Electoral Register.

Talal bin Saif al Hosni, Governor of Masirah, said, "Electronic voting is a new addition to the electoral process in Oman. The municipal elections will help decentralisation of governance, empower local administration in the governorates and activate community participation in the comprehensive national development as envisioned in Oman Vision 2040."

For Nasser al Hosni, a voter from Dhofar, the process was smooth. "The e-voting provided the opportunity for the first time to all Omani voters outside the country to cast their votes via their smartphones."

Similarly for Dr Auhood al Balushi, an academic based in Muscat, said voting was a breeze.

"In less than a minute, through the Intakheb app, I voted for who would represent me in the municipal council. The process was so easy and smooth."

Dr Auhood also lauded women's participation in the political process. "Their participation was robust in the previous municipal council elections and in the Majlis A'Shura polls. Their participation was in the range of 46-48 per cent," she said.

Eng Talal Said al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, hailed the e-voting experience, which he described as a fruitful outcome of the government's efforts to expand the base of society's participation in this decision making process. He pointed out that the electronic voting provides an excellent example of public-private collaboration in saving time and efforts.



900 wounded Yemenis rehabilitated in Oman

Our Correspondent Muscat

The eight-year-old conflict in Yemen has killed and crippled thousands. An Omani prosthetics centre in Salalah is making an effort to put some of the injured back on their feet and thus far has succeeded in doing that with 900 Yemenis.

In continuation of its mission, Arabian Prosthetics Centre (APC) last Saturday concluded the rehabilitation of 50 maimed Yemenis from its 15th batch of beneficiaries.

"Fifty wounded patients from Sana'a, Ibb and Ma'rib successfully concluded their treatment and kinetic rehabilitation programme at the centre in Oman," APC said. With the successful completion of the process for the latest batch, 'we have com-

pleted rehabilitation of 900 wounded Yemenis', it added.

APC's management thanked the sultanate for its humanitarian efforts in the Yemen war and its fraternal ties with its neighbours.

Abd al Karim Nofal, from Sana'a who currently lives in Marib, said that he has regained hope after getting a prosthetic leg. "I am able to perform my daily chores comfortably."

Nofal praised the humanitarian services provided to him and others by APC. "The relief came after a long suffering due to the loss of my left lower limb in a landmine blast."

Hassan al Huwaisk, from Marib, who injured both his feet four years ago, one of which had to be amputated, said that he now runs and races with the new limb.

One Million Working Hours initiative creates 1,249 jobs

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Labour's (MoL) 'One Million Working Hours' initiative is making good progress with around 1,249 jobs created in 24 government institutions until November.

The initiative provides one million hours of part-time work in the government and private sectors in various governorates.

The initiative targets all jobseekers who will be working for a period ranging from three months to two years. Furthermore, the beneficiaries of the initiative are entitled to apply for jobs in the private and government sectors.

"The importance of this kind



Nabil Abdul Rahman al Farsi

of initiative is to facilitate opportunities for all jobseekers to gain practical experience in government institutions. These opportunities were announced in the past through job announcements that allowed candidates to apply for jobs via SMS or the ministry's official website," said Nabil Abdul Rahman al Farsi, Director of Employment and Replacement Department in MoL.



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SEASON 2022 -2023



RING OUT THE OLD, RING IN THE NEW

One more year has come to an end leaving behind many memories - good and bad - for all of us to reflect on. The year 2022 witnessed the impact of lingering COVID-19 on economy; the war in Ukraine, which continued to inflict pain since February; and the death of Queen Elizabeth marking the end of an era, not only for the United Kingdom, but for the entire world.

And for some good memories, there were events that united the world; and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar appeared as the brightest moment not only for the GCC, but also for the entire world.

With 2022 coming to an end, here is what *Muscat Daily* readers had to say about this year and the best memories that it is leaving behind, while pondering over their New Year resolutions as they ring in the new.



Pankaj Phophaliya
Private company employee

The best memory of the year 2022 is that I was able to visit home for ten days post COVID-19; and the smiles on the faces of my parents and family members have given me inexplicable happiness. Yes, I'm making a New Year resolution. The resolution is I will take care of my health, plant a tree every week. I will include my children in plantation so that they understand the value of nature.

Mohammad al Abri
Accountant

The best memory of this year is the birth of my son; he brought so much happiness in our lives

and my priority shifted. This year my resolution is to take my parents and in-laws for Umrah. Also another resolution is to limit my screen time (also for my son).

Saeed al Balushi,
HR manager

The best memory for me is my trip to Qatar for the World Cup. I have always been a football fanatic and this memory will always be in my heart. I have not been making resolutions for the last few years as I realised that by the 15th day, everything goes for a toss.

Ahmed al Hinai
Businessman

I do not have any specific memory of this year

as overall the year went fine. Among the many resolutions that I will make, one is to be with my old mother for at least one hour (likely evening) everyday. Also I want to learn Spanish, which I have been indeed trying for several years.

Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

The year 2022 is coming to an end which has offered a fresh lease of life with the last dose of COVID-19 vaccine given. My focus was always on the environment... I've also attended environmental seminars and LEED Green Associate programme which are my takeaways. Further, football has united the world which was great to see after COVID. The resolution for Y-2023 is to focus on the environment, to

be healthy and safe as COVID is on the surge in a few countries again.

Sushmita Kumari
Teacher

There have been many good memories of this year; mainly my travels with my family and receiving an Apple watch as a gift. Overall the year has given me great memories including an opera show, World Cup matches. Some of my resolutions for 2023 are to sleep on time, have less screen time and to maintain a healthy diet and exercise.

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

No more New Year resolutions hereafter, I have no success so far. COVID free year went smoothly - that's the memory of 2022 and this smooth sail is my expectation too - which I want to carry to 2023.

Vinod Raghavan
Ad specialist

After nearly 30 months of being in Oman at a stretch due to the pandemic, this year I could spend good time with family and friends back home in Mumbai. During this period, I attended scores of national and religious festivals. Mumbai is known as a land of public celebrations viz. ten-day Ganeshutsav, Navratri, Raksha Bandhan and this year India's 75th Independence Day. During my 60-day stay, I also successfully attended 'script and screen play writing certificate course' conducted by Mumbai University.

Of course resolution for 2023... I have kept it close to my heart, as resolutions are not to be shared in public, but it's results definitely I would like to share.



What changes would you like to see in Oman in 2023 as we enter the New Year?

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

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

Share your comments in not more than 50 words along with your full name and profession before next Sunday, 10am, via WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram

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Tender Announcement

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tenders:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Nonrefundable)	Tender Purchase deadline	Clarification deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2022/12/ENG/003	Revamping of Bisya Filling Station in Al Dhakliya Governorate	100.000	02.01.2023	08.01.2023	15.01.2023
TENDER/2022/11/ENG/002	Retender - Revamping of Tawi Attir Filling Station in Wilayat Mirbat in Dhofar Governorate	150.000			
TENDER/2022/12/ENG/004	Revamping of Al Kahal Filling Station in Wilayat Al Jazer in Al Wusta Governorate	100.000			
Bank Name & Account Number		Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)			

The Conditions:

- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with a minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om.
- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- Offer Submission:** The tender bid should be submitted in a sealed envelope and addressed to the **Chairman of the Tender Committee**, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without giving any reasons.
- For any enquiry email us at (procurement@almaha.com.om) or by calling 24610289/24610287/24610355

Time to be merry: Christmas mood sways Muscat life



Our Correspondent
Muscat

With the Christmas festivities gripping the city, Muscat got decked up in red all around. The malls are decorated with stars and Xmas trees, while Santas in red can be seen coming out often - dancing to the tunes of Christmas songs and carols and handing out chocolates and gifts to children at parks and malls. Winter markets are flooded with freshly baked cakes and cookies, while the revellers are out to set the mood of the festive season.

The atmosphere near the Ruwi church was buzzing with vendors selling cakes and eateries, while believers were queuing up for the morning Mass. Similar atmosphere could be seen around the church in Ghala. Queues of cars and people on foot could be seen crowding both the places right from Saturday evening.

Many took a day off on Sunday to socialise and celebrate the day. Nancy K P, a believer from Kerala, said, "My landlady has

Al Falaj Hotel had a special attraction with a 60 feet tall Xmas tree made with recycled cans and bottles

been kind enough to grant me two days of leave. I came from Al Khuwair and stayed with my brother and sister-in-law in Ruwi. We made some snacks and plum cakes, and distributed them in the church.

"We were at the church until late last night. Today we celebrated with our friends. Even my sister-in-law (who works in a hospital) took cakes for her friends," she added.

Like Nancy, David and his wife Jasmine (only first names provided) were at the Mall of Oman to catch a glimpse of Snow Oman. Their teenage son came from Ireland for Christmas and they were busy taking him around.

"Generally, we are not used to

warm winters, but my son is very happy to avoid the harsh cold in Europe and come to Oman," said Jasmine. "We had some hot Belgium chocolate and visited Snow Oman. For sometime we were in the winter mode there."

The hotels around the city were decked up in Christmas lights; and red and white colours. Carols were playing in many hotels with live bands taking the centre-stage.

Al Falaj Hotel had a special attraction with a 60 feet tall Xmas tree made with recycled cans and bottles from the hotel.

"We conceptualised the idea in August and we started making it in September," said Praveen George, the general manager of the hotel. "Keeping in mind the 'sustainable' theme of the Aitken Spence Hotels, the idea was conceived after an internal meeting. We have had almost all the staff in the hotel coming in their spare time and contributing to the decor of the tree."

"The making of this tree took almost four months to complete," he added.

Municipality cracks whip on street vendors in Seeb

Our Correspondent

Muscat

A photograph showing two cyclists riding side-by-side on a wide, paved path. They are both wearing black athletic gear and helmets. The path is flanked by lush greenery, including palm trees and manicured bushes. In the background, a beach and the ocean are visible under a clear blue sky. The scene is bright and sunny, with shadows cast on the path.

and Safety Services.

Under the arrangement, the company will help monitor behaviours of people that may harm public health and environ-

mental safety.

'This stems from the local order No 32/97 on the protection of public facilities belonging to Muscat Municipality issued by

the Royal Decree No 8/92,' the municipality explained.

'Security and Safety Services will provide personnel to carry out oversight functions on a daily

basis on the sea-front in Seeb and its facilities, or any other sites determined by the municipality'.

The monitoring will be carried out in the morning and evening, and the working hours will be doubled on weekends.

Efforts will be made to monitor the most pressing municipal issues such as preventing littering and dumping waste in non-designated places, spitting, tampering with garbage containers, using vehicles and bicycles on beaches, lighting fires, grilling on grass, and dog and animal control, the municipality added.

The team will also monitor camping violations, and preventing individuals from visiting beaches during unsafe weather conditions. Any action that may damage trees and plants, or cause inconvenience to visitors,

or violate public decency, or any phenomena determined by the municipality will also be closely monitored.

"In the first stage, we are targeting Sur Al-Hadid area in Seeb, as it is a vital and active site, especially during holidays," Humaidi informed, explaining that "the site faces issues that affect individuals, public facilities and the environment".

He further said that the agreement reflects the municipality's vision in creating a safe and comfortable environment for the members of the community, away from inconvenience and unwanted behaviours.

According to the agreement, the municipality will train the Security and Safety Services personnel for monitoring and documenting municipal violations.

Muscat Municipality carried out an inspection campaign to curb street vending activities in the wilayat of Seeb on the weekend.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality said, 'As part of our efforts to reduce the negative phenomena of random sales on the roads and streets of the wilayat of Seeb, Muscat Municipality in cooperation with the Royal Oman Police and the Ministry of Labour carried out an inspection campaign in Seeb and issued several health violation notices against street vendors.'

These measures were taken following repeated reports about the street vendors, who sell fish and vegetables on the streets in unhygienic conditions.

Muscat Municipality calls on everyone to abide by the regulations and laws.

Muscat - Heavy to moderate rains lashed several governorates in the past few days with more expected till Wednesday.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), Madha in

Musandam recorded 37mm rainfall over three days from Thursday to Saturday.

Data from the rain monitoring stations of MAFWR from Thursday to Saturday showed that Khasab received 25mm of rain-

fall, Bukha 12mm and Diba 3mm in Musandam; while in Dhofar, Salalah received 13mm of rainfall, Taqah 8mm, and Mirbat 2mm. Isolated rains were witnessed in Dhahirah, Dakhiliyah, North and South Batinah on Sunday.





إعلان مناقصة

TENDERERS ANNOUNCEMENT

SOHAR Port and Freezone invites Tenderers to the following tenders

تدعو شركة ميناء صحر والمنطقة الحرة الموردين للمشاركة في المناقصة أدناه

No رقم	Tender Ref الرقم المرجعي	Tender Title عنوان المناقصة	Tender Fee OMR الرسوم
1	SIPC 2022-67	Supply of Standard Uniform for all SOHAR Port and Freezone. (Re-Tender)	26.250

- The above-mentioned tender fees including the VAT 5%.
- Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 9:00 am Monday, 26/12/2022 until 4:00 pm on Monday 9/01/2023 .
- Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:

- يشمل رسوم المناقصة المذكورة أعلاه ضريبة القيمة المضافة ومقدرها 20
- يرامكان لمقدمي العطاءات طلب استلام وثائق المناقصة إلكترونياً ابتداءً من يوم الاثنين الموافق 26/12/2022م (الساعة 9:00 صباحاً) وحتى يوم الاثنين الموافق 09/01/2023م (الساعة 4:00 مساءً).
- على مقدمي العطاءات اتباع الإجراءات والخطوات التالية للحصول على مستندات المناقصة إلكترونياً.

Step 1: Interested Tenderers should remit the stated tender fees as per the below bank details:

- Account Name
اسم الحساب
- Account Number
رقم الحساب
- Bank Name
اسم البنك
- SWIT
رمز السوفيت كود

Sohar Industrial Port Co
شركة ميناء صحر الصناعي

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Oman Arab bank SAOC – Main Br
البرنسي بنك عمان العربي ش.م.ع.م. – الفرع

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Note: Bank transfers is the only mode of payment accepted
ملاحظة: التحويل البنكي هي الطريقة الوحيدة المقبولة للدفع

Step 2:
Tenderers to send the following documents:

- A request for the electronic tender documents Scanned bank transfer
- The firm's commercial registration documents All shall be communicated to the following e-mail address:
sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

- طلب الحصول على النسخة الإلكترونية من مستندات المناقصة
- نسخة من إيصال التحويل البنكي
- أوراق السجل التجاري للشركة على أن يتم إرسالها إلحـ

sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

Step 3:
Tenderers will receive the electronic Tender Document by e-mail.

- SOHAR reserves the right to accept or reject any tender without assigning any reasons
- All SMES are requested to provide their Green Card along with the required documents

For any clarification regarding the tenders please send an e-mail to:
sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

- سوف يستلم مقدمي العطاءات نسخة إلكترونية من مستندات المناقصة عبر البريد الإلكتروني.
- يحق لشركة ميناء صحر والمنطقة الحرة قبول أو رفض أي مورد بدون الإفصاح عن الأسباب.
- يتوجب على جميع المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة تقديم بطاقة ريادة إلى جانب مستندات الشركة
- في حال وجود أي أسئلة أو استفسارات تتعلق بالمناقصة الرجاء التواصل معنا عبر البريد الإلكتروني،
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BRIEFS

Russia calls EU gas price cap 'non-market measure'
Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev called the EU gas price cap a "voluntarist, non-market measure."

In a statement on Telegram, Medvedev said like in the case of the oil price cap, the decision on the gas price cap "was dictated by zoological hatred to Russia, proceeding from the manic thesis that 'Russians are guilty of everything.'"

Medvedev, who is deputy head of the country's Security Council, said reservations will prevent "serious" implementation of the decision.

"It (the decision) is taken based on the EU's incapability to influence the situation. Just on the principle of 'let's do something' at all. That is why the limit is set at a level that a couple of years ago would have seemed surprising to absolutely all participants in the gas market, including spot traders. He said due to high energy prices, Russophobia, "and with it the impoverishment of ordinary Europeans is increasing."

Shell agrees to pay \$15.9mn over oil spills in Nigeria

Shell Petroleum has agreed to pay €15mn (US\$15.9mn) as settlement to Nigeria over oil pipeline leaks in the country's Niger Delta in the early 2000s.

In a statement on Friday, Shell said it had negotiated the settlement for the benefit of the Oruma, Goi and Ikot Ada Udo communities in Nigeria affected by oil spillage caused by the petroleum company during exploration in 2004-2007. On its website, Shell said the settlement is "no admission of liability," ending all pending litigation in the area related to oil spills within the period. Yaya Adebisi, a petroleum engineer in the country's Niger Delta, hailed Shell's decision to pay compensation to the affected communities.

"The resolve to pay €15mn is heartwarming though the amount isn't commensurate to the level of devastation of ecosystem, fishing activities, and water in the area," he told Anadolu Agency.

Retail sales in Oman expected to grow more than 6% annually

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Retail sector sales in Oman are expected to grow by more than six per cent annually over the next five years, primarily driven by increase in tourism activity, rise in per capita income and a growing population.

The sultanate's retail industry is undergoing a transition with competitive developments across offline and online channels driving the market dynamics, according to Alpen Capital, a regional investment banking advisory firm.

Alpen Capital's latest retail sector report projects GCC retail industry to surpass pre-pandemic levels in 2022, registering a 15.7 per cent year-on-year growth and reaching a revenue of US\$296.8bn. As per the report, GCC retail industry sales are forecasted to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.7 per cent between 2022 and 2026 to reach US\$370bn.

"Bahrain (7.3 per cent CAGR), Saudi Arabia (6.5 per cent CAGR) and Oman (6.1 per cent CAGR) are expected to grow above the GCC average of 5.7 per cent CAGR during 2022-2026 period. Growth in the



smaller countries such as Bahrain and Oman is expected to primarily be driven by increase in tourism activity, rise in GDP per capita and penetration of organised retail stores," Alpen Capital said.

Though the current retail landscape in Oman is largely dominated by standalone units, the concept of organised retail in the form of malls and shopping centres is gaining prominence, the report noted.

"This is primarily driven by

growing interest among consumers, especially the affluent class and millennials, in new lifestyle experiences and increasing demand for space from both global and regional brands who look to further establish their presence and broaden their portfolio to gain market share," Alpen Capital said.

It said a growing population base, coupled with rapid urbanisation and a high GDP per capita (at constant prices) of US\$29,444 has also contributed

to the rise of organised retail market in Oman.

Wholesale and retail trade in Oman grew by 16.1 per cent year-on-year in the first nine months of 2022 to reach RO2.63bn as compared to RO2.26bn in the same period of 2021, the data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information showed.

Alpen Capital noted that the retail space expansion has picked up pace in recent years as major developers flock Oman to

Wholesale and retail trade in Oman grew by 16.1% year-on-year in the first nine months of 2022 to reach RO2.63bn as compared to RO2.26bn in the same period of 2021

set up shops, mostly from pan-GCC retailers and large-scale malls.

"Apart from Muscat, many new projects are springing up in other cities such as Sohar and Nizwa supported by the government's efforts in moving towards expansion of the retail sector," it added.

Robust e-commerce growth

Alpen Capital has projected a more than 20 per cent average annual growth in Oman's e-commerce sector for the next five years.

The report said that the sultanate's retail industry is wit-

nessing a change due to increased consumer awareness, high competition, and rise in e-commerce penetration as several retailers are gradually adopting the omni-channel approach to establish a strong presence in the market. It added that there is also a shift indicating high smartphone user penetration and an increase in online shopping triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Although there is limited e-commerce activity in Oman's private sector, the market is estimated to grow by an average of more than 20 per cent annually between 2022 and 2026 given that the government is actively promoting digitisation and e-government services through the Information Technology Authority," Alpen Capital said.

Under Oman's Vision 2040, the government is inviting investment flows into the commercial real estate sector, especially targeting the hospital-ity and retail industries. Moreover, initiatives undertaken by the government in streamlining the retail infrastructure and strengthening investments towards infrastructure has helped the sector gain further prominence within the GCC markets, the report said.

Meethaq wins award from Global Finance

Muscat - Meethaq Islamic Banking, the leading Islamic financial services provider in the sultanate, has won Global Finance's Best Islamic Digital Bank (Oman) Award.

Meethaq won the prestigious award based on a number of criteria including success in getting customers to use digital offerings, growth of digital customers, breadth of product offerings, evidence of tangible benefits gained from digital initiatives, and website and mobile banking design and functional-ity.

The award was received on Meethaq's behalf by Mohammed Sultan al Habsi, chief representative, UAE representative office, Bank Muscat.

In a press release, Sami Bait Rashid, assistant general manager - retail banking at Meethaq said, "Meethaq is delighted to win this prestigious Islamic Digital Banking Award and we



would like to thank Global Finance for recognising our commitment to continue investing in state-of-the-art technology to further increase efficiency and enhance customer service."

He said, "Meethaq, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, is committed to offering the latest financial services and solutions in line with global financial trends. Meethaq continues to emphasise on service delivery through multiple channels and introduce new

products that cater to different customer segments thereby maintaining its leadership in hi-tech products and services."

Over the past two years, Meethaq has witnessed a remarkable rise in e-channels usage including a rapid uptake in contactless payment solutions through its various debit and credit cards. Customers are able to transact quickly, securely and 24/7 via mobile banking, Internet banking, contact centre, over 40 ATMs and

CDMs in addition to free access to Bank Muscat's ATM-CDM network of over 800 ATMs/CDMs, which is an affirmation of its customer-centric strategy.

A deep analysis of Meethaq customer transactions at branches has revealed that over 88 per cent of all eligible transactions have already moved to digital channels with branch transactions confined to mostly those beyond the limits for Internet and Mobile banking.



India-GCC bilateral trade rises 77%

New Delhi, India - Bilateral trade between India and the GCC countries grew from US\$87.35bn in Indian fiscal year 2020-21 to US\$154.66bn in 2021-22, registering an increase of 77.06 per cent on a year-on-year basis, Union Minister of State in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry Anupriya Patel informed the Indian Parliament during the recent sessions.

During the current financial year 2022-23, for the period

April-October 2022, bilateral trade between India and the GCC stood at US\$111.71bn, up from US\$79.49bn during the same period in 2021-22.

This is an increase of 40.53 per cent on a year-on-year basis, the minister said. During the period financial year 2017-18 to 2021-22, bilateral trade between India and the GCC has grown by 10.57 per cent on a compounded annual growth rate basis. ANI

Two years after EU exit, UK businesses feel Brexit blues

London, UK - Two years after Britain's departure from the European Union, bosses of UK businesses are reeling from the cost of Brexit, including some who voted to cut ties with Brussels.

"It's cost, cost, cost with no benefit," noted Adrian Hanrahan, chief executive of a small chemicals company, Robinson Brothers, based in central England and for which the EU remains a key market.

The problem is not the customs duties, largely eliminated by the post-Brexit free trade agreement between London and Brussels, but rather a mountain of new regulatory paperwork.

"We've added probably 25 per cent extra now on our administration costs just to cope with the changing paperwork... of getting stuff in from the EU and out of the EU," Hanrahan told AFP.

The company employs 265 people, producing chemicals

used by various sectors featuring food, electronics, pharmaceutical and other firms.

Robinson Brothers exports around 70 per cent of its products, of which more than half go to the EU.

'Nothing to help them'

The company is far from alone in struggling with the consequences of Brexit, with 56 per cent of UK businesses facing difficulties adapting to new trading rules, the British Chambers of Commerce said Wednesday.

"Businesses feel they are banging their heads against a brick wall as nothing has been done to help them," said BCC director general Shevaun Haviland.

"The longer the current problems go unchecked, the more EU traders go elsewhere, and the more damage is done."

The government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said it



A file photo shows commuters walking across London Bridge

believes the UK economy has entered a recession on fallout from sky-high inflation.

While it repeatedly blames this on Russia's invasion of Ukraine fuelling energy prices,

analysts claim Brexit has also pushed up costs.

"There's good causal evidence that the depreciation of sterling immediately following (the 2016 vote for) Brexit led to higher in-

flation, specifically for goods we import a lot of," London School of Economics researcher Nikhil Datta told AFP.

He added that new trade deals, such as the one struck

with Australia, "have been tiny".

Bank of England monetary policy committee member Swati Dhingra told MPs last month that Brexit was to blame for "a much bigger slowdown in trade in the UK compared to the rest of the world".

According to King's College London economist Jonathan Portes, "there is a reasonable degree of consensus that Brexit has reduced UK trade by perhaps 10 to 15 per cent compared to a no-Brexit scenario".

The government's own economic forecasting body, the OBR, estimates that Brexit will reduce the country's long-term output by around four per cent.

EU workers

Complicating matters has been the loss of EU workers in sectors such as health, hospitality and agriculture, even if some of those returning home have been replaced by staff from non-EU

countries.

Witnessing the fallout, some high-profile bosses who voted for Brexit are calling on the government to relax the new and tighter immigration rules.

"In respect to immigration, it's definitely not the Brexit I wanted," Simon Wolfson, head of clothing giant Next, told the BBC last month.

Tim Martin, boss of pubs group J D Wetherspoon, is of a similar opinion.

For Hanrahan, Brexit fallout has led questioning whether his company can survive.

"If this continues, then we have no other option but to shrink our offering to remain in business.

"We've had two or three very large German customers tell us that they're no longer going to come to us because it's too complex for them to work with anybody in the UK."

AFP

US economy grew 3.2% in Q3 on stronger spending

Washington, US – The US economy expanded 3.2 per cent in the third quarter, the Commerce Department said, in a further upward revision of data reflecting stronger consumer spending and investment than earlier estimated.

The world's biggest economy grew for the first time this year in the July to September period, after two quarters of contraction that worsened recession fears.

It earlier revised the GDP figure to 2.9 per cent, annualized – already an improvement from the 2.6 per cent first reported in October.

Both adjustments "primarily reflected upward revisions to consumer spending" as well as non-residential fixed investment, the Commerce Department said, in its final GDP estimate for the quarter.

But growth was partly offset by decreases in residential fixed investment and private inventory investment, it added.

Within consumer spending, a rise in services was partly held back by a drop in goods – sales of cars and auto parts lagged as did food and beverage purchases, as households grappled with soaring costs.

An increase in government spending was led by upticks in staff compensation and defense



The world's biggest economy grew for the first time this year in the July to September period, after two quarters of contraction that worsened recession fears

spending, the Commerce Department said.

The data also showed that personal consumption expendi-

tures picked up 2.3 per cent, markedly higher than the 1.7 per cent previously estimated.

But it is unclear how long consumers will be able to keep up the current pace of spending.

'Still spending'

"Despite a rapid increase in interest rates, the economy is growing and importantly, households are still spending," said Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics in a note.

The Federal Reserve has raised interest rates seven times this year in an attempt to tamp down decades-high inflation, walking a tightrope to try to cool

the economy without triggering a recession.

While effects of the higher rates are rippling across sectors, consumer spending has proven more resilient than expected.

But analysts point to signs that households are dipping into their savings, predicting a slower growth path in the future.

"In 2023, we expect a slower growth trajectory," said Farooqi. "In terms of Fed policy, even as growth slows... a focus on lowering inflation means rates will remain higher for longer next year," she said.

AFP

Fed's preferred US inflation indicator eases in November

Washington, US – A key indicator of US inflation edged down in November, according to government data released Friday, in welcome news to households grappling with soaring costs while spending slowed.

This extends a downward inflation trend in recent months as officials try to cool the world's biggest economy, though it is unlikely to bring quick relief from a forceful campaign to rein in prices.

The US Federal Reserve's preferred inflation measure, the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index, rose 5.5 per cent last month from November 2021, Commerce Department data showed.

This was below the October level but remains significantly higher than policymakers' target of two per cent inflation.

The central bank focuses on the PCE price index as it reflects actual spending of consumers, including shifts to less expensive items, unlike the better-known consumer price index.

From October to November, the PCE price index increased 0.1 per cent, boosted by food prices, likely pointing to further tightening by the Fed.

But an easing of inflation pressures overall has boosted consumer sentiment in December, rising five per cent from last month, according to a separate survey by the University of Michigan.



Although "sentiment remains relatively downbeat," consumers' extremely negative attitudes have improved, said survey director Joanne Hsu in a statement.

Meanwhile, expenditures appear to be "softening" with a drop in auto spending, although spending on services shows few signs of faltering just yet, said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics.

Household spending, which has proven resilient in the face of decades-high inflation, jumped 0.1 per cent from October to November, the Commerce Department data showed.

While there may be holiday distortions to the latest figures, "it seems reasonable to expect people to become more cautious," Shepherdson added.

This is because consumers would have "run down about half of their accumulated pandemic savings, and labor market conditions are softening," he said.

Personal incomes also rose

0.4 per cent from October, official data indicated.

"High interest rates and elevated inflation caused consumers to take a breather on spending in November, but income gains and excess savings offered support," said Oren Klachkin of Oxford Economics.

Consumer prices have surged this year, exacerbated by supply chain snarls and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, leading the Fed to hike interest rates rapidly in hopes of easing demand.

The central bank has raised the benchmark lending rate seven times this year, with higher borrowing rates already battering sectors like housing.

But spending has been resilient and prices remain stubbornly high.

Excluding the volatile food and energy segments, the PCE price index rose 4.7 percent from a year ago, down from October but still far off the Fed's goal.

AFP

EU gas price cap will be of limited use, say experts

Brussels, Belgium – EU nations have adopted a mechanism to cap natural gas prices, but experts say it will likely have only a limited impact on reducing what businesses and households pay – and could harm efforts to purchase supplies next winter.

Natural gas is traded on wholesale exchanges where utilities and even some large industrial firms can buy supplies.

The European benchmark price for gas, a contract called Dutch TTF to be delivered the following month, is currently around 95 euros (about US\$100) per megawatt hour. In August, it briefly spiked to 345 euros.

The European price cap will be triggered if two conditions are met: If the benchmark price rises above 180 euros per megawatt hour over three consecutive days, and if it exceeds a reference price for liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices by at least 35 euros.

Once triggered, the cap remains in place for 20 days - unless the benchmark price falls back below 180 euros for three consecutive days, or a supply emergency in the EU is declared.

Are fuel bills going to fall?

It is hard to judge the impact of the mechanism because it hinges on a double constraint of very high prices which may rarely happen.

"The ultimate impact of it is very uncertain," said Simone Tagliapietra at the Bruegel think tank. But if there are tensions in world gas supplies – especially due to heightened Chinese demand – certain conditions could combine to trigger the cap, Katja Yafimava from Oxford Energy said.

"Any potential problems with supplies, cold weather snaps, and insufficient demand reduction could all contribute towards these two conditions being met at the same time," she said.



Ultimately however, the cap aims to prevent "extreme volatility," she added rather than bringing down bills.

"But this has nothing to do with lowering energy prices overall, which will indeed remain high with this price gap."

The impact for consumers will be negligible, warned oil and gas analyst Thierry Bros.

"There will be no impact for individuals and very little for manufacturers," he said.

"There is not necessarily a direct link between the wholesale price and the price you pay for electricity or gas."

Governments have already spent 700bn euros to "limit the rise in prices and prevent the price from being passed on" to consumers, he added.

Acting on the wholesale price will mainly have consequences for the small number of manufacturers that buy directly from the wholesale market.

"The main issue related to next year is the fact that (the price cap) might compromise your opportunity to secure the supplies. But in that case, the system will just be deactivated," said Tagliapietra.

But there is a risk that more transactions will be made outside regulated exchanges to avoid the cap, leading to "less transparent" over-the-counter trades that are riskier for financial stability, he added.

Others warned that the price cap could hinder efforts to get supplies for next year, since Europe will need to buy a lot of gas during spring and summer to fill

up its reserves ahead of next winter.

"This will have negative consequences since usually supply is guaranteed with high prices," said Bros.

"With low prices, you no longer guarantee anything."

He says another risk is that it creates a precedent for intervention in the market.

"You will have operators who will say that now, there is a risk that politics could intervene at any time."

Norway – which has become Europe's main gas supplier as Russian deliveries have fallen – has already expressed its concern, and said that the cap will not resolve the problem of a shortage of gas.

Africa's top gas exporter Algeria has also spoken out against the cap, saying it would threaten upstream investments.

What are solutions to energy crisis?

Thierry Bros believes that the best solution is for the EU to separate the price of gas and electricity.

"That is one way to promote decarbonisation of the system and to lower the price of electricity," he said.

"This crisis will only be solved if we maximise the alternative supply to Russian gas, including renewables, and if we got the demand (down)," said Tagliapietra, insisting that Europeans need to keep burning less gas.

"There is no easy way around this."

AFP

Japan's inflation rises to 3.7% in November, highest since 1981

Tokyo, Japan – Prices in Japan rose at their fastest pace since 1981 in November, data showed, fuelled in part by higher energy costs.

Core consumer prices, which exclude volatile fresh food costs, climbed 3.7 per cent last month compared to a year earlier, data released by the internal affairs ministry showed.

Prices jumped the most for processed food items and were also higher for electricity and durable goods like air conditioners.

The November figure is well below the sky-high levels that have sparked concern in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, but far exceeds the Bank of Japan's long-term goal of 2.0 per cent.

Even excluding fresh food and energy, the index was up 2.8 per cent.

"Although low by international standards, Japanese consumer price inflation at three per cent to four per cent is high enough to feel uncomfortable with stagnant wage growth," wrote Sarah Tan, economist at Moody's Analytics, in a note.

The headline core consumer price index (CPI) has risen con-



sistently since the beginning of the year, putting pressure on the Bank of Japan to tweak its long-standing monetary easing policies.

The US Federal Reserve and other central banks have sharply hiked interest rates this year to tackle inflation.

But Japan, which since the 1990s has swung between periods of sluggish inflation and deflation, has gone against the grain and continues to keep interest rates at ultra-low levels as it tries to kickstart its economy.

to its ultra-easy monetary policy, prompting the yen to strengthen rapidly.

While the adjustment falls short of a rate hike, analysts said it could help arrest the yen's declining value.

Koya Miyamae, senior economist at SMBC Nikko Securities, said prices were likely to continue rising in the short term.

"The core CPI rose in November due to rises in food prices and gas. The index will likely rise further, nearing or potentially rising above four percent in December," he told AFP.

"But core CPI will remain above two percent next year, while the pace of the rise in wages is not catching up with inflation," he added.

Most analysts expect price rises in Japan to peak around the end of the year or early 2023.

"Inflation will likely average four percent in December given delayed pass-through of higher producer prices," Tan said.

"It is expected to decline in 2023 as policy support kicks in," with global inflation also moderating as commodity prices temper and supply chain disruptions are fixed.

AFP

ECB 'will succeed' in taming inflation

Frankfurt, Germany – The European Central Bank "will succeed" in bringing down sky-high inflation, president Christine Lagarde said in a holiday message on Friday, as the eurozone braces for more interest rate hikes in 2023.

Eurozone consumer prices soared to a record high this year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent energy and food costs surging.

Inflation in the euro area

slowed in November for the first time in a year and a half, but at around 10 per cent was still five times higher than the ECB's target.

"I know that high inflation hurts everyone, especially the poor," Lagarde said in a video message ahead of the Christmas and New Year's holiday season.

"I promise that we will do our utmost to bring inflation down," she said. "And we will succeed."

AFP

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Bank Nizwa opens first digital-only branch

Bank Nizwa, has introduced its first digital-only branch in the Mall of Oman. The paperless, unmanned branch was inaugurated by Tahir al Amri, CEO, Central Bank of Oman (CBO) along with Sheikh Khalid Abdullah Ali al Khalili, chairman of Bank Nizwa, Sheikh Majid Ali al Mamari, Board Member at Bank Nizwa, and Khalid al Kayed, CEO, Bank Nizwa.

In addition to providing market-leading services with an emphasis on rendering seamless customer experience, the digital branch is designed to educate consumers on Islamic financial products and services through its dedicated 'Islamic Finance Knowledge Corner', a press release said.

Kayed said, "The pandemic had expedited digitalisation in banking and other industries. bank customers were compelled to use remote banking for months. Due to this shift, more individuals use online and mobile banking now. Although this change was first driven by need, it led to masses of patrons learning about the simplicity, convenience and reliability that digital banking offers.



"This led to the belief that these services can successfully take the role of branch banking. Customers can bridge the analogue and digital worlds with the use of such services. Whilst personal interaction remains a cornerstone of customer service, digital enhances the experience, especially for quick turnaround requirements."

Bank Nizwa's digital branch leverages technological evolution and aims to encourage those who use conventional banking methods to adopt digitalisation. The branch is equipped with three machines where customers can complete a host of transactions and activities, including an Interactive Teller Machine, where customers can withdraw and deposit cash upto RO20,000), a fully functioning machine where customers can make regular withdrawals and deposits or pay bills, and a kiosk where customers can fulfil their debit card issuance needs.



Sohar International sponsors MENA Karting

Promoting the spirit of 'winning' and brining positive socioeconomic change by reflecting Oman as an international sporting destination, Sohar International sponsored the MENA Karting Nations Cup 2022.

Organised by Oman Automobile Association (OAA), the 3rd edition of MENA Karting Nations Cup 2022 witnessed participation of 140 drivers from 16 countries within the MENA region. The competition concluded with Oman's karting team ranking in first place within the category of DD2 Master, a press release said.

Held at the Muscat Speedway

Circuit in OAA, the 2-day MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup 2022 kicked off on 16 December with the presence of Brigadier (ret'd) Salim Ali al Maskari, chairman of Oman Automobile Association, where Sohar International's COO, Hamood al Sawai, conducted the draw to identify the starting positions of all participants.

Day 2 concluded the races and witnessed a closing ceremony which was held under the patronage of Brig General ohammed bin Awad al Rawas, director general of Traffic, and witnessed the presence of Khalil Salim al Hedaifi, chief Retail

Banking officer, Sohar International.

As a people-centric bank that is invested in the community it serves, Sohar International has remained at the forefront of supporting initiatives that promote local talent enabling them to achieve their aspirations. The bank's sponsorship to Oman Automobile Association's various activities including the MENA Karting Nations Cup 2022 reflects the bank's continued efforts in promoting Omanis, and the Sultanate as a thriving sport tourism destination in its drive to achieve optimal economic diversification across various avenues.

Vodafone deploys first 5G indoor coverage at Muscat airport

Just in time for the holidays, Vodafone has deployed the latest 5G capabilities at Muscat International Airport, giving travellers state of the art connectivity available only in few airports around the world.

Dedicated for Vodafone customers, the ultrafast system is the first 5G indoor coverage at the airport, offering a peak rate of up to 5000Mbps - fast enough to download a HD movie in one minute or handle as many as 300 Zoom calls at once, a press release said.

Using the latest technology solutions on the market from Ericsson, Radio Dot System, will ensure the future-readiness of Muscat International Airport, allowing for easy, and seamless deployment of future 5G enhancements with Vodafone. The service is currently operational in



the airport's Departures, with deployment in Arrivals planned in the coming weeks.

"Vodafone in Oman is very proud to be the first operator to have a dedicated 5G in-building coverage solution in Muscat International Airport," said Stelios Savvides, Vodafone's Technology director (CTIO). "We always strive to bring innovation into the Oman and provide an enhanced experience for our customers, and this deployment is a true testament of that. I would like to thank our partners, Ericsson and Oman Broadband, who have worked tirelessly to deliver this deployment."

Masader hosts research workshop

Masader (Oman Virtual Science Library) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has organised a two-day workshop presented by Dr Ayman Akil, head of Professional Services Research & Academia - MENA Clarivate, on December 21-22 at the Social Center at Innovation Park Muscat. The workshop was for research managers,



decision-makers within academic institutions, researchers, and members of Technology Transfer Offices.

The first workshop was titled 'Research Visibility and Pathway to Innovation', which aimed to share best practice when making research outcomes visible to the industry. The second workshop aimed to offers academic institutions with a roadmap to enable a

shift from a research-centered mindset to a broader innovation-focused environments within universities/research centers.

Masader provides seamless and affordable access to a wealth of global research material among academics, university students, and private researchers. It connects Oman's academic community to some of the finest digital resources.



TZC highlights value of Performance Management

Sharifa Khalid al Balushi, Group head - Human Capital Center of Excellence of The Zubair Corporation, recently inaugurated a workshop highlighting the relation between employee's performance and organisational success.

The workshop, titled, '2nd SMART Performance Manage-

ment 'Constructive Feedback', was organised by the Zubair Corporation's Human Capital Center of Excellence Division at Bait Al Zubair, and saw several executives and line managers from different departments of The Zubair Corporation and its subsidiaries participating in the workshop.

With an aim to build a productive work environment based on a culture of high performance, the workshop aims to improve the communication between the employee and line manager, obtain feedback of the performance management, and emphasise the importance of linking employee performance with the ob-

jectives of the group companies.

Commenting on the workshop, Sharifa al Balushi said, "The Zubair Corporation seeks to launch several initiatives in the field of human capital management in order to enhance the culture of institutional performance. This can be achieved by unifying the efforts made towards achiev-

ing the future goals of the group that are set by the corporation's board of directors. The workshop aims to evaluate employees more effectively, give constructive feedback, handle difficult performance conversations, and use an effective coaching style to handle performance conversations.

ahlibank extends credit card offers with Shell Oman

In a continued effort to offer value-added benefits and services to its customers, Ahlibank has once again teamed up with Shell Oman Marketing Company (Shell Oman) to provide all its credit card holders with an exciting cash back offer.

Scheduled to run for 5 days starting from December 27 till the end of the year, the promotion offers all Ahlibank credit cardholders 20% cash back when fuelling or shopping in Shell service stations and Select shops with a maximum cap of RO10 per customer.

Muneer al Balushi - AGM - head of Retail Distribution, Ahlibank, said, "Our role as one of the sultanate's leading banking institutions requires

us to develop offers and services that meet customer needs over time.

"This will enable us to fulfill their intention to utilise their credit cards in the best way possible. Such offers enhance our customers' loyalty and give them added value. We are pleased to extend this offer, which will help us strengthen relationships with existing clients and build relationships with new ones. With the launch of the latest promotional offer, Ahlibank is demonstrating its leadership in providing innovative banking reward programs," he added.

The campaign reflects the bank's commitment to its growth strategy by creating such products and services.



Suhol Al Fayha launches new logo, expansion plans

Suhol al Fayha, a part of the KV Group and the largest importer, distributor and grower of fruits and vegetables in the Sultanate of Oman, will be launching its new logo in sync with the renewed renaissance of the country and announce its future expansion plans at an event to be held at the Hormuz Grand hotel on Monday.

The group has been getting itself prepared to unleash a new story after 30 years of its journey embracing the new opportunities and continuing to delight

the customers, which keeps Suhol moving forward, according to the promoters, a press release said.

The mission of the organisation has been aligned with the great vision of its founders to serve the population with the premium quality products and services. One of the proactive initiatives of the group, the 'Farm to Fork' approach, has proved to be a great success as it contributed to the ICV and supported the sustainability initiative of the country.

"Our initiative to support local farmers and crops was possible with our businesses spanning from farms in different regions of Oman to distributing them to every nook and corner of Oman through our 150 operating facilities," says Abdul Wahid, MD. Suhol is the first ISO 22000: 2018 certified fresh fruits and vegetables grower and distributor in Oman as it keeps quality as its credo.

"Sustainability is the key to any business continuity. We are proud to have passed on the

mettle of the organisation to the second generation who is welcoming and embracing the changes to keep up with the times," added Abdul Jabbar, chairman of KV group.

According to Jabbar, bringing in newer technologies and challenging ideas is what is helping the organisation move to the next level in its journey. "Keeping this in mind and ensuring consumer delight is what has resulted in the design and launch of the new identity of Suhol al Fayha," he added.

Ooredoo wins M E Digital Customer Experience award

In recognition of its commitment to providing an unrivalled customer experience, Ooredoo has won the award for 'Best Middle Eastern Digital Customer Experience' at the recently held Telecom Review Summit in Dubai.

Broadening internet accessibility, championing innovation, pioneering technologies such as IOT, Cloud and 5G have all been high on the company's agenda, with the aim of offering a superior, digital-led end-to-end customer journey, a press release said.

Ooredoo has also embarked upon an ambitious long-term technology strategy to develop the framework necessary to stay ahead of the curve and meet the evolving digital requirements of customers. The customer experience is now completely intertwined with the use of technology and has improved



access to telecoms services, most notably from the multi-award winning Ooredoo App.

Delivering on its brand promise to 'Upgrade your World', Ooredoo has made significant upgrades to network infrastruc-

ture, product offerings and the launch of a fully-digital customer experience across a variety of touchpoints, not only through the App, but leading social media platforms, an award-winning contact centre and stores.

Hilton Garden Inn launches Together & Co restaurant

Hilton Garden Inn Muscat, in Al Khuwayr, announced the launch of Together & Co restaurant.

For more than three years, the hotel's all-day dining restaurant, The Garden Grille, has been a place for families, friends, and colleagues to gather. With its brand refresh, the new name itself - Together & Co places a strong emphasis on being a place that feels comforting, familiar,

and fun. A place where hotel travelers and locals actually want to spend time as they gather over a memorable meal.

"Our team at Hilton Garden Inn Muscat, Al Khuwayr, is proud to have launched this new restaurant brand with a contemporary menu with local touches, stellar service, and a welcoming atmosphere," said Ozge Yilmaz, General Manager.

"Delicious, fresh food and drink are just where things get started. What really matters to us is building a local community of people. We do not want to be just another dining venue. We want to be able to provide a space and time where people can connect with one another, spend a moment to themselves, and create unforgettable memories together," he added.

ROHM presents Gile Bae with Armenian orchestra

The Royal Opera House Muscat is delighted to announce a special New Year's Eve concert featuring the acclaimed pianist Gile Bae and the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra.

Gile Bae is an extraordinary pianist who has been performing to great acclaim since the age of 5. Bae is joined by the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra to perform a beautiful, sophisticated concert with a programme of the finest pieces of classical music, under the baton of the legendary conductor, Jan Latham-Koenig. These include pieces from the masters of classical music - Mozart, Beethoven, Bizet, Elgar, and Ravel.

The Royal Opera House Muscat also offers opportunities to experience the rich history and beauty of music for the benefit



and wellbeing of audiences from around the region and beyond.

Gile Bae with the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra will take place at the Royal Opera House Muscat on December 31 at 6.30pm.

Blockchain Valley coming to Oman soon

With the boom in emerging technologies and a lack of infrastructure to support the rising demand, OSOS and Chainsense Ltd have signed an MoU to come together to help not only the local community and businesses but the overall industry by setting up a Blockchain Valley within the Sultanate of Oman.

The National Real Estate Development and Investment, also known as OSOS, offers a variety of services that meet all the requirements of the real estate market efficiently, through a specialised management team and strong backing from the major shareholders, such as Royal Oman Police PF, Ministry of Defence PF, Dewan PF, Public Authority of Social Insurance, Bank Muscat, MB Holdings, Al Madina Investments, and Al Rayan Bank - Qatar.



Activities of OSOS includes real estate development, management, operations, valuations of real estate, along with special focus on investments in lucrative

and value added opportunities in the region which synchronised with the Vision 2040 of the Sultanate of Oman. With its strong shareholders and experienced

management team OSOS is a logical choice as the infrastructure partner in the venture.

Chainsense Ltd is a Tech MNC headquartered in London

and presence in four countries. With years of experience in the Web3 space, Chainsense as a Web3 enabler joins the venture as the technical and operational partner to manage, structure and operate the Blockchain Valley.

The purpose of the Valley is simple, to support, incubate, build the technical infrastructure, help grow the awareness and penetration of Web3 across industries within the region by bringing together a team of like-minded experienced professionals from the industry on one platform for a single cause.

"This will not only help expedite the growth of tech industry but also the start-up ecosystem within the region. Our vision is to enable mass adoption of Web3 technologies and that cannot be done independently," said Ganesh Lore, founder.

Volkswagen Oman, Oman Air partner under corporate affinity programme

Volkswagen Oman, represented by Premium Motors, has announced that Oman Air has joined the brands corporate affinity programme.

As part of the partnership, Volkswagen's model Teramont, Touareg and Golf GTI are on display at the Oman Air headquarters in Muscat, a press release said.

Volkswagen's corporate programme ensures that employees of companies in the programme receive enhanced sales and service privileges. Additionally, it extends preferential rates for corporate customers, special rates on service, parts and extended warranty, finance and insurance solutions and courtesy vehicle service and replacement.

Volkswagen's corporate



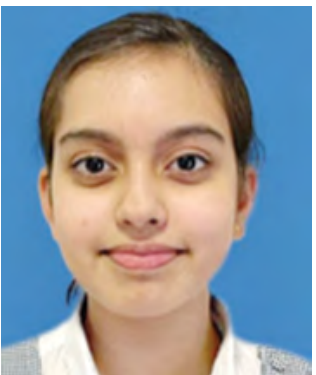
range is applicable on across the brands fleet of cars in Oman.

Christian Nehme, general manager of Premium Motors Oman, said, "We are honoured with Oman Air and offer the best buying experience for them. At

Volkswagen, our mission is to make the ownership experience as smooth, convenient and cost-effective as possible. We do this through our commitment to unparalleled service, customized solutions, and world-class vehi-

cles that raise the standard in their respective classes. Our mission is to provide a unique and innovative automotive experience by offering a wide range of products and services that deliver superior value."

Literary laureates from ISG shine



Budding poets from Indian School Al Ghubra (ISG) made their mark in the International Poetry and Recitation Competition organised jointly by DBP (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka - the government body responsible for coordinating the use of the Malay language and literature in Malaysia) and Motivational Strips (an international writers' forum).

Five of the nine prizes were

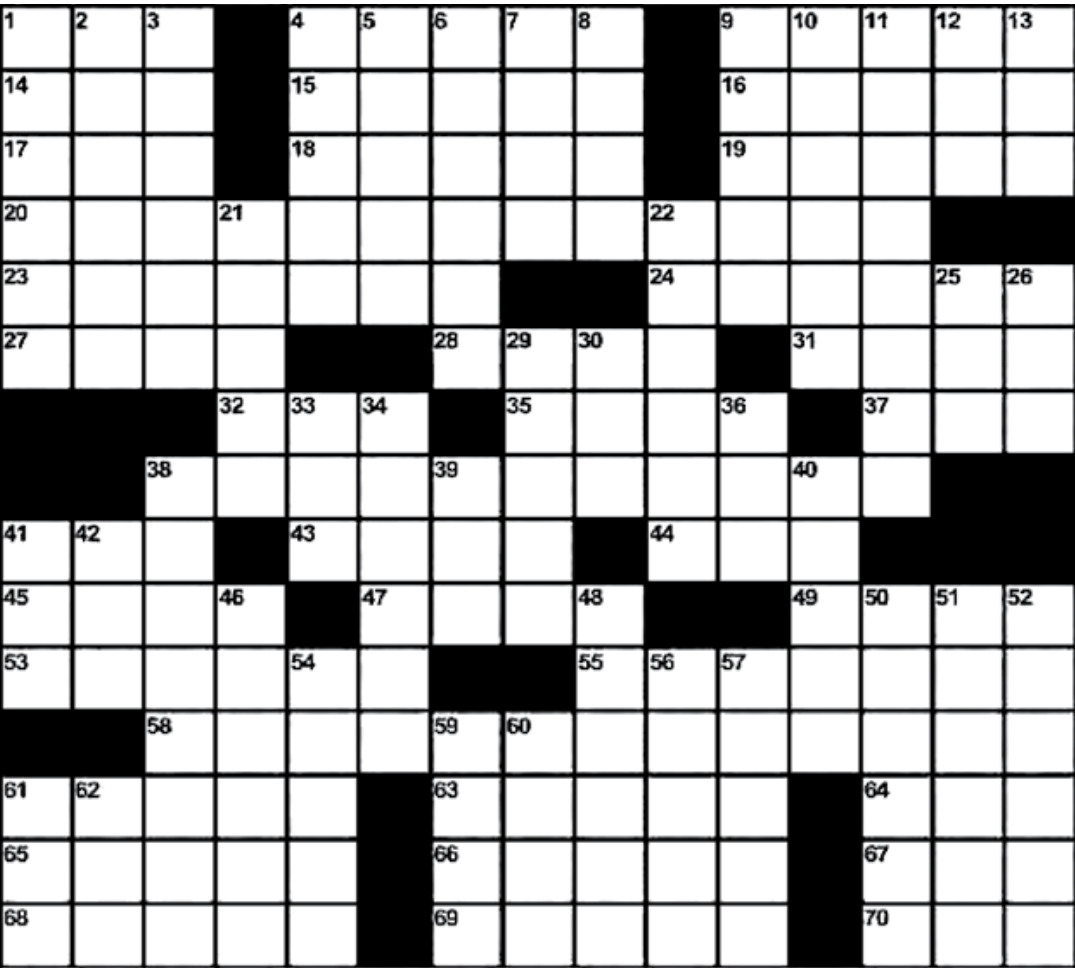
bagged by students from ISG who competed with participants ranging in the age group from 12 years to 70 years from different countries, including USA, India, Nepal, Mauritius, Turkey, Argentina, and Oman, a press release said.

The competition had two categories - poetry writing (self-composed poems) and recitation (of the self-composed poems) on the theme of heritage, art and

culture of the Malaysian community.

Devika Balakrishnan from class 11 and Ayaana Sharique Shaikh from class 8 won consolation prizes while Gouri Reghu, Ayaana Sharique Shaikh, and Daksh Gulecha, all from class 8, won the first, second and third prizes respectively. Seethalekshmi Kishore from class 9 also won a consolation prize for recitation.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) What attys. join
4) Humpback's domain
9) Cheese-topped snack
14) Bird's beak
15)_ cum laude
16) Reddish-brown pigment
17) Palindromic honorific
18) Softly hit single
19) Take away forcibly
20) Willpower, essentially
23) Start of a Huxley title
24) Undisturbed
27) Southwestern butte
28) Manner of doing
31) Ladled-out "food"
32) Price indicator, often
35) Put back the way it was
37)_ Gatos, Calif.
38) "Keep going!"
41) Have_ at (try)
43) "If it_ broke ..."
44) After dusk, poetically
45) Daily Planet reporter
4 7) Be rude to
49) Cage for chicks

53) Napoleon's tongue
55) Palm Sunday shout
58) Loyalty
61) Worshiper at Stone-henge
63) Radii neighbors
64) Mental agility
65) Edible desert plant
66) Cliff projection
67) Did some consuming
68) Obsolete anesthetic
69) Piece of cake?
70) Word of concurrence

DOWN

1) Wreath for the head
2) Scad variety
3) Dies down
4) Three-player card game
5) Eases one's anxiety
6) Doctrine of individual self-interest
7) Any day now, to the Bard
8) Auto parts giant
9) Kind of situation
10) Down's opposite, in puzzles
11) Velvety fabric
12) "For_ajolly ..."

13) Food scrap
21) Tickle pink
22) Color fabric, '60s-style
25) "_ many cooks ..."
26) Type of truck
29) Topples from power
30) Crime-lab specimen
33) One of Frank's wives
34) Professional obiwearer
36) Wordsworth work
38) One without equal
39) Biochemistry abbr.
40) From Cuzco, e.g.
41) Visitor from the planet Melmac
42) Long-jawed fish
46) Bait the hook
48) Sterne's Tristram
50) Kind of street
51) Like some inspections
52) Kindergarten stick-ums
54)_ Rapids, Iowa
56) Tributary of the Missouri River
57) Animal in a roundup
59) Like watching paint

dry
60) Dog hounder
61) Salon supply
62) Same old, same old

NOTE PAD

HARE POSIT HALO
EXIT RATCH OVID
LIGHT OF YOUR LIFE
PLAYA ENMASSE
LUAU SPIT
PSI GYMS SLEEPS
IAN HABIT IDEA
LIFE THREATENING
AGES AVION TAG
FARCES EGOS SLY
HAHS AKIN
AMERICA GOLEM
ANEWLEASE ON LIFE
BARE SPAWNANTS
SPED TEPEE NOSH

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Most of us don't deal well with change. Fortunately, there are some people who just love it and are happy to provide us with living examples of how great change can be. Keep those facts in mind today while you're trying to deal with others who aren't quite so open to last-minute modifications in their carefully planned schedules. They might not be kindred spirits, but they're fellow humans. Be merciful.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You're not exactly famous for your ability to keep things secret, mostly because you do so love drama, even melodrama, at times. So when someone raises an eyebrow today because of something you've said that isn't quite in the politeness handbook, you'll probably just give them a bit of a giggle and move on. Whatever. It's good to keep the world on its toes, and that's obviously your job now.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Whatever emerges from your lips on a daily basis is always surprising and never much of a shock to those who know and love you. For people who aren't quite so familiar with you personally, however, or with your own startling style, today's announcement may come as something of a shock. Keep that in mind and try to be gentle. Just a tad. It wouldn't hurt to go easy on anyone who's just now getting to know you. It might make it easier, in fact.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

When you least expect it, the world as you know it will come to a rapid-fire close. Not an end, exactly, and certainly not an unpleasant one, regardless, but you may wake up today tapping your heels together with the vague realization that you're definitely not in Kansas anymore. This time, even though you're not ordinarily fond of change, climbing into the balloon with the Wizard won't bother you, mostly because you've been planning this for a while.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You're still worried about a certain work issue, something that you really should have been able to let go of several days ago, maybe even weeks ago. But when you decide it's time to focus, there's really no talking you out of it, as anyone who tries will soon find out. There might be a lot going on, and you might not be aware of it, but getting too involved in it won't help. You've got one last day left to distract yourself. Use it well.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

There is a lot of potential for rewarding verbal communication today, so it's a great time for talking about big ideas with a friend or two. Sharing your hopes and dreams is always good fun, but together you might be able to cook up some plans that will actually help make some of those dreams come true. The best resources for ideas are the people who care about you the most, so listen when they make a suggestion, no matter how crazy it may sound.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You're always game to meet someone new and unusual as long as they're interesting and, more importantly, fun. The Universe has decided to afford you with all that and more right now, so prepare yourself for some wonderful diversions. Different, interesting people are due to come your way, not just today but for the next several weeks. Better take your vitamins every day. You'll need to keep up in any way you can. And you know you feel like you're missing something if you sleep for more than a few hours.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Denial can be a powerful force in your life, but it is seldom a positive one. Be extra careful right now to see things are they truly are, and accept them that way. Pretending everything will be fine isn't the right way to handle a troublesome situation. Finding a way to make everything fine is the right way to handle it. There's nothing wrong with positive thinking. Just make sure that you aren't fooling yourself about what's what.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

For the next several weeks, you're due for a bit of romance. No, more than a bit thanks to an introduction from a neighbor or sibling. It's up to you whether it lasts forever or just for a day, of course, but if you opt for forever, it might fall to you to convince the admirer in question that you're willing to stay in this for the long haul. Of course, that won't be tough to do. Anyone as unusual and interesting as you are is well worth the effort it undoubtedly takes to land anyone at all.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

After days or maybe even weeks of rooting around trying to find someone you can truly get close to, you'll be more than happy with today's events. The Universe has seen fit to get you connected with someone who will be able to let their hair down, become truly intimate, and partner up. Ready? Because this is the real thing. Of course, you can't win if you don't play. So, if you know someone who answers this description, make sure you're with them. If you don't, get dressed and prepare to mingle.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your intuitive feelings are definitely helpful in many life situations, but right now they might be distracting you from focusing on one important project or relationship. Constantly checking in with yourself about how you're feeling about this, that, or the other thing is a waste of your energy, and you're going to need a lot of energy today! Turn off the spigot of your subconscious and just keep your mind focused on the task at hand. You'll be glad you did.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Prepare to become privy to at least one wonderful secret. The tricky part is that you might need to keep this a secret for a while, and as wonderful as you'll be feeling, that might not be easy. But if you really try, you'll be able to pull it off. And afterward, think of how wonderful you'll feel about not letting the cat out of the bag and how smug you'll feel when everyone who knows you wants to know how you managed to do it.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. By what name is Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus better known?
- A. Octavian
B. Nero
C. Caligula
D. Decameron
02. Of the first underground railways to open in Europe, which was the next to open after the Metropolitan Railway (now part of the London Underground), in 1863?
- A. Budapest Metro
B. Paris Metro
C. Glasgow Subway
D. Berlin U-Bahn
03. What was the name of the evil wizard that appeared in the TV series "The Smurfs"?
- A. Gilgamesh
B. Gargamel
C. Gorgon
D. Graham

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

A	U	K	T
A	C	C	M
O	R	B	A
E	M	A	R

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.

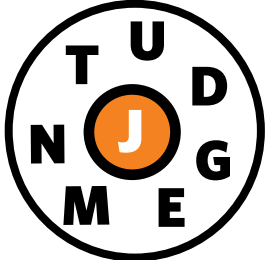
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

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

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

Putin: West wants to tear apart ‘historical Russia’

Putin used concept of historical Russia to argue that Ukrainians and Russians are one people

Moscow, Russia - President Vladimir Putin blasted the West for trying to ‘tear apart’ Russia and said his offensive in Ukraine aimed to ‘unite the Russian people’. Meanwhile in Kyiv, a day after deadly shelling in southern Ukraine, residents held Christmas services on Sunday, defying Russian spiritual leaders who celebrate it on January 7.

Putin has used the concept of ‘historical Russia’ to argue that Ukrainians and Russians are one people - undermining Kyiv’s sovereignty and justifying his 10-month offensive in Ukraine.

He said Russia’s ‘geopolitical opponents (were) aiming to tear apart Russia, the historical Russia,’ Putin said in excerpts from an interview to be aired later on Sunday. “Divide and conquer, that’s what they have always sought to accomplish and are still seeking to do,” Putin added. “But our goal is different: it’s to unite the Russian people,” he said. Putin said his government was acting ‘in the right direction... protecting our national interests, the interests of our citizens, of our people.’

He repeated that Moscow was ready to negotiate and ap-



A woman lights candles during the Christmas service in a church of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Kyiv on Sunday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

peared unfazed when asked about the new air defence sys-

since the offensive began, Zelensky earned firm pledges of sup-

the city, Kherson remains within reach of Moscow’s weaponry and under constant threat.

The Ukrainian army counted 71 strikes on the partly recaptured region on Saturday, including 41 on the main city, also named Kherson.

This included deadly shelling on a busy market in the city centre that left 10 people dead and 55 injured. The Russian-installed head of the Kherson region, Vladimir Saldo, said on Telegram the shelling was ‘a disgusting provocation’ by Ukraine used to blame Russia.

Zelensky blasted Russian ‘terror’ and urged his compatriots to persevere as they observed a Christmas eve marked by destruction.

port from US President Joe Biden, including the Pentagon’s most advanced air defence system. Western military and financial aid has been crucial for Ukraine’s push back of Russian troops - including from Kherson, the only regional capital held by Russia. Despite Russia’s retreat from

Divide and conquer, that’s what they have always sought to accomplish and are still seeking to do. But our goal is different: it’s to unite the Russian people

VLADIMIR PUTIN

tem the United States will deliver to Ukraine.

“Of course we will destroy it, 100 per cent!” Putin said, referring to the Patriot missile battery promised to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Kherson ‘terror’

In his first trip outside Ukraine

Suspect in Paris shooting admits to ‘pathological’ hatred of foreigners

Paris, France - A French man suspected of killing three Kurds in Paris has confessed to a ‘pathological’ hatred for foreigners, Paris prosecutor Laure Becquau said on Sunday.

The 69-year-old man was removed from custody for health reasons on Saturday and taken to a police psychiatric facility.

Becquau said in a statement that the suspect was ‘depressive’ and ‘suicidal’ and said he ‘wanted to kill foreigners’ after a robbery in his home in 2016.

The shooting at a Kurdish cultural centre and a nearby hair-dressing salon on Friday sparked panic in the city’s bustling 10th district, home to several shops and restaurants and a large Kurdish population. Three others were wounded in the attack.

The suspect said he initially wanted to kill people in the northern Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, which has a large immigrant population, before deciding to go to the 10th district instead.

The shooting has revived the trauma of three unresolved murders of Kurds in 2013 that many blame on Turkey.

Many in the Kurdish community have expressed anger at the French security services, saying they had done too little to prevent the shooting.

The frustration boiled over on Saturday and furious demonstrators clashed with police in central Paris for a second day running after a tribute rally.

The capital’s police chief Laurent Nunez told BFM television channel on Saturday that 31 officers and one protester were injured in the disturbances, while 11



Participants gather to pay tribute to the victims of the shooting in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

people were arrested, ‘mainly for damage’. The suspect - named as William M. by French media - is a gun enthusiast with a history of weapons offences who had been released on bail earlier this month. The retired train driver was convicted for armed violence in 2016 by a court in Seine-Saint-Denis, but appealed.

A year later he was convicted for illegally possessing a firearm.

Last year, he was charged with racist violence after allegedly stabbing migrants and slashing their tents with a sword in a park in eastern Paris.

‘He’s an idiot’

“He is crazy, he’s an idiot,” his father was quoted as saying by the M6 television channel.

Often described as the world’s largest people without a state, the Kurds are a Muslim ethnic group spread across Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

Meanwhile, a top aide to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan blamed the street unrest that gripped Paris following

the killing on outlawed PKK militants.

“This is PKK in France,” Erdogan’s foreign policy adviser Ibrahim Kalin tweeted, posting images of overturned and burning cars in Paris. “The same terrorist organisation you support in Syria,” he wrote in apparent reference to the YPG.

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and its Western allies.

Ankara has been feuding with the United States and European powers about their support for Kurdish fighters in the People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia, which it says is the Syrian offshoot of the PKK.

The YPG played a central role in the US-led campaign against Islamic State group militants in Syria. It is not proscribed as a terrorist group by either the United States or the European Union - an issue of constant tension in their relations with NATO member Turkey.

AFP

At Christmas, Pope urges end to ‘senseless’ Ukraine war

Vatican City, Holy See - Pope Francis on Sunday appealed for an end to the ‘senseless’ war in Ukraine, in his traditional Christmas Day message broadcast around the world.

The head of the Catholic Church addressed thousands of people gathered in St Peter’s Square, some of them holding Ukrainian flags, before delivering the ‘Urbi et Orbi’ blessing (‘to the city and the world’).

A call to peace is traditionally the focus of the pope’s message at Christmas, the holiday marking the birth of Christ, which he delivers from the central balcony of St Peter’s Basilica and is broadcast live worldwide.

The 86-year-old on Sunday first turned to ‘our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who are experiencing this Christmas in the dark and cold, far from their homes’.

“May the Lord inspire us to offer concrete gestures of solidarity to assist all those who are suffering, and may he enlighten the minds of those who have the power to silence the thunder of weapons and put an immediate end to this senseless war!” he said.

“Tragically, we prefer to heed other counsels, dictated by worldly ways of thinking,” he added, recalling ‘with sorrow’ that ‘the icy winds of war continue to buffet humanity’.

‘Food as a weapon’

“Our time is experiencing a grave famine of peace also in other regions and other theatres of this third world war,” he said.



Pope Francis waves to the crowd as he arrives to deliver his Christmas Urbi et Orbi blessing in St. Peter’s Square at The Vatican on Sunday (AFP)

May the Lord inspire us to offer concrete gestures of solidarity to assist all those who are suffering

POPE FRANCIS

Francis referenced numerous countries in difficulty this Christmas, whether due to conflict or another crisis, from Afghanistan to Yemen, Syria, Myanmar, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lebanon and Haiti.

For the first time, he also called for ‘reconciliation’ in Iran, rocked by women-led protests for the past three months.

The pope has called for peace

Afghanistan: 3 NGOs stop work after ban on women staff

Kabul, Afghanistan - Three foreign aid groups, including Save the Children, announced on Sunday they were suspending their operations in Afghanistan after the Taliban ordered all NGOs to stop their women staff from working.

The announcement came as top officials from the United Nations and dozens of NGOs operating in Afghanistan met in Kabul to discuss a way ahead after the Taliban’s latest restriction delivered a blow to humanitarian work across the country.

“We cannot effectively reach children, women and men in desperate need in Afghanistan without our female staff,” Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council and CARE said in a joint statement. “Whilst we gain clarity on this announcement, we are suspending our programmes, demanding that men and women can equally continue our lifesaving assistance in Afghanistan.”

Saturday’s order issued by the Taliban authorities drew swift international condemnation, with governments and organisations warning of the impact on humanitarian services in a country where millions rely on aid.

The latest restriction comes less than a week after the hardline Islamists banned women from attending universities, prompting global outrage and protests in some Afghan cities.

The Ministry of Economy on Saturday threatened to suspend the operating licences of NGOs if they failed to implement the order.

The ministry, which issues these licences, said it had received ‘serious complaints’ that women working in NGOs were not observing a proper Islamic dress code.

A meeting of the Humanitarian Country Team, which comprises top UN officials and representatives of dozens of Afghan and foreign NGOs was being held in Kabul to discuss whether to suspend all aid work following the latest Taliban directive, aid officials told AFP.

The United Nations condemned the ministry’s directive and said it would seek an explanation from the Taliban about the order, which by excluding women ‘systematically from all aspects of public and political life takes the country backward, jeopardising efforts for any meaningful peace or stability in the country’. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the ban would be ‘devastating’ to Afghans as it would ‘disrupt vital and life-saving assistance to millions’.

“I’m the only breadwinner of my family. If I lose my job my family of 15 members will die of hunger,” said Shabana, 24, a woman employee with an international NGO working in Afghanistan for decades.

AFP

putting entire peoples at risk of famine, especially in Afghanistan and in the countries of the Horn of Africa,” he said.

“We know that every war causes hunger and exploits food as a weapon, hindering its distribution to people already suffering,” he said.

“On this day, let us learn from the Prince of Peace (Christ) and, starting with those who hold political responsibilities, commit ourselves to making food solely an instrument of peace.”

Meaning of Christmas

On Saturday evening, the pope led the traditional Christmas Eve mass at St Peter’s Basilica, using a wheelchair as he continues to struggle with knee pain.

He prayed for ‘the children devoured by wars, poverty and injustice’ and lamented that ‘men hungry for power and money swallow up their loved ones, their brothers’.

He called on people to ‘abandon the warmth of worldliness’ and ‘rediscover the meaning of Christmas’ in the face of ‘consumerism’, advocating for a Church that serves the poor.

The Vatican put the crowd Sunday at 70,000, while 7,000 people attended Saturday evening’s mass, with more following the service on screens outside.

“It’s very inspiring to be here with all these people,” Victoria Machado, who travelled with her family to the Vatican from Mexico, told AFP.

AFP

Massive gang crackdown in San Salvador

More than 2,000 soldiers and police surrounded two districts in El Salvador’s capital on Saturday

San Salvador, El Salvador - More than 2,000 soldiers and police surrounded two districts in El Salvador’s capital on Saturday as part of President Nayib Bukele’s war on gangs, the second such operation this month in the Central American country.

“As of this morning, the Tutunichapa district in San Salvador is totally surrounded,” Bukele posted on Twitter.

“More than 1,000 soldiers and 130 police officers will extract the criminals who still remain,” he added.

Bukele later tweeted that 1,000 more soldiers and 100 police officers had been dispatched to La Granjita, another neighbourhood in the capital.

“After encircling Tutunichapa, a famous drug distribution center, we knew that many drug traffickers would take refuge in the neighbourhood of La Granjita, another famous distribution center,” Bukele tweeted.

Images released on Saturday by the office of the president showed heavily armed soldiers entering Tutunichapa, a populous district where small houses mostly constructed of concrete



Alleged members of the Calle 18 gang and drug dealers captured by soldiers are seen at the Tutunichapa community in San Salvador, on Saturday (AFP)

blocks stand alongside one of the many polluted streams that run through San Salvador.

Justice Minister Gustavo Villatoro posted photos of members of an anti-narcotics police unit with drug-sniffing dogs.

“We are going to extract every criminal from our communities,” Villatoro said in a Twitter post.

‘Bastion on crime’

Defense Minister Rene Merino said 23 people had been arrested in Tutunichapa, without specifying whether they were accused of being gang members or drug traffickers.

“All terrorists, drug traffickers and gang members will be removed” from the area, Bukele said

in another tweet, adding that until recently it was a ‘bastion of crime’.

“Honest citizens have nothing to fear and can continue to live their lives normally,” he wrote.

Local resident Edwin Diaz, 51, cheered the law enforcement action, saying the area has long been considered a ‘dangerous

place due to gang activity and drug sales.

“All our lives we have suffered the stigma that here there is drug dealing, gang members, bad things, and today with this security they have set up, there is nothing to fear,” Diaz told AFP by phone on Saturday.

Echoing Bukele’s remark, Diaz

added: “He who owes nothing, fears nothing.”

Almost 60,000 arrests

Earlier this month, Bukele, who has declared a state of emergency to quash gang violence, sent 8,500 soldiers and 1,500 police officers to surround Soya-

moured military vehicles, some with artillery, carrying out constant patrols while heavily armed police search houses and people as they leave their neighbourhoods, as well as random sweeps of public transport.

As of Saturday, some 650 suspected gang members had been arrested in Soyapango, Merino said. “We continue working in the rest of the territory looking for terrorist criminals,” the defense minister added.

Almost 60,000 suspected gang members have been arrested since the launch of the state of emergency in March, which has prompted humanitarian groups to question what they see as heavy-handed tactics.

Despite that criticism, El Salvador’s Congress on Thursday once again extended the state of emergency for another month.

Over 75 per cent of Salvadorans approve of the emergency declaration, and nine out of 10 Salvadorans say that crime ‘has decreased’ with Bukele’s policies, according to a Central American University (UCA) poll published in October.

AFP

All terrorists, drug traffickers and gang members will be removed from the area. Honest citizens have nothing to fear

NAYIB BUKELE

Ten killed in fuel tanker explosion near Johannesburg, say rescuers

Johannesburg, South Africa - Ten people died and around 40 others were injured when a fuel tanker exploded in Boksburg, a South African city east of Johannesburg, emergency services said on Saturday.

The tanker, transporting liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), was caught beneath a bridge close to a hospital and houses on Saturday morning.

“We received a call at 0750 telling us a gas tanker was stuck under a bridge. Firefighters were called to extinguish the flames. Unfortunately, the tanker exploded,” William Ntladi, spokesman for the emergency services in the region, told AFP.

One of those injured was the driver who has been taken to hospital, he added.

He said the death toll had risen to 10 from the nine reported earlier. Of those injured, around half were in a serious condition while 15 others were seriously hurt but in a stable condition.

Six firefighters also suffered minor injuries, Ntladi said.

Videos on social media



South African Police Service (SAPS) officers and forensic experts stand beside bodies in Boksburg, a city east of Johannesburg, on Saturday (AFP)

showed a huge fireball under the bridge, which the tanker appeared to have been too high to go under. It was carrying 60,000 litres of LPG gas, which is used especially in cooking and gas stoves, and had come from the southeast of the country.

Witness Jean Marie Booysen described a ‘huge jolt’ in the early hours of the morning, shortly after 6:30am.

“Today is indeed a very sad day in our little suburb,” she said, standing near a forensics team combing the scene.

“I went upstairs to have my cup of tea and I saw immense flames, I thought a house was on fire.”

She said she later learned of the deaths of ‘two children here across the road, 16, the girl, and 25, the boy, who came and did

my lawn every weekend for me’.

Another witness named William, who did not give his surname, said people nearby had felt the blast.

“I think I was 50 metres (164 feet) away from the scene and when the third one exploded, I was about 400 meters away.”

“We did burn behind our backs,” he said.

AFP

China to stop publishing daily COVID figures: NHC

Beijing, China - China will no longer publish daily figures for COVID-19 cases and deaths, the National Health Commission (NHC) said on Sunday, ending a practice that began in early 2020.

Cities across China have struggled with surging infections, and a resulting shortage of pharmaceuticals and overflowing hospital wards, after Beijing rapidly dismantled its zero-COVID strategy. “From today, we will no longer publish daily information on the epidemic,” the NHC said, without giving an explanation for its policy shift.

But the end of strict testing mandates has made caseloads virtually impossible to track, while authorities have narrowed the medical definition of a COVID death in a move experts say will suppress the number of fatalities attributable to the virus.

“The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will publish information about the outbreak for reference and research purposes,” the



A health worker takes a swab sample from a man to test for the COVID-19 in the Jing'an district in Shanghai on Friday (AFP)

NHC said, without specifying the type or frequency of data to be published by the CDC.

People in China, who are seeing a large discrepancy between official statistics and infections within their families and social circles, greeted the decision with cynicism.

“Finally, they are waking up and realising they can’t fool people anymore,” wrote one user on the social network Weibo.

Another user said: “This was the best and biggest fake statistics manufacturing office in the

country.”

Crematorium workers interviewed by AFP have reported an unusually high influx of bodies.

“Are there crematorium workers here? Are you overloaded? Can you talk about it?” another Weibo user wrote.

While state media has largely ignored the surge of bodies arriving at crematoriums, they have, to some extent, said hospitals are under stress from an influx of patients and a shortage of anti-fever drugs.

AFP

Trump acolyte Kari Lake loses appeal in Arizona election

Washington, US - An Arizona judge on Saturday dismissed a lawsuit brought by Republican candidate Kari Lake, a Donald Trump loyalist who sought to overturn her unsuccessful bid to become the southwestern state’s governor.

The court found no ‘clear and convincing evidence of misconduct’ that would have impacted the outcome of the November election as Lake alleged, Judge Peter Thompson said in his decision seen by AFP. Lake, a 53-year-old former TV news anchorwoman, tweeted on Saturday that ‘for the sake of restoring faith and honesty in our elections, I will appeal his ruling.’

After losing to Democrat Katie Hobbs by a margin of 17,117 votes, Lake claimed that problems with ballot printing in Maricopa County, Arizona’s



Kari Lake (AFP)

most populous county which includes its capital, were intentional and aimed at her defeat.

The court cannot accept speculation or conjecture in lieu of clear and convincing evidence, said Thompson, who also upheld Hobbs’s victory.

Lake supporters had seized upon minor problems with vote tabulation machines in Maricopa, home to America’s fifth biggest city, Phoenix, which left some people standing in short

lines during the November vote. Officials have forcefully insisted that no legitimate vote would be excluded, and mounted a well-organised social media campaign to push back at falsehoods circulating online. Arizona has been under intense scrutiny for two years since Joe Biden eked out a narrow win in the state over Trump, the president at the time. Maricopa County became ground zero for election deniers, who made unfounded claims about ballot stuffing, despite repeated investigations that turned up no evidence of wrongdoing.

Lake made denial of the 2020 presidential election win by Joe Biden a key tenet of her campaign, and said that she would not have validated his victory if she had been in the governor’s mansion at the time.

AFP

Rohingya refugee boat lands in Indonesia after a month at sea

Banda Aceh, Indonesia - A broken-down boat carrying 57 Rohingya refugees landed on Indonesia’s western coast on Sunday after a month at sea, police said.

Thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, heavily persecuted in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, risk their lives each year on long, expensive sea journeys - often in poor-quality vessels - in an attempt to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

The wooden vessel with 57 men on board arrived around 8am local time (0100 GMT) on a beach in the westernmost Aceh province, local police spokesman Winardy told AFP. “The boat had a broken engine and it was carried by the wind to a shore in Ladong Village in Aceh Besar (district),” Winardy, who goes by one name, said.

“They said they have been



This photo shows a boat that was carrying Rohingya refugees after their arrival at a beach in Krueng Raya, Indonesia’s Aceh province on Sunday (AFP)

drifting at sea for a month.”

Winardy added that police arrived at the beach after being informed by some locals that the boat had docked there.

He said four of the men on board were sick and had been transported to a hospital.

Telmaizul Syatri, the head of the local immigration office, said the refugees will be tem-

porarily housed at a local government facility. “We will coordinate with the International Organisation for Migration and the UNHCR so that it can be handled well,” Syatri said.

This is the third Rohingya refugee boat to arrive in Muslim-majority Indonesia in recent months.

Two boats carrying a total of

229 Rohingya landed in Aceh on November 15 and 16, according to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).

Sunday’s arrival comes after the UNHCR and Southeast Asian politicians called for the rescue of another vessel carrying as many as 200 Rohingya refugees, including women and children, which has been stranded at sea for several weeks.

That boat has been reported in waters close to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and India in the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Strait, one of the world’s busiest shipping routes.

The UNHCR said last week that it has been in the water since late November, and it had received reports of at least a dozen people dying on board. Those left on the boat have no access to food or water.

AFP

INDIA

‘Art, literature, culture are collective wealth’

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said it is society’s responsibility to take forward its collective wealth

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his last Mann Ki Baat address of the year 2022 on Sunday said it is society’s responsibility to take forward its collective wealth comprising art, literature, and culture.

“Art, literature and culture are the collective wealth of society; it is society’s responsibility to take them forward,” Modi said in the 96th edition of Mann Ki Baat. The Prime Minister talked about various startups of the countrypersons which have contributed to the central government’s ‘Vocal for Local’ campaign. Modi in his address mentioned the recently recognised record from the Kalari Club of Dubai.

“The Guinness Book of World Records recently recognised a record from the Kalari Club of Dubai. The record is about the ancient martial art from India, Kalaripayattu. This record was for the highest-ever number of people performing Kalaripayattu in one place,” Modi said and clarified the connection of a Dubai-based club with India.

“This record is related to Kalaripayattu, the ancient martial art of India. This record is for the performance of Kalari by the maximum number of people simultaneously. Kalari club Dubai, together with Dubai Police, planned this and displayed it on the National Day of UAE. In this event, people ranging from 4 years old children to 60 years old showed their best ability of Kalari. This is a wonderful example of how different genera-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with children at Central Hall in the Parliament, in New Delhi on Sunday (ANI)

tions are carrying forward an ancient tradition, with full inner enthusiasm,” he added.

on similar lines, next, he mentioned a club on Kalpeni Island, Lakshwadeep called the Kummel Brothers Challengers Club where the local youths are being trained in the arts of Kol-kali, Parichakli, Kilipaath and traditional songs.

Informing about the ‘Quemshree’, he said that this Gadak district resident of Karnataka has created a platform called ‘Kala Chetna’ for organising several programmes for Karnataka’s artists.

“He has been engaged in the mission of reviving the art culture of Karnataka for the last 25 years. Earlier he was associated with the profession of Hotel Management. But, his attachment to his culture and tradition was so deep that he made it his mission,” Modi said.

He further said that the enthusiasm of the country persons towards art and culture is a manifestation of the feeling of ‘pride in our heritage’.

Further talking about the products made from Bamboo, Modi said: “There are skilled bamboo artisans, skilled artists, especially in tribal areas. Ever since the country changed the British-era laws related to bamboo, a huge market has developed for it. Even in areas like Palghar in Maharashtra, tribal people make many beautiful products from bamboo. Things like boxes, chairs, teapots, baskets, and trays made of bamboo are becoming very popular. Not only this, these people also make beautiful clothes and decorations from bamboo grass. This is also providing employment to tribal women and their talent is also getting recognition.” He also talked about a Karnataka-based couple indulged in making products from betelnut fibre and exporting it to the international market.

“This is a couple from Shivamogga in Karnataka - Shriman Suresh and his wife Shrimati Maithili, they are making many decorative things ranging from trays, plates and handbags from the betelnut fibre. Chappals made of this fibre are admired a lot,” he said adding that their products are being sold in London and other markets in Europe. He further encouraged everyone to use indigenous and local products and also suggested gifting them to others ‘as well as it will strengthen our identity, strengthening the local economy, and, in large numbers, brightening the future of the people’.

Modi urged the citizens to share their ideas and opinions for making the 100th episode of Mann Ki Baat more engaging.

“Next time we will meet in the year 2023. May this year also be special for the country, and together we have to make it come true,” he said.

ANI

Hanging led to Tunisha Sharma’s death, say Mumbai police

Mumbai, India - The Mumbai Police on Sunday said that the post-mortem reports of the deceased Tunisha Sharma have specified ‘hanging’ as the cause of death.

“Tunisha Sharma used to work as an actress in a TV show. She and Sheezan Khan had a love affair. They had a breakup 15 days ago after which she committed suicide on the sets of her show,” Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Chandrakant Jadhav said during a press conference here. The ACP said: “Tunisha’s mother had filed a complaint and accused Sheezan was arrested and later produced in the court which sent him to four-days judicial custody. The post-mortem report clearly specifies the cause of death of Tunisha as hanging.”

A case of abetment to suicide was registered against Sheezan under Section 306 of the Indian Penal Code after his Ali Baba: Dastaan-E-Kabul co-star, Tunisha, was found dead on the show’s sets.

He was taken by the officials from Waliv police station to the Vasai court on Sunday.

At the court, Sheezan’s lawyer, Sharad Rai, told media: “Whatever has happened, police and court are working. He has been produced in court. Allegations against him are baseless.” Adding that the investigation into the matter is underway, ACP Jadhav further clarified of no other angle of love jihad or blackmailing so far.

“Accused Sheezan’s and the deceased’s phones have been seized. There is no angle of any other affair, blackmailing or ‘Love Jihad’ as of now,” the ACP said.

Tunisha, who also appeared in Bollywood movies including Fitoor, Baar Baar Dekho, Kahaani 2: Durga Rani Singh, and Da-bangg 3, was found dead on the sets of a TV serial.

According to Waliv Police, they received information that after the tea break, the actress went to the toilet and when she did not come back, the police broke the door open and found that she had hanged herself.

ANI

A case of abetment to suicide was registered against Sheezan after his co-star Tunisha was found dead on the show’s sets

Three more bodies recovered after sinking of Thai navy ship

Bangkok, Thailand - Three more bodies have been recovered from the waters after a Thai warship went down in the Gulf of Thailand a week ago, the kingdom’s navy said on Sunday.

The HTMS Sukhothai sank on December 18 roughly 37km (22 miles) off Thailand’s southeastern coast, with a massive rescue operation managing to pull 76 crew alive from the waves.

“We found three bodies which will be brought into an identification and autopsy process, which will take about three or four days,” said navy spokesperson Pogkrong Montradpalin.

He said in case of an oil leak, the area around the vessel and two others that sank that day had been declared a ‘disaster prevention zone’.

The navy increased the death toll to 18 with one body found on Saturday confirmed as a crew member and a further two discovered, although Pogkrong did not give any further details.

Eleven members of the 105-strong crew are still missing, the navy said.

Helicopters, unmanned surveillance aircraft and warships have been combing the sea in hope of finding survivors.

On Tuesday, Admiral Chonlathis Navanugraha called the incident ‘one of the most severe tragedies’ in the navy’s history.

The vessel - a corvette, among the smallest of military warships - ran into trouble after its electronics system was damaged.

The Sukhothai was commissioned in 1987 and built in the United States by the now-defunct Tacoma Boatbuilding Company, according to the US Naval Institute.

AFP

Former guerrilla leader Prachanda returns as Nepal’s prime minister

Kathmandu, Nepal - Nepal’s president appointed former guerrilla leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal as prime minister for the third time on Sunday, after his Maoist party cobbled together a coalition following elections last month.

Dahal, better known by his nom de guerre Prachanda or ‘the fierce one’, hid out for years in the jungle during Nepal’s 1996-2006 civil war that killed nearly 17,000 people and led to the end of the monarchy. Sagar Acharya, a spokesman for President Bidya Devi Bhandari, said that Dahal, 68, has been appointed as the new prime minister and would be sworn in on Monday at 4pm.

Following the 2006 peace accords, Dahal transformed his Maoist revolutionary movement into a political party and served briefly as prime minister in 2008-9, and again in 2016-17.

Elections in the Himalayan nation of 29mn people on November 20 saw the ruling coalition of



Pushpa Kamal Dahal (left) hands over his documents to President Bidya Devi Bhandari in Kathmandu (AFP)

prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, 76, lose its majority although his Nepali Congress remained the largest party.

Dahal’s Maoist CPN party has now formed an alliance with another communist party, the CPN (UML) - they used to be one party before splitting - and six others including combative television host Rabi Lamichhane’s new National Independent Party.

Lamichhane, who once held a Guinness record for the longest talk show at over 62 hours, was one of more than 30 independent and minor party candidates to enter parliament after the election in a wave of frustration at Nepal’s ageing political elite.

AFP

Spain: 4 killed after bus falls into river

Madrid, Spain - Four people died after a bus plunged into a river overnight while crossing a bridge in Spain’s northwestern Galicia region, officials said on Sunday.

The accident occurred on Saturday night near Vigo and the border with Portugal. The regional La Voz de Galicia newspaper said the bus was carrying people visiting their loved ones jailed in Monterroso in central Galicia. The emergency services said two corpses had been recovered while two others, including the bus driver, had been rescued and taken to hospital.

Spain’s Civil Guard later said two more bodies were found on Sunday. The woman’s body was recovered but a man’s corpse was yet to be retrieved. “There could have been more people inside the bus,” the emergency services had said on Twitter and posted a photo of the vehicle in turbulent waters. Rescue operations had to be suspended overnight due to bad weather.

AFP



India's Ravichandran Ashwin (L) and Shreyas Iyer run between the wickets on the fourth day of the second Test against Bangladesh on Sunday (AFP)

ASHWIN TO THE RESCUE

Ashwin partners with Iyer to steer India to thrilling win against Bangladesh in second Test

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Shreyas Iyer and Ravichandran Ashwin held firm as India beat Bangladesh in a thrilling second Test on Sunday, dashing hopes in Dhaka of a first-ever win over their giant neighbours.

India needed just 145 to win the match and the series 2-0 but the visitors in the end won by only three wickets in a nail-biting morning's play on day four in Dhaka.

Bangladesh overcame India in the preceding 50-over series but have never beaten them in a Test. India had won 10 of the teams' previous 12 Tests, including five victories by an innings.

India won the first Test comfortably by 188 runs in Chittagong and were widely expected to romp home in the second game, cementing their position in second place in the ICC World Test Championship.

India bowled Bangladesh out on Saturday for a sub-par 231 but the home side's spinners Mehidy Hasan and Shakib Al Hasan then reduced the visitors to 45-4 at stumps with 100 still to chase.

Shakib started the slide with the wicket of captain KL Rahul for two and then Mehidy claimed Cheteshwar Pujara, Shubman Gill and Virat Kohli - all for single-digit scores.

Bangladesh then reduced India to 74-7 when play resumed on Sunday but Shreyas (29 not out)

(I'm) not going to lie, there was a lot of tension in the dressing room. It was a tough wicket to bat on, they put us under pressure

KL RAHUL

and Ashwin (42 not out) put on 71 runs in an unbroken eighth-wicket stand to steer India home.

Mehidy was the stand-out bowler for Bangladesh in the second innings, finishing with 5-63, which included two wickets in the morning.

Bangladesh dominated play in the opening hour as Shakib dismissed nightwatchman Jaydev Unadkat, who hit a six in the opening over but fell in the next after making 13.

Mehidy then trapped danger man Rishabh Pant leg before for nine before he bowled unbeaten overnight batsman Axar Patel for 34 runs.

Ashwin was dropped by Mominul Haque on one at forward short leg before he grew in confidence, with Iyer looking solid against spin at the other end.

Ashwin - named player of the match - took India close with a six after Mehidy changed his bowling end and wrapped up the contest with two more boundaries. Pujara was named player of the series, with the Sussex star making 222 runs in the series.

"(I'm) not going to lie, there was a lot of tension in the dressing room. It was a tough wicket to bat on, they put us under pressure in both innings," said Rahul, who captained in place of injured Rohit Sharma.

AFP



Australia's Scott Boland (L) talks with captain Pat Cummins at the MCG on December Sunday (AFP)

Boland keeps place for Australia as South Africa mull batting shake-up

Melbourne, Australia - Australian seamer Scott Boland was Sunday confirmed to start the Boxing Day second Test in Melbourne ahead of an "underdone" Josh Hazlewood, while South Africa suggested they could shake up their batting line up.

Boland replaced injured fast bowler Hazlewood in the opening Test at Brisbane and was a key performer with his red-hot form making him virtually undroppable.

He is now assured of another game on his home ground - where he took an incredible 6-7 on debut against England a year ago, cementing himself into

Ashes folklore.

Skipper Pat Cummins told reporters the team was unchanged from the side that won by six wickets inside two days on a hostile bowler-friendly Gabba pitch in Brisbane last week, the first of a three-match series.

"We gave Joshy every chance, (but) it just got to a stage where (he) more than anyone else felt like he was a little bit underdone," he said.

"It's a mark of the man really, he himself said 'don't feel quite right', so he kind of pulled himself out of selection.

Hazlewood missed Australia's last two Tests in Adelaide and

Brisbane due to a side strain but had been training hard in the build-up to Melbourne, where hot and humid conditions are expected. Boland has taken 25 wickets at 10.33 since his debut at the MCG a year ago and said Friday he was hoping his local knowledge would give him the edge over Hazlewood.

The Boxing Day Test will be David Warner's 100th, with the opener striving to end a lean run that has seen some question his position in the side.

He is just 78 runs shy of 8,000 Test runs and has vowed to get back to his best.

AFP

New Zealand gearing up for Pakistan Test challenge, says captain Southee

Karachi, Pakistan - Newly appointed New Zealand captain Tim Southee expects Pakistan to bounce back from a 3-0 home Test series whitewash at the hands of an aggressive England team, saying on Sunday that his men would find their own way to defeat the wounded hosts.

England handed Pakistan their first-ever 3-0 home Test whitewash earlier this week, enhancing the reputation of their newly adopted ultra-aggressive style of Test cricket - coined 'Bazball' after the nickname of head coach Brendon McCullum.

The Kiwis take on Pakistan in the first match of a two-match series in Karachi on Monday.

Southee described England's win as "impressive and incredible", but said his team would find their own strategy to take on Pakistan.

"I think England played an incredible style of cricket and to come over here and win three Tests and the way they did was very impressive," Southee said on Sunday.

"It seems to be working for them (England), so we will be trying to look for ways that have worked for us and hopefully put on a performance that works for our side."



New Zealand captain Tim Southee (R) and his Pakistan counterpart Babar Azam unveil the trophy on Sunday (AFP)

Southee, taking over the Test captaincy from Kane Williamson, said conditions in Pakistan would be likely to suit spin.

"I think when you come to this part of the world, you tend to think that spinners will have more of an impact," said Southee. "But there is a place for the pace as well."

New Zealand have only won one Test series in Pakistan, way back in 1969.

The last time they played a Test in Pakistan was in 2002,

with Pakistan's "home" series in the interim being mostly played in the United Arab Emirates due to security concerns.

The Kiwis have dominated Pakistan in recent contests, winning their last three series against them - twice in New Zealand (2016 and 2020) and once in the UAE in 2018.

Southee said he expected Pakistan to bounce back from the whitewash.

"Pakistan are a very good side, especially in these conditions," said Southee.

Pakistan skipper Babar Azam vowed his team would come back strongly.

"Yes, we could not execute what we wanted in the last series but I have the belief in my team and my players that we can stage a strong comeback," said Azam.

Pakistan's captain said he was unperturbed by recent changes in the Pakistan Cricket Board, with Ramiz Raja sacked as chairman and replaced by a management committee on Thursday.

AFP

Oman Stallions get the better of Majees, easy for Yalla Shabab

Muscat, Oman : Hemal Tandel took six wickets but Oman Stallions still had to struggle before getting the better of Majees CT by two wickets in the Premier Division League Season 2022-23 powered by Muscat Pharmacy on Friday.

Opting to bowl first, Oman

Stallions were all over Majees batting line up with Tandel in lethal form.

Skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, with 22 off 16 balls (4x4), was the top scorer for Majees while all the other batters failed to cope with Stallions' bowling.

Rafiullah also bagged a cou-

ple of wickets for Stallions as Majees innings ended on 106 in 27.3 overs.

Chasing a modest target, Stallions started on the wrong foot. Jan Shafiq and Ishtiaq Mohammed startled Oman Stallion batsmen and took four wickets in the powerplay. But hard-Hit-

ting all-rounder Rafiullah scored a quick-fire 35 with three boundaries and two sixes to ensure Stallions got over the line.

Ishtiaq took three wickets while Shafiq and Md Yousuf bagged two scalps each.

In another match, played on Saturday, Yalla Shabab defeated

Renaissance by 108 runs.

BRIEF SCORES :
Majees CT 106 all out in 27.3 overs (Hemal Tandel 6/53, Rafiullah 2/13) lost to Oman Stallions 107/8 in 23.4 overs (Rafiullah 35/35) 3x4, 2x6; Ishtiaq Mohammed 3/27) by 2 wickets.

Yalla Shabab 241 all out in 50 overs (Muhammed Zahid 57(64) 4x4, Imran Alam 51(93) 3x4; Syed Muzamil 5/59) beat Renaissance 133 all out in 42.3 overs (Hamad Irfaq 31(45) 3x4, Ahmed Fayyaz Butt 30(28) 4x4,1x6; Nester Dhamba 5/45) by 108 runs.



Hemal Tandel of Oman Stallions

Iraq football body launches ticket sales for Gulf Cup

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq's football federation on Saturday launched ticket sales for the 25th Gulf Cup, the first regional football competition to be hosted by the country for more than 40 years.

The prestigious competition brings together the hosts as well as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

It will be held in Iraq's southern city of Basra from January 6-19.

Hosting the event is a major challenge for Iraq, which

Football's governing body FIFA earlier this year lifted a ban on international competitions in Iraq that had been in place for years due to security concerns

has experienced decades of conflict and upheaval, and whose security situation remains fragile.

"Today, we are launching the sale of Gulf-25 tickets," Adnan Dirjal, head of Iraq's football federation, told a press conference in Basra on Saturday.

The federation shared a link for the ticketing website on its Facebook page, with prices ranging from \$10-\$30.

Earlier this month, Iraqi authorities announced they were scrapping visa fees for fans entering Iraq for the competition.

The move seeks to attract



football fans from across the Gulf region, particularly Kuwait, whose border with Iraq lies less than 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Basra.

One of the city's stadiums has

a capacity of 65,000, while the second can hold 30,000 fans and will be inaugurated on Monday with a friendly match between two local clubs from Iraq and Kuwait.

Football's governing body FIFA earlier this year lifted a ban on international competitions in Iraq that had been in place for years due to security concerns.

In January, Baghdad's packed

Al-Madina Stadium hosted a friendly between the Iraqi team and Uganda, the first international match in the capital since 2013, FIFA said at the time.

Iraq first hosted the Gulf Cup

in Baghdad in 1979, when it also won the tournament.

The country was set to hold the Cup's 2014 edition but it was instead shifted to Saudi Arabia.

AFP



Contador has surgery to remove more than 100 tumours

Paris, France - Retired double Tour de France winner Alberto Contador has undergone surgery to remove more than 100 benign tumours.

The Spaniard, who also won the Spanish Vuelta three times and the Giro d'Italia twice, posted a video on Instagram in which he pulled up his shirt to show his torso swathed in bandages. Both legs were swaddled.

"Yesterday it was time to go to the repair shop. I needed to get some lipomas removed and it turned out I had over 100!" he wrote.

He indicated to the bicycle leaning on a wall behind him and said he hoped to be back on it "in the next month or so".

A lipoma is a fatty non-cancerous tumour between the skin and the muscles. It is usually harmless.

AFP

Pele's family members gather at his hospital bedside for Christmas

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Family members spent Christmas morning on Sunday with Pele at the Sao Paulo hospital where the legendary footballer is battling worsening cancer as well as kidney and heart problems, according to a social media post by his daughter.

Fans of the player, considered by many the greatest of all time, have been expressing hope for his recovery since he was hospitalized in Sao Paulo in late November.

Shortly after midnight, at the start of Christmas Day, Pele's daughter Kely Nascimento posted a picture of the footballer's wife, Marcia Aoki, and other family members gathered at the Albert Einstein Hospital where he is being treated. Pele was not visible in the image.

"Almost all of us. Merry Christmas. Gratitude, love, union, family. The essence of Christmas. We thank you all for all the love and light you send us," Kely wrote.



Pele

On Wednesday, the hospital announced Pele's colon cancer was showing "progression" and he needed "more extensive care to treat kidney and heart failure."

Earlier that day, his daughters had announced he would not be home for Christmas.

Edinho, Pele's son - who was recently appointed coach of Brazilian Serie B football club Londrina, based in Parana in the

north - arrived on Christmas Eve at the medical center, where he joined his sisters Kely and Flavia Nascimento.

He posted a photo on Instagram showing him holding the football star's hand, captioning it: "Father... my strength is yours."

Edinho, an ex-goalkeeper, arrived a day after having explained his absence at his father's side to local media.

"I would like to be present, but I am committed to my mission here. I'm not a doctor, I couldn't really help much," he said in an interview published on Friday by the daily Estadao.

That same day, Kely shared a photo of herself hugging her 82-year-old father in the hospital with the caption "one more night together."

Pele, born Edson Arantes do Nascimento, has received several messages of support since his hospitalization, including one from the French star Kylian Mbappe, who called on followers to "pray for the King."

Pele took the 1958 World Cup by storm when he was 17 years old, netting a hat trick in the semifinals and two more goals in the final, catapulting his own career and launching the soccer dynasty of the Brazilian national team.

He is the only player in history to have won three World Cups (1958, 1962 and 1970).

AFP

Curry will be out at least two more weeks for NBA Warriors

San Francisco, United States - Four-time NBA champion Stephen Curry, sidelined since suffering a partially dislocated left shoulder, will be out for at least another two weeks, the reigning champion Golden State Warriors said Saturday.

Curry, who suffered the injury December 14 at Indiana while trying to make a steal, has missed the team's past four games.

The Warriors said Curry was recently reevaluated and the exam indicated Curry is "making good progress" in his recovery and "will be re-evaluated again in two weeks," the team said in a statement.

The 34-year-old guard, a two-time NBA Most Valuable Player and last season's NBA Finals MVP, will miss at least six games in the next two weeks, starting with Golden State's home showdown Sunday against Memphis.

That contest is part of the NBA's annual Christmas Day NBA schedule, this year featuring five games involving most of the



Curry, who suffered the injury December 14 at Indiana while trying to make a steal, has missed the team's past four games.

league's best clubs and biggest stars. In other holiday games, the Philadelphia 76ers will visit New York while Dallas plays host to the Los Angeles Lakers, Milwaukee travels to Boston and Phoenix plays at Denver.

The Boston-Milwaukee contest pits the team's with the

NBA's best records against each other, the Celtics leading the league at 23-10 with Giannis Antetokounmpo-led Milwaukee on 22-10.

Denver and Memphis share the Western Conference lead at 20-11.

AFP

Charlo suffers broken hand, showdown with Tszyu postponed

Los Angeles, United States - Undisputed world super-welterweight boxing champion Jermell Charlo suffered a broken left hand in training and his January showdown with unbeaten Australian Tim Tszyu has been postponed, promoters announced Saturday.

The matchup, which had been set for January 28 at Las Vegas, would have been the first time Charlo defended all four major sanctioning body world crowns after unifying them in May by knocking out Ar-

gentina's Brian Castano.

Charlo broke his left hand in two places, between the pinkie and ring fingers and at the base of the thumb, on Tuesday after landing a punch in sparring at his gym in Houston.

The 32-year-old American visited two doctors and a hand specialist in Houston and his hand was placed in a cast, where it will stay for the next two months. Only then will Charlo begin rehabilitation of the injury, which he must complete before he can resume training.

"I was sparring and I threw this nice punch and as soon as it landed, I knew something was wrong," Charlo said. "I felt my hand throbbing right away."

"I had two X-rays and an MRI to see what was wrong. It showed it was broken in two places. I hate this feeling. My hand will be in a cast for two months. I'm as disappointed as the fans, maybe more, because this was my first chance to defend the undisputed title."

Charlo, 35-1-1 with 19 knockouts, spoke confidently about



Jermell Charlo

being able to handle Tszyu, 21-0 with 15 knockouts, even with the injury.

"The way I am, I would have beaten Tim Tszyu with one hand, but the doctors and the boxing commission won't allow that," Charlo said.

"It's even more dangerous when a lion faces adversity and has to come back to defend the pride. I've been training since July, and I've been hitting harder than ever, and these are the things that happen when you push yourself to the limits."

"After my hand heals, I'm coming back stronger than ever to defend my legacy."

The 154-pound battle remains among the most anticipated fights of 2023, whenever it might happen.

Tszyu, the son of former light welterweight world champion Kostya Tszyu, indicated he would fight a mandatory rival while waiting for Charlo to become healthy once more.

"I'm very disappointed," Tszyu said.

AFP



Newcastle United players have had plenty to celebrate so far this season

NEWCASTLE, NEW HOPES, AND HOWE!

Eddie Howe ignoring league table as Newcastle look to continue good run

London, United Kingdom - Eddie Howe has insisted he has no interest in looking at the Premier League table as Newcastle bid to maintain their impressive start to the season following the World Cup break.

England's top flight paused for the tournament in Qatar with the Saudi-backed Magpies riding high in third place, having lost just one game in all competitions all season and won their last five in the league.

Newcastle, who haven't won a major domestic trophy since lifting the 1955 FA Cup, resume their league campaign away to Leicester on Monday with manager Howe trying to keep a lid on the growing expectation of the team's large and passionate fan-base.

"I haven't actually looked at the league table once, genuinely I haven't," he said. "That's not to say that I'm not aware of where we are, but for me the focus is always on the next training session



It has gone, no denying it, amazingly well and we've enjoyed what we've done to this point, but it feels like we're only halfway through

EDDIE HOWE

to make sure we give the players the best chance to play well in the next game and let everything else fall into place."

This time last year, Newcastle were firmly fixed in the relegation zone after winning just one of their first 18 fixtures. But, aided by a January transfer window spending spree that saw Kieran

Trippier, Dan Burn, Bruno Guimaraes and loan signing Matt Targett all arrive at St James' Park, they climbed away from danger to preserve their top-flight status.

Howe, however, had no great interest in looking back despite overseeing Newcastle's remarkable rise since being appointed in

November 2021.

"I tend not to reflect too much, to be honest, because it's maybe something you do at the end of the season when you're bringing your ideas together for what the next season will look like," said the 45-year-old former Bournemouth boss.

"It has gone, no denying it, amazingly well and we've enjoyed what we've done to this point, but it feels like we're only halfway through."

Monday's match sees Newcastle up against a Leicester side they will face in next month's League Cup quarter-finals, with the Foxes having won six of their last seven matches in all competitions after a sluggish start to the campaign.

"They're a top team with a top manager and that never changed, in my opinion, even though they had a difficult start to their season," said Howe.

AFP

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Conte may rest Tottenham's World Cup players at Brentford

London, United Kingdom - Tottenham Hotspur boss Antonio Conte suggested on Sunday that he might rest his World Cup players in the game at Brentford on Boxing Day that marks the Premier League's return.

"For the players who played at the World Cup it's a big effort because they have never stopped and only now after one week, 10 days," he said in a preview posted on the club website.

"I think that it is different for the players that played in the World Cup."

He said he would give a chance to those who had to stay behind and train.

"For the players who worked in these four weeks, for sure it is a new start, a fresh start like pre-season."

Tottenham had players representing Wales, Uruguay and Denmark, who were knocked out at the group stage, as well as South Korea, England, Senegal and Brazil who went out at the quarter-finals or earlier in Qatar.

Argentine Cristian Romero and French goalkeeper Hugo Lloris played every minute of the



Antonio Conte

final and Ivan Perisic appeared for Croatia the day before as they took third place.

"We are really excited (to be back) - honestly, it's not easy after the World Cup and only eight days when you played the final and semi-final to play so quickly, but it's okay, it's a positive on one hand," Conte said.

"On another hand, you have the players who played the World Cup in a different physical condition, but it's okay, football during the Christmas period for sure is fantastic to play."

"At the same time, for many players we have to try to push them and to find a good physical condition."

Training on Christmas Day

Romero's father told *La Voz*, a newspaper in their hometown of Cordoba, last week that Tottenham were eager to have the defender, who played a crucial role in Argentina's triumph, back.

"He won't have much time to enjoy himself."

"We will see how everything goes. But they already want him back in England", Quito Romero said.

Conte said the players would be training on Christmas Day.

"It happened also last season," he said.

"We played on 26 December and then also on the first day of the New Year. You know, in Italy, for us, Christmas is an important period to stay with the family," he said.

"We have to play and for this reason, on 25 December, we will have the training session, then have lunch with our relatives, then we have to go together to stay in the hotel because the game will be very early on December 26."

AFP

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CHRISTMAS TOURISM

Bethlehem beckons

Tourists and pilgrims visit the Church of the Nativity in the biblical West Bank city of Bethlehem on December 24



Christmas is reborn in Bethlehem after the pandemic years as people gather for prayers and festivities

With a giant ever-green tree, colourful balloons in the streets and selfies in the Church of the Nativity, Christmas tourism has returned to Bethlehem after two years of COVID-related restrictions. Revered in Christian tradition as the birthplace of Christ, the town of Bethlehem welcomes thousands of pilgrims and tourists for Christmas every year, a windfall that dried up over the past two years due to the coronavirus pandemic and travel restrictions. Now with restrictions lifted in the Palestinian territories and Israel, where the closest international airport with access to Bethlehem is located, the southern West Bank town has taken on a festive air.

Scouts marched with bagpipes as thousands of onlookers lining the streets held balloons and cotton candy. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, greeted worshippers upon his arrival to the town, ahead of leading the annual Christmas eve procession at the Church of the Nativity. "Christmas is the town's celebration, and we put in a lot of time and effort to prepare for it," Bethlehem mayor Hanna Hanania told AFP. "We wanted to have international participation, and organised children's songs and shows with singers from France, South Africa and Malta," he added.

Significant place
Tourists converged on the streets, shops and stone buildings of this Palestinian

town, where Christians and Muslims live side by side. It was "wonderful to be here", said Paul Wittenberger, a 40-year-old American from Michigan who was visiting with his father and siblings. "We've been here for three days and the weather's nice, we're lucky to be here out of the storm sweeping the United States this weekend." To John Hughes, just 'hanging out' in Bethlehem was meaningful. "It's a pretty cool city," the 22-year-old Canadian from Vancouver told AFP. For him, the birthplace of Christ was a significant place - especially on Christmas. Michael al-Siriani, who owns a pottery and ceramics workshop, was delighted to see tourists flocking back to the town after two difficult years, which had seen local hotels standing empty.

"Things are much better now after the coronavirus pandemic," he said. "Besides, tourists have started to sleep in the city again." The Palestinian Authority, which governs the Israeli-occupied West Bank, confirmed Siriani's feelings. "Since the beginning of this year, but more specifically since March, we have begun receiving pilgrims and tourists from all over the world," Palestinian tourism minister Rola Maayah said. "Until now, we have received about 700,000 tourists from around the world," she said. Meanwhile on Saturday, pilgrims were deep in prayer in the Church of the Nativity while others took selfies wearing red and white Santa Claus caps, hours before the traditional midnight mass and its wishes for peace. AFP

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Ice adorns a fountain in Charleston, South Carolina, on December 24 when temperatures dropped below 32°F (0°C)



Travelers throng Miami International Airport during a winter storm ahead of the Christmas holiday in Miami, Florida

BOMB CYCLONE

THE NORTH WIND DOTB BLOW

Deadly blizzard leaves US in Christmas weekend deep freeze

tracking website Flightaware.com. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg tweeted Saturday that 'the most extreme disruptions are behind us as airline and airport operations gradually recover' - words that travellers stranded at airports, including Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, and New York, were holding on to. Road ice and white-out conditions also led to the closure of some of the nation's busiest transport routes, including the cross-country Interstate 70, parts of which were temporarily shut down in Colorado and Kansas. The National Weather Service warned about lethal conditions and urged residents in affected areas to remain indoors. On Friday, it said wind chills had sent temperatures plunging to -55 Fahrenheit (-48 Celsius).

WHAT'S A 'BOMB CYCLONE'?

The storm pummeling large swaths of the United States and Canada is what forecasters call a 'bomb cyclone'. While this kind of storm is not exceedingly rare, this one is very strong, with high winds that are bringing heavy snow or rain to many areas. Storms can form when a mass of low-pressure air meets a high-pressure mass. The air flows from high pressure to low, creating winds. What defines a bomb cyclone is how rapidly the pressure drops in the low-pressure mass - by at least 24 millibars in a day. This quickly increases the pressure difference, or gradient, between the two air masses, making the winds stronger. This process of rapid intensification is called bombogenesis. As the winds blow, the rotation of the earth creates a cyclonic effect. The direction is counterclockwise in the Northern Hemisphere (when viewed from above).

Frustration growing In El Paso, Texas, desperate migrants who had crossed from Mexico huddled for warmth in churches, schools and a civic center, Rosa Falcon, a school teacher and volunteer said. But some still chose to stay outside in frigid temperatures because they feared attention from immigration authorities, she added. In Chicago, Burke Patten of Night Ministry, a nonprofit dedicated to helping the homeless, said, "We've been handing out cold weather gear, including coats, hats, gloves, thermal underwear, blankets and sleeping bags, along with hand and foot warmers." Weather officials forecast that dangerously cold conditions would continue throughout the central and eastern United States over the weekend before temperatures returned to more normal seasonal weather next week. Canadian authorities have also issued severe weather warnings. Hundreds of thousands were left without power in Ontario and Quebec provinces, while many flights were cancelled at airports in



A man braves the freezing weather along Chicago's Michigan Avenue, and (right) vehicles move cautiously on a highway in Louisville, Kentucky

A fearsome winter storm continued to pummel parts of the United States with blizzard conditions Saturday evening after its powerful Arctic winds left over a million customers without power earlier in the day and caused Christmas travel nightmares. At least 17 weather-related deaths have been confirmed across eight states as heavy snow, howling winds and dangerously frigid temperatures kept much of the nation, including the normally temperate south, in a frozen grip for a third straight day.

In hard-hit New York state, Governor Kathy Hochul deployed the National Guard to Erie County and its main city Buffalo, where authorities said emergency services have essentially collapsed in the face of the extreme blizzard. The National Weather Service warned that blizzard conditions in the Great Lakes region caused by lake-effect snow will continue into Saturday night, including in Buffalo. One couple in the lake-side city, which sits across the border from Canada, said with the roads completely impassible, they would not be making a 10-minute drive to see their family for Christmas.

"It's tough because the conditions are just so bad... a lot of fire departments aren't even sending out trucks for calls," said 40-year-old Rebecca Bortolin. Her fiancée Ali Lawson is having back pain, but plans to tough it out at home because driving to the hospital was dangerous. "We can currently see across the street, but last night we couldn't see past our porch," said Lawson. The 'bomb cyclone' winter storm, one of the fiercest in decades, had already forced the cancellation of over 3,300 US flights on Saturday and the delay of nearly 7,500 more, a day after nearly 6,000 were scrapped, according to

Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal.

Flooding, fierce winds

In the US, transportation departments reported near-zero visibility whiteouts, ice-covered roads and blizzard conditions, and urged residents to stay home. Drivers were warned not to take to the roads though it is the busiest time of year for travel. Meteorologist Kelsey McEwen, in Toronto, tweeted that waves of up to eight metres high were reported in Lake Erie, while in Ohio's Fairport Harbour, winds gusted to 120kmph. AFP



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