



TUESDAY, 04 JANUARY 2022
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26°C/21°C

CLASSES, EXAMS SUSPENDED; HEAVY RAIN FORECAST

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HM to preside over ROP Day

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, will preside over a ceremony on Wednesday marking the Annual Day of Royal Oman Police (ROP) and graduation of a new batches of officers.

The ceremony will be held on the military parade grounds of Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in Nizwa.

SAYYID SHIHAB RECEIVES SAUDI CHIEF OF GENERAL STAFF



H H Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received at his office in Al Murtafa'a Garrison Air Chief Marshal Fayyadh Hamid al Ruwaili, Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on Monday. The two sides had a cordial conversation and discussed issues of common concern. The meeting was attended by Vice Admiral Abdullah Khamis al Ra'eesi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, and the guest's accompanying delegation (ONA)

Preserving Omani culture, identity important priority

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Preserving Omani identity, heritage and culture is an important priority area in the 10th Five-Year Development Plan (2021-25).

The Ministry of Economy (MoE) released the 'Strategic Programmes Folder' for the 10th Five-Year Development Plan (2021-25) recently, which focuses on 14 national priorities and 430 strategic programmes chosen as per the priorities of Oman Vision 2040.

Under the many priorities detailed in the Strategic Programmes Folder, 'Citizenship, Identity, Heritage and National Culture', which has 45 programmes, targets the preservation and promotion of Omani identity as well as its cultural heritage over the course of the next five years.

Omani Identity

Some of the important programmes lined up under the 'Citizenship, Identity, Heritage and National Culture' priority include promoting Omani culture through participation in international forums, organising 'Oman Day' exhibitions and events in leading museums across the world. Creating 'Oman Corner' in famous museums, making World Heritage Sites ready and easily



The Strategic Programmes Folder, which has 45 programmes, targets the preservation and promotion of Omani identity and its cultural heritage over the next five years

accessible and establishing an integrated centre to preserve documents, archives and documentary reserves of intangible cultural heritage are also planned.

The programme will focus on documenting and promoting Omani arts globally, establishing a Centre for Omani Civilisation Studies, the Omani Encyclopedia

of Traditional Arts as well as creating a Unified National Index for Omani Manuscripts and the 'Yashhadoo' programme for documenting oral history.

There will be impetus to promote traditional games and create sports league. Omani identity will be preserved through a platform - 'Urban and Bedouin Pro-

gramme: Our Identity is Citizenship and Ethics'.

Cultural heritage

The five-year plan outlines measures for sustainable investment in Oman's cultural heritage. Among the plans is one to establish new museums and develop existing ones, as well as develop private museums in castles and forts. Also envisaged are cultural centres in the wilayats of Khasab and Buraimi.

Restoration and maintenance of archaeological and historical monuments and preserving and documenting Omani antiquities are the areas identified for preservation of Omani cultural heritage.

An incubator will be established to encourage investment in heritage, crafts and arts. Tourism will be promoted by developing tourism heritage sites and adding cultural components.

Creative economy

A National Programme for the Development of the Crafts Sector and Craftsmen will be developed to focus on having a creative economy. This will be in addition to the establishment of a Fine Arts Centre and formation of a national centre for research, experimentation, innovation and design for the development of craft industries.

Free booster dose drive begins for Muscat expats

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health has started administering the third dose of COVID-19 vaccine to expatriates free of charge in the former airport building in Seeb.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, a Ministry of Health (MoH) official said, "The booster dose is free for expats in Muscat."

He informed that the immunisation centre in Oman Airports' building in Seeb witnessed a large turnout of residents for the vaccine with prior registration through the Tarassud app.

The Directorate General of Health Services in Buraimi Governorate also announced the availability of the booster dose free of charge for expats, besides the first and second doses for those who haven't yet taken it, at the Directorate General of Health Services in Buraimi Governorate in Building No 10.

On Sunday, the Directorate General of Health Services in South Batinah Governorate started administering the booster dose free of charge to expats at the Rustaq Sports Complex from 8am to 1.30pm. The drive will continue till Thursday.

Friday prayers

The Government Communication Centre (GCC) has denied



Expats queue for free booster dose at Oman Airports' building in Seeb

COVID-19 UPDATE

176 NEW CASES

Muscat - The Ministry of Health announced 176 cases of COVID-19 and zero related deaths on Monday. This takes the total number of positive cases in the sultanate to 306,008.

The number of deaths stands at 4,117, while the total number of recoveries has reached 300,532.

rumours circulating in social media regarding suspension of Friday prayers in mosques.

A statement issued by GCC said, 'There is no truth in what is being circulated about stopping Friday prayers. The post is from the precautionary measures issued in March 2020 in the sultanate. Everyone should take information from official sources.'

Vaccine expiry

The Ministry of Health issued a statement clarifying news circulating on social media platforms

about administration of expired vaccine.

A citizen recently tweet about receiving a booster dose against COVID-19 from a bottle past the expiry date.

The ministry stated that the dose administered to the Tweeter user was within the use-by date.

'Some vaccines have extended validity, based on the latest studies on stability and efficacy, conducted in coordination with manufacturers and regulatory authorities,' the ministry stated.

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Proposals to amend archives, securities laws discussed

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Al Rahma launches initiative to support needy families

Rocks that may be potential source of petroleum found in N Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dr Mohammed al Kindi, from the Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre, recently published a scientific paper in the *Journal of Petroleum Geology* identifying rocks that may be a source of petroleum in the Governorate of North Sharqiyah.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Kindi said, "The newly identified potential source rocks of petroleum were deposited in deep oceanic environments, which is not a normal environment where rocks with high content of organic matter, essential to generate petroleum, are found."

He explained, "When manually deepening a water well in a

Geochemical evidence confirmed that the oil is not a refined product but a mix of fresh and biodegraded charges indicating an active seepage rather than an impregnation

DR MOHAMMED AL KINDI

small village known as Quraisha'ah in Wadi Bani Khalid, North Sharqiyah, villagers noted oil oozing from natural fractures in recovered limestone debris.



Evidence of oil was first encountered at about 46m below ground level and continued for several metres around the water table. The water table is known to

fluctuate over a few metres in the well during periods of abundant rainfall and drought. Fragments of fractured limestone from the well bled oil when broken or cut.

No oil seepage has previously been reported from the area which occurs in an unlikely geological setting for deposits in the Eastern Oman Mountains."

According to Kindi, initially it was thought that the seepage was due to manmade petroleum waste in the area. The village is remote from any oil pipeline or known hydrocarbon accumulation. "Geochemical evidence, furthermore, confirmed that the oil is not a refined product but a mix of fresh and biodegraded charges indicating an active seepage rather than an impregnation."

He informed that the quality of oil in the seepage is lighter compared to many Oman oils.

"The significance of the new oil seepage, remote from Oman's oil and gas fields and other known seeps, remains to be established. However, it might trigger further interest to study the area and explore its prospects."



State Council discusses proposals to amend archives, securities laws

Muscat - The State Council on Monday held a meeting during which it studied proposals to amend the Law on Records and Archives and the Securities Act in preparation to submit the drafts of both to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, along with the opinions of the State Council and the Shura Council.

The drafts of the Archives and Records Law (promulgated under Royal Decree No 60/2007) and the Securities Act were earlier forwarded to the two councils for discussion by the Council of Ministers. The deliberations took place as part of the third ordinary session of the State Council's annual sitting of the seventh term held under the auspices of Sheikh Abdul Malik Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council.

In his opening speech, Sheikh Khalili said that the meeting coincides with the start of a new year, which he wished would be a year of bounty for Oman and His Majesty the Sultan. He also wished that 2022 would see the



Maha bint Suleiman al Lamkiah took oath as a member of State Council replacing Lubna bint Muhammad al Kharusiyah on Monday (ONA)

eradication of coronavirus and the recovery of the global economy from the negative impacts of the pandemic.

Then, Dr Rashid Salim al Badi, Chairman of the Legal Committee in the State Council, said that the proposed amendment of the first draft law stems from a keenness to address the challenges facing the Records and Archives Authority. The implementation

of the law would conform with the provisions of the State's Administrative Apparatus System promulgated under Royal Decree No 75/2020, he said.

Amendments were proposed to be made to the 14th Article of the Records and Archives Law forwarded to the State Council, said Badi.

On his turn, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah al Harthi,

The proposed amendments to the Securities Act assume significance due to the fact that the law plays a great role in facilitating the activities of the national economy

SHEIKH MOHAMMED ABDULLAH AL HARTHI

Chairman of the Economic Committee, said that the proposed amendments to the Securities Act assume significance due to the fact that the law plays a great role in facilitating the activities of the national economy.

Sheikh Harthi explained that the draft law deals with many vital issues, including the funding of existing productive units and new investment units, providing

opportunities for investors other than traditional banking portfolios, allowing owners of small and medium enterprises to become investors, contributing to the financing of development plans, consolidating internal and external credit and achieving efficiency in channeling resources to more profitable areas.

The views of the Economic Committee focused on ways to enhance the power of financial securities, augment employment opportunities funding, creating the desired balance among stakeholders dealing with the stock market and minimising risk factors, to name a few.

The meeting also discussed the reply of the Council of Ministers about two proposals made earlier by the State Council; one about a study on the Law on Environment Conservation (promulgated under Royal Decree No 114/2001) and the other about the 2020 Annual Report of the State Audit Institution.

ONA

ENVOY PRESENTS CREDENTIALS



H E Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received a copy of credentials of H E Filali Guenni, Ambassador of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the sultanate, on Monday (ONA)



MoHT instals devices to monitor meteorites

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) is implementing a project to instal meteorite monitoring devices in different sites in Oman.

A statement issued by MoHT said, 'Ministry specialists have started to instal four meteorite monitoring devices in different sites to track new meteors.

'This project saw joint cooperation between a specialised scientific team from the Natural History Museum in Berne, Switzerland, with technical sup-

port from Curtin University in Australia and Oman Telecommunications Company.'

MoHT has recovered more than 1.7 tonnes of Omani meteorites that were earlier sent to scientific and research institutions for study and analysis.

According to the ministry, more than 6,300 meteorites have been recovered so far.

MoHT recently established a warehouse for Omani meteorites in accordance with scientific requirements. It aims to preserve the meteorites and ensure these are not affected by natural elements.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Muscat Electricity Distribution Company S.A.O.C Invites Interested Companies To Participate In The Follwing Tender

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Sit Visit	No of Attendee	Tender Price (R.O)
01/2022	Construction of 2x20MVA Airport Height 6 (P195) Primary Substation)	20/01/2022	15/02/2022	A	24/01/2022 @9:00 AM at MEDC head office	One Electrical, Civil Engineer & One Protection Engineer with Full PPE	1575

The table below shows the instructions for participation: -

Executive Summary

- Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender documents.
- The amount specified above is including 5 % VAT.
- The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply)
- For payment procedure and to obtain the tender document, please contact us via e-mail Contract@medcoman.com
- 24588600 – Ext: 8577 - 8726

Purchase timing

Tender documents can be purchased at the official working time between 08:00 – 13:00 hours

Enquiries

- Any inquiry can be sent using clarification available in the tender documents, one week before bid submission date
- Any request for clarification received after the above-mentioned period will not be considered.

Tender Submission

- Tenders should be submitted in a sealed and stamped envelope which contiane two sperate envelopes (Technical prposal and Commercial prposal) addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF MINOR TENDER COMMITTEE, MUSCAT ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION CO. marked only with tender number and the subject.
- Please follow SUBMISSION OF TENDER mentioned in clause 20.0 in Prime Document.

Guarantee

- The Tender should enclose a bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman Unconditional and irrevocable and shall be disbursement as soon as it is submitted for the value of (1%) of the tender value valid for a period of at least ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF MINOR TENDER COMMITTEE, MUSCAT ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION COMPANY S.A.O.C.
- The bid bond should be included in the commercial proposal envelope only.
- Any tender not accompanied by a Tender Bond shall be rejected

Terms and

- Tenders received after the deadline stated in the Invitation to Tender, including any extension thereof, for any reason whatsoever will not be considered
- The Tender shall be valid for a period of at least ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission including any extension thereof.
- If the submission date extended, the bank guarantee or a certified cheque shall be extended in accordance with the bid extension date
- MEDC is not bound to accept the lowest (or highest) Tenderer.
- Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from Local Products and have a High-level percentage of Omanization
- Muscat Electricity Distribution Company gives priority to award the projects to SMEs companies.
- For projects whose value is less than OMR 10K, the priority to award will be given to registered companies that hold a valid certificate Of Reyadah.
- Failure to comply with the instructions in tender document may lead to disqualification.

Bid Placement

The Completed Tender should be deposited in the Tender Box No. 1 in the ground floor of MEDC Head Office building at Airport Heights, before 10 a.m. on the assigned date of tender submission



80070008
www.medcoman.com

Classes, exams suspended due to heavy rain forecast



Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Education (MoE) announced on Monday evening that classes and examinations at public and private schools in all governorates except Dhofar and Al Wusta will be suspended on Tuesday.

Classes and examinations will resume on Wednesday, and the examinations that were scheduled on Tuesday will be shifted to the day following the final examinations according to the timetable set earlier.

'The Ministry of Education has decided to suspend classes in all public and private schools tomorrow, Tuesday, in all governorates of the Sultanate of

The Ministry of Education has decided to suspend classes in all public and private schools on Tuesday in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, except for the governorates of Dhofar and Al Wusta

reported.

On Monday evening, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued a warning of heavy rains ranging between 30mm to 80mm on Monday night and Tuesday. 'Heavy rains are expected in the governorates of Musandam, North Batinah, South Batinah, Buraimi, Dhahira, Dakhliyah, Muscat, North Sharqiyah and South Sharqiyah.'

The CAA advised all to exercise caution during rains and thundershowers, not to cross running wadis, avoid low-lying areas and not to venture into the sea. 'Thundershowers will be accompanied by fresh downdraft winds, hail and flash floods,' a CAA statement said.

99 cruise ships to visit in 2021/2022 winter season



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Ninety-nine cruise ships are scheduled to visit the sultanate this winter season. Abdullah Saif al Saadi, head of cruises and chartered flights in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, informed that these cruise ships carrying thousands of tourists from all over the world will drop anchor in Oman's three main ports in the 2021/2022 season. Sultan Qaboos Port will receive 62 cruise ships, Port of Khasab 22, and Port of Salalah

15. The highest number of arrivals is expected in the October-April period. The ministry has been collaborating with relevant govern-

The winter cruise tourism season began in the sultanate with the arrival of 'Mein Schiff 6', carrying more than 2,100 tourists to the Port of Khasab in Musandam governorate

ment and private sector entities and cruise operators to enhance cruise tourism in the sultanate. "In the 2019/2020 season,

the three main ports saw tourists from all over the world. In 2019, Sultan Qaboos Port received 163 cruise ships carrying 660,295 tourists and 66 cruise ships car-

rying 263,587 tourists in 2020. "The Port of Khasab received 70 cruise ships carrying 136,984 tourists in 2019 and 31 cruise ships carrying 125,110

tourists in 2020." The Port of Salalah received 45 cruise ships carrying 69,060 tourists in 2019 and four cruise ships with 1982 tourists in 2020. After a gap of more than a year due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant disruptions in tourism activities across the world, Oman received the first cruise ship of this season on November 17, 2021, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism informed. The winter cruise tourism season began in the sultanate with the arrival of *Mein Schiff 6*,

carrying more than 2,100 tourists to the Port of Khasab in Musandam governorate. On November 19, Salalah Port received the Italian cruise ship *AIDAbella* carrying 1,104 tourists. Passengers of *AIDAbella* visited popular archaeological and historical landmarks in Dhofar, including the Museum of the Land of Frankincense, Samharam Archaeological Park and popular markets in Salalah. Oman recorded a 45 per cent increase in the number of cruise ship visitors from 193,000 in 2017/2018 to 283,000 in 2018/2019.



GCC undersecretaries for health review COVID-19 situation

Muscat - GCC Health Undersecretaries held their 20th virtual meeting on Monday to discuss updates on the COVID-19 pandemic in the GCC states. The Ministry of Health's Director General of Disease Control and Surveillance Dr Saif al Abri participated in the meeting in the presence of Dr Saeed al Lamki, Director General of Primary Health Care and member of the Gulf Health Council's Executive Office, and several senior

ministry officials. The meeting reviewed the latest developments of COVID-19 with particular consideration to the new coronavirus variant Omicron, in addition to the measures taken by each Gulf country in this regard and suggestion for the upcoming phase. The meeting further reviewed updates on COVID-19 vaccine and each country's experience in increasing vaccine coverage rate, specifically the booster dose.

ROHM kicks off 2022 with 2 concerts starring Saber Rebai

Muscat - Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) has announced that it will kick off its 2022 season with two concerts on January 6 and 7 starring the pan Arab singer, composer and violinist Saber Rebai. Born to Yemeni parents from the region of Hadramut, long celebrated for its rich artistic heritage, Rebai grew up in Tunisia and started his

music career at the age of 17. Rebai's talent is recognised by great artists and he continues to be hailed as a major voice on the music stage of the Arab world. Rebai will perform his best loved songs, accompanied by an orchestra in a show which is designed to stir the senses and enrich souls of the audience.



Al Rahma launches initiative to support needy families

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Al Rahma Association has launched an initiative - called Sanid - to support low-income families. Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, an official of Al Rahma Association informed that the initiative targets people in the Governorate of Muscat with salaries of less than RO325 who do not have any other source of income. "The initiative aims to provide aid in various forms, including food worth RO30 for families and a monthly sum of RO30 for orphans. They will also benefit from the services of a free charity store providing clothes, cooking utensils, vegetables, fruits and furniture. It will support undergraduate students in their last academic year, and help families pay outstanding dues, including rent, monthly installments and utility bills," the official said. The association opened registration for beneficiaries of the initiative starting December 2021 for a three-month period ending in February 2022. "Needy families should go to the Zakat Committee or the charitable team affiliated to their area to register in the initiative. Forms of the registered families will be sent to the association for necessary action and provision of assistance according to the family's need," the official informed. "Those who wish to support the initiative can do so through donations to Al Rahma's account,



the electronic portal of charities, Talabat, or by donating cash at the association's headquarters in Al Khoudh in Seeb." According to the official, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Al Rahma has launched more than 12 initiatives to support needy families and alleviate its impact on them. It distributed RO100,000 and more than 280 laptops among students, and maintained air conditioning and heating devices for more than 500 families in the

areas affected by Cyclone Shaheen. "The Relief and Emergency Committee of the association recently visited the wilayat of Nakhl to determine the damage caused by Al Azm low pressure which is expected to last until Wednesday. The visit aimed to help the people there." "Anyone can donate to support the association. Al Rahma accepts any sum of money. We can be reached at 97553348 or 93616581," the official said.



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. (1/2022)

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

Tender No.	No E- Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/21/062	2021/MM/ QS-30	Supply and fixing Kiosk in Wailayat A' Seeb (Re-Call) (E-Tender)	Rial 25	22/01/2022	13/02/2022	Specialized
PRE/21/092	2021/MM/ QS-32	Supply of spare parts for road machines (Re-Call) (E-Tender)	Rial 25	22/01/2022	13/02/2022	Specialized
PRE/21/095	2021/MM/ QS-34	Supply of granite walls for Muttrah Corniche (Re-Call) (E-Tender)	Rial 25	13/01/2022	26/01/2022	Excellent
PRE/18/102	2021/MM/ HQ-1	Construction of Dualization of Halban Street (Phase 1) (E-Tender)	Rial 290	22/01/2022	13/02/2022	Excellent
PRE/21/070	2021/MM/ HQ-2	Construction of Link Road between Al Amerat Road and Al Joud Road (Phase 1) (E-Tender)	Rial 290	22/01/2022	13/02/2022	Excellent

Tender Conditions :-

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

ROP NEWS

Expats arrested for transporting beach sand illegally

Muscat - The Environment Authority (EA) has arrested a group of expats for transporting beach sand without permission in Dhofar governorate. A statement issued by EA said, 'The Directorate General of Environment in Dhofar, in coordination with Royal Oman Police, has arrested expatriate workers who transported beach sand without a permit. Legal measures have taken



against them.' EA confirmed that transporting soil and sand from wadis, beaches and valleys without a permit from the authority is a violation of Article No 21 of the Environmental Protection and Pollution Control Law No (114/2001). It urged all to preserve the environment and report violations via hotline 80071999 or 24693666.

MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,172.14
BSE Sensex	59,183.22

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	193.17
Pakistani Rs	457.84
Bangladeshi Taka	222.93
Philippine Peso	132.79
Sri Lankan Rs	527.15

*Rates as on January 03
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

China to scrap subsidies for electric vehicles

China will end subsidies for electric and hybrid cars, authorities have announced, saying the strength of sales in the sector meant state support was no longer needed.

In a statement, the Ministry of Finance said purchase subsidies would be reduced by 30 per cent from the beginning of 2022 before being scrapped completely by the end of the year.

'Given the growth of the industry for vehicles with new energy, the sales trends and the smooth transition of manufacturers, the subsidies... will end on December 31,' the ministry said.

'Vehicles registered after December 31, 2022 will not be subsidised.'

Sales of electric and hybrid cars have boomed in China, with increases of more than 100 per cent year-on-year in recent months.

The cars are set to represent 18 per cent of all vehicle sales in 2022, the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers (CAAM) estimated last week. In 2019, they accounted for only 5 per cent.

Of the 27.5mn vehicles set to be sold this year, according to CAAM, 5mn will be electric and hybrids.

Overall growth in the world's largest market for vehicles will likely come in at 3.1 per cent for 2021, according to CAAM.



OPEC+ may revive output amid oil demand optimism

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies are expected to revive more oil supplies when they meet later today. This, as per analysts, underscores the OPEC+ group's optimism in the outlook for global oil demand in 2022.

The 23-nation OPEC+ group led by Saudi Arabia and Russia is likely to proceed with another modest monthly hike of 400,000 barrels a day as it restores production halted during the pandemic, according to a Bloomberg survey.

Several national delegates also said they expect the boost - due to take effect in February - will go ahead, Bloomberg reported.

According to an OPEC report, the cartel expects global oil demand to further recover in 2022, taking only a 'mild' hit from the omicron variant. "The market can take the extra oil, as long as Omicron or a macro downturn

don't crush demand again," Bob McNally, president of consultant Rapidan Energy Group and a former White House official, told Bloomberg.

Fifteen of 16 analysts and traders surveyed by Bloomberg predicted the output increase will be approved when OPEC+ members meet online on Tuesday.

However, there are still persisting concerns about demand. And proceeding with the next monthly increase is not without risks, the Bloomberg report said.

OPEC estimates that the world oil market is returning to surplus, which will only widen in the coming months as supply jumps from the group's rivals - including the deployment of emergency reserves by the US and other consumers.

With the excess projected to reach a hefty 2.6mn barrels a day in March, the group may need to reconsider further increases.

"OPEC+ is highly unlikely to drop the ball now and allow inventories to rise significantly,"

said Bjarne Schieldrop, chief commodities analyst at SEB AB, as reported by Bloomberg.

The report said OPEC+'s output increase will in any case be tempered as many countries - most notably Angola and Nigeria - struggle to make the production hikes they are allowed because of constrained investment and operational disruptions. As a result, the actual boost in February will likely fall short of the official 400,000 barrels a day, Rapidan's McNally said.

A Reuters report on Monday said OPEC+ is expected to stick to its plans for a February output increase when it meets today, predicting a mild and short-lived impact on demand from the Omicron coronavirus variant.

Ahead of today's meeting, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries held its Joint Technical Committee meeting on Monday via videoconference to review the conditions of the global oil market.

Top oil producers on Monday appointed Kuwaiti oil executive

and former diplomat Haitham al Ghaiss as new secretary general of the OPEC.

The conference decided by acclamation to appoint by Haitham al Ghaiss of Kuwait as secretary general of the Organization, with effect from August 1, 2022, for a period of three years,' the OPEC statement said.

Current OPEC secretary general, Mohammad Barkindo, said, "As another chapter begins with the new year, let us remember with a sense of pride all that we have accomplished to date through our landmark Declaration of Cooperation."

Barkindo pointed out that the OPEC+ members' flexible approach has helped provide an added sense of stability, reassurance and continuity to the market and investors despite the ongoing uncertainties.

Referencing OPEC's Monthly Oil Market Report, Barkindo noted that global oil demand is projected to reach 100.6mn barrels per day in 2022, surpassing pre-pandemic levels.

Dubai ruler approves \$49bn general budget

Dubai, UAE - Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai and Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, has approved the government of Dubai's general budget for the fiscal cycle of 2022-2024, with a total expenditure of AED181bn (approximately US\$49.3bn).

Sheikh Mohammed also approved the general budget for the fiscal year 2022, with AED59.95bn (approximately US\$16.3bn) expenditure.

The budget cycle 2022-2024 will support Dubai's efforts to stimulate the overall economy and objectives of the Dubai Strategic Plan 2030. The new general budget reflects the emirate's determination to accelerate post-pandemic economic recovery and achieve the leadership's broader goals to stimulate entrepreneurship, enhance society's happiness and consolidate Dubai's position as a land of opportunities and innovation.

The three-year budget cycle focuses on increasing economic growth rates by activating the public-private partnership ecosystem and supporting the private sector to drive economic growth. It also addresses the social aspects of healthcare and education, as well as digital infrastructure development and financial sustainability programmes.

Through its 2022 budget, Dubai continues to place a high emphasis on developing social services, and its healthcare, education and cultural sectors.

The budget also pays attention to citizens' housing sector by raising the value of the housing loan to AED1mn and allocating more than 4,000 plots and houses with a total value of AED5.2bn in the first phase of the housing programme for citizens in Dubai within a broader 20-year programme of



Sheikh Mohammed al Maktoum

AED65bn.

Dubai's 2022 budget expects to achieve revenues estimated at AED57.55bn, an increase of 10 per cent over the expected revenues of the previous budget of the fiscal year 2021, as a result of the rapid recovery of Dubai and the effective measures taken to curb the pandemic.

Dubai is one of the first cities in the world to achieve a rapid recovery due to the economic stimulus measures approved by the government that reduced some government fees for businesses and put a freeze on fee increases until 2023.

These revenues are based on ongoing operations in the emirate and do not rely on oil revenues. Oil revenues account for 6 per cent of the total projected revenues for the fiscal year 2022, which creates the conditions for enhanced financial sustainability.

Non-tax revenues, which come from fees, account for 57 per cent of the total expected revenues, while tax revenues account for 31 per cent, and government investment revenues represent 6 per cent of the total expected revenues.

WAM

Canon EOS R5

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with the **Canon EOS R5**

- 45 megapixel full-frame CMOS sensor
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Alpha Dhabi raises stake in Aldar to 30%

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Abu Dhabi-based Alpha Dhabi Holding (ADH) has announced the acquisition of an additional 17 per cent shareholding of Aldar Properties. The acquisition will increase Alpha Dhabi Holding's shares in Aldar Properties to 29.8 per cent, making it one of the largest shareholders, said an ADH statement on Monday.

Commenting on the announcement, Hamad Salem Mohamed al Ameri, managing director and CEO of Alpha Dhabi Holding, said, "The real estate sector has been witnessing an outstanding recovery during 2021, and demand for residential, commercial, hospitality and logistics units continue to grow as a result of the resilience and agility of the country's post-pandemic strategy."

Early last year, Alpha Dhabi Holding acquired a 12.8 per cent strategic stake in Aldar Properties. The transaction, which involved the transfer of around 1bn shares in a block trade valued at AED3.7bn, was one of the largest private share purchases in a UAE listed company.

In this latest investment, ADH has completed the acquisition of Sublime 2, Sogno 2 and Sogno 3 which together own 17 per cent of Aldar Properties.

WAM

Turkish inflation hits 19-year high of 36% due to lira crisis

Ankara, Turkey – Turkey’s annual inflation rate surged to its highest level since 2002 in December, official data showed on Monday, after a currency crisis sparked by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s unconventional economic policies.

Consumer prices jumped to 36.1 per cent last month from the same period in 2020, up from 21.3 per cent in November, according to the Turkish statistics office. The figure is the highest since October 2002 when inflation reached 33.45 per cent, before the party of Erdogan came to power.

It is also more than seven times the official government target.

Erdogan’s enduring success has often been attributed to the development and prosperity his government enabled after a financial crisis in 2001.

His Islamic-rooted party rose to power the following year, and he has dominated Turkish politics for the past two decades as both prime minister and president.

But he faces an increasingly difficult path to re-election in polls due to be held by mid-2023.

Opinion polls show him losing in a second-round runoff against most major rivals, and his ruling alliance ceding control of parliament to an increasingly popular group of opposition parties.

But Erdogan has stuck fast to



his policies, opposing interest rate hikes – which he calls ‘the mother and father of all evil’ – to combat inflation.

High interest rates are a drag on activity and slow down economic growth.

But central banks raise their policy rates out of necessity when inflation gets out of hand.

Erdogan on Monday accused ‘the elites’ of profiting from ‘unearned interest income’, sticking by his pledge not to raise borrowing costs.

Lira collapse
The Turkish lira lost 44 per cent

of its value against the dollar in 2021, with the losses accelerating at the end of last year, when Erdogan orchestrated a series of sharp interest rate reductions.

The dollar soared to a historic high of nearly 18.4 liras by the time Erdogan announced new currency support measures last month that were backed by reportedly heavy indirect interest rate interventions.

The exchange rate has since slipped back down to around 13 liras to the dollar, although the Turkish currency lost a further two percent after the latest inflation reading was announced.

A dollar was worth 7.4 liras at the start of 2021.

The monthly inflation reading has turned into an politically-sensitive issue in Turkey, with opposition leaders claiming that the government is putting pressure on the statistics agency to underreport price jumps.

They point to separate readings prepared to independent economic institutes such as the Inflation Research Group (ENAG), which calculated last month’s annual inflation rate at 82.8 per cent.

The official readings show prices for most food staples rais-

ing substantially above the annual inflation rate.

The price of milk, yogurt and sunflower oil all jumped by roughly 75 per cent on the year, while that of chicken rose by 86 per cent.

Erdogan has raised the take-home monthly minimum wage by 50 per cent, raising it to 4,250 liras (about US\$310, 275 liras), which economists worry will further feed inflation.

His government has also raised sharply raised utility costs, including those of heat, gas and electricity.

AFF



Tesla delivers nearly 1mn cars globally in 2021

Washington, US – Tesla said on Sunday it delivered nearly 1mn vehicles in 2021, almost twice as many as in the previous year, results that were better than expected despite global supply challenges.

The US electric carmaker delivered more than 936,000 cars of all models in 2021, an increase of 87 per cent over the previous year, the company said in a statement.

Tesla had announced last January that it was aiming to increase deliveries by 50 per cent per year over several years, so Sunday’s results far exceeded that goal.

The group, which recently moved its headquarters from Palo Alto, California to Austin, Texas, sold 911,208 Model 3 and Model Y vehicles as well as 24,964 vehicles of its luxury S and X models (at a price of US\$90,000 and US\$100,000 respectively).

In the fourth quarter alone, Tesla delivered 308,600 cars.

Tesla has managed to over-

come global logistics issues that have plagued the auto industry.

Its chief Elon Musk previously said he was able to get around much of the semiconductor shortage by using new chip designs and rewriting software.

Tesla got another boost in October when it received an order for 100,000 electric vehicles from the rental company Hertz, to be completed by 2022.

This announcement brought the automaker into the very select club of companies worth more than US\$1tn on the stock market.

Tesla, however, finds itself under scrutiny from the NHTSA auto regulator, which is probing its autopilot system over safety concerns.

The automaker has also agreed to update its software to prevent drivers from playing video games on the car’s system while the vehicle is in motion, following a government safety investigation.

AFF

India’s year of unicorns: Startups in spotlight of 2021

Mumbai, India – Sumit Gupta has had a big year – turning 30, getting married and seeing his startup become one of India’s newest tech unicorns.

Hampered by the coronavirus pandemic and too busy expanding and getting funding for his cryptocurrency platform CoinDCX, his team finally grabbed a few days on the beach in Goa to celebrate recently.

“That was very delightful to everyone,” Gupta said. “It’s been a very, very exciting journey. I’ve learnt a lot... The future of India is very bright.”

This year 44 Indian unicorns – privately held startups valued at more than US\$1bn – were minted as investors piled money into a country long overlooked despite its vast potential.

Overseas funds put more than US\$35bn into Indian startups in 2021 – a tripling from 2020, according to data compiled by Tracxn – buying into everything from fintech and health to gaming.

Foreign investors have long preferred China, another Asian country with more than a billion people.

But Beijing’s clampdown on runaway growth in China’s powerful Internet sector, and reining in of big businesses, have



Men work at a poultry shop where a QR code for Paytm is displayed in Mumbai on December 15, 2021 (AFP)

spooked investors and wiped billions off giants such as Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent.

In the startup space, investors this year sank US\$54.5bn into Chinese firms, down from US\$73bn in 2020, analysis by GlobalData showed.

India by contrast became more attractive, with its large pool of well-educated entrepreneurs upending how many businesses work using a fast-developing digital infrastructure.

“India really is that final frontier where businesses can attract a sixth of the world’s population,”

said Siddharth Mehta, founder of investment firm Bay Capital Partners.

“I think India is about 13-14 years behind China in terms of size and scale of the market. India’s overall digital marketplace is about sub-US\$100bn today but that number can easily be a trillion or US\$2tn over the next 10 to 15 years.”

‘India will be great’
Among those attracted are Japan’s Softbank, which invested US\$3bn in India last year, as well as China’s Jack Ma and Tencent,

and US-based Sequoia Capital and Tiger Global.

“I believe in the future of India. I believe in the passion of young entrepreneurs in India. India will be great,” Softbank’s founder Masayoshi Son said last month.

Indian tech also saw a record number of initial public offerings (IPOs) last year.

Companies going public included food delivery app Zomato and beauty products platform Nykaa, listing at huge premiums to their IPO prices and making billionaires of their founders.

At their October high, Indian

stocks had rallied more than 125 per cent from their April 2020 low, becoming one of the world’s best-performing equities markets.

No profits
But some experts warn that many of these firms may be grossly overvalued.

For instance, local fintech giant Paytm, the biggest IPO of the year 2021, is yet to make a profit and its share price is some 40 per cent down from its IPO valuation.

India’s bumper year for startups also masks serious problems for an economy struggling to provide jobs for the 10mn young people entering the workforce every year. Desperate for employment, many take low-wage ‘gig economy’ jobs, earning as little as ₹300 (US\$4) a day with little to no job security.

But for white-collar workers in the startup sector, demand for qualified workers has outstripped supply last year.

CoinDCX’s Gupta, fresh from his beach holiday, was bullish.

“If you remain persistent, it’s very possible to create a unicorn, especially if you’re living in a country like India, which is full of opportunities,” he said.

AFF



Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah offers special benefits to Alizz Islamic Hiyya card holders

Alizz Islamic Bank has signed an exclusive cooperation agreement with Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah, Muscat featuring a variety of unique offers and special benefits, designed for female customers of the female banking segment 'Hiyya'.

The agreement was signed by Mohammed al Ghassani, chief consumer banking officer, Alizz Islamic Bank and Rene D Egle, area general manager of Shangri-La Resorts in Muscat in the presence of a number of senior management members from both sides.

Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah, Muscat is offering the first 50 women with 'Hiyya' Titanium Debit cards 50 complimentary vouchers for a one night stay with bed and breakfast in Al Bandar for two adults. If the card holder wishes to extend the stay for an additional night, they will get 20 per cent discount on the best available rate in addition to 20 per cent discount on food and beverage during the stay and 20 per cent discount on treatments and massages (exclusively for women only) at Chi, The Spa during the stay.

Hiyya card holders can also book a deluxe room in (Al Ban-



dar or Al Husn), for two nights where they can get the second night with 50 per cent discount on the best available rate. The offer comes with a 20 per cent discount on food and beverage during the stay and 20 per cent discount on treatments and massages (exclusively for

women only) at Chi, The Spa. Alizz Islamic Bank's Hiyya card holders can also book a 60-minute massage (exclusively for women only) and enjoy an instant upgrade to a 90-minute massage on selected spa treatments. Prior reservation is required

on all the offers, and it will be subject to availability at the time of booking and discounts are only applicable by using a Hiyya Card. 'Hiyya' is designed to meet all the investment, health and financial needs of female customers and will provide customers with

a tier based savings account to enhance their profits. The Sharia'a compliant account is based on the principle of Mudaraba where you will be Rabb-ul mal, and the Bank will be the Mudarib. Your funds will be invested in the common pool along with the other Mudaraba-based

accounts. The generated profit will be shared between you and the bank according to a profit sharing ratio specified earlier. Profits will be shared between customers and the bank according to the previously agreed distribution ratios. Instant debit cards will be offered with exclusive benefits to ensure an open platform for women to enjoy a host of discounts and special offers at spas, beauty salons and beauty products, while availing deals from health clubs, fitness centres and perfume stores. Exclusive stores and branded outlets for clothing and accessories, home décor, restaurants and flower shops are all pegged onto the account, which also includes priority express service at all Alizz Islamic Bank branches. Women who opt for the Hiyya account will also get free Takaful insurance services -this is designed specifically for women, as it covers some of the most common cancers that affect women and will also include insurance cover to obtain a second medical opinion. Additionally, it will also cover insurance on hand luggage and travel, the Takaful insurance pro-

vision also assures compensation for the loss of hand luggage while traveling anywhere in the world. It will also provide compensation for the loss of personal documents or keys on account of the loss of handbag; the onus will be on the insurance company to reimburse the customer for the expense incurred in obtaining new personal documents/keys. The only condition for availing the Takaful insurance scheme, which has some of the best offers to meet all health needs of women and add value to their lifestyles, is that the woman must not be less than 18 years old and not more than 65 years old, and that she be of Omani nationality or have a valid Omani residency visa. Recently, Alizz Islamic Bank had held a ceremony to launch 'Hiyya' card at Shangrila Bar Al Jissah, Muscat under the auspices of H E Asila al Samsami, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and in the presence of Sulaiman al Harthi, CEO of Alizz Islamic Bank and this was the start of a blossoming exclusive partnership between both entities.

Are you a startup owner? Overcome your challenges with Sindbaad business

On an average, more than 50 per cent of the consumers entering a brick-and-mortar shop use a phone to look up product reviews, price comparison and finding other store locations according to a study done by RetailDive. Selling online helps avoid missing out on those customers with a surplus of other benefits. With the presence of an online marketplace, businesses get discovered beyond their target market that was previously unknown to them. This comes with the added benefit of automatically becoming a global vendor. Having an online presence makes you globally searchable on the world wide web. On the other hand, with a physical store, target market is limited to buyers in the local area. Reaching customers on and off business hours does not get easier than this. Even when the businesses are unavailable at off hours, their products/services are always available for the end consumer to view, review and compare. The plethora of metrics become easily available.

"One of the major advantages of selling online has to be the ability to track everything," mentioned Kasmani, managing director of Sindbaad. A business owner can track customer behaviour, which shows where the customers are coming from, their interests and how they are interacting with the website in just a few clicks. The data then drives their marketing to turn their cold audiences to potential leads and ultimately to buyers. An online identity with a dynamic inventory management and a secure payment gateway makes a great recipe for SMEs to sell online.

Sheikh Ghalib al Naamani, Sindbaad's chairman says, "There are currently more than 81,000 SMEs in Oman. Forming a network of buying and selling would help not just themselves but also the country in a positive manner." For most sellers, every single lead coming their way

would be required to be converted. Kasmani states, "Sindbaad rids all the pain points of getting started online. Here we have carefully taken care of design, user interface and user experience. The new wave of e-commerce can be driven by SMEs taking their businesses online."

When vendors sell online on Sindbaad, they can respond to enquiries through a 'Request for Quote' commonly referred to as an RFQ. This is a process via which the suppliers and contractors bid for specific purchases from a consumer. Put simply, it's a request for the quotation of the price of the products/services sent by the buyer to the seller (suppliers and contractors) when the buyer wants to purchase some specific set of products/services. Naamani adds, "with an aim of simplifying and solidifying business buying, Sindbaad has implemented the RFQ feature. It reduces the amount of time needed to procure goods and services and offers security where a buyer will only receive quotes from preferred vendors." When a buyer receives a quote in response to an RFQ, it is not a contract or an offer. The buyer upon receiving the quote can send a purchase order which will in turn, serve as a contract mentioning the T&Cs of the job. If the supplier agrees, then they sign the purchase order and the contract and begin work. This is done all at the convenience of the buyer and the supplier without any interference from a third party. The RFQ specifically works well when the buyer is aware about the requirement of the quantity and the standard of the product or the service they are looking for. "One of the many advantages of RFQs is that it allows the comparison of different quotes at a single click, companies look forward to getting the best value for the price paid," said Kasmani.

In a recent market survey done by Sindbaad with more

than 5000 small and medium enterprises, a common point of concern seen is that most companies, being start-ups are unaware of the ways they can promote and market their products/services beyond the scope of their region.

Sindbaad helps businesses build their brand through various evidence based technological efforts, extending their reach to a wider audience. With effective search engine optimisation (SEO), digital and social media marketing, keyword advertising, regular traditional networking, referrals and influencer marketing, businesses can connect to other companies and buyers as per their requirements, targeting specific categories and locations for business. Sellers get their own mini store on the marketplace, from where they can display their products, company profiles, create an action plan, receive enquiries, respond to those enquiries, and conduct business deals.

Alternatively, businesses can also be assisted in their startup requirements, from branding, banking and operations, to logistics, delivery, and after-sales business growth analysis. "They get a full-fledged, technologically advanced, hyper-growing platform to build new connections, increase their annual turnover with lowered operation costs, minimal investments and experts guiding them throughout the journey," reiterates Kasmani.

To manage sales, signing up on Sindbaad allows a business to have a competitive advantage at the negotiation table. While the sales reps do a great job, it is likely that they can't remember every item that goes together with every product that the particular business sells. Sindbaad is optimised for search engines to promote upselling and cross selling effectively, the average order value due to this is significantly higher when doing businesses on an online marketplace than at a physical store.

GM selects top ten technicians in Mideast

General Motors Middle East (GM MEO) has announced the winners of the tenth edition of its Dealer Skills Competition to support and upskill technicians as part of its global safety vision of returning people home safely. The virtual climax to the six-month programme took place in December 2021, naming Oscar Ochoa Jr from Alghanim Automotive in Kuwait as the overall winner from over 1,000 participants from across the Middle East.

Technicians went through a series of online tests to reach a finalist line-up of 24 who were able to take part in the final skills competition in December. For the first time last year, technicians were given a combination of virtual and physical tasks to test their ability to diagnose and remedy problems.

Challenges included a mystery box that brought to the fore their ability to use various measuring tools and a noise, vibration, and harshness test that asked them to find the reason a car was vibrating, putting their



diagnostic skills to the test. Further spotlighting their diagnostic skills was a Global Diagnostic System SnapShot, while a remote diagnosis test, came to be amongst the most taxing elements of the final hurdle, showcasing their skills in the increasingly important ability to diagnose engine troubles offline. Technicians were invited to tune in to the car, control all the functions and modules remotely using the schematic diagram and asked to pinpoint the bug and find the root cause of a problem.

The award ceremony was

held virtually, spanning two hours, recognising the holistic efforts of technicians over the six months. The celebrations were tuned into by over 150 GM employees, partners and sponsors including Milwaukee Tool, Advanced Solutionz, GP Strategies, Michelin, and Bosch.

Rohan Fernandes, director of Customer Care & Aftersales at General Motors Africa & Middle East said, "We take pride in our initiatives supporting our dealer network such as the Dealer Skills Competition, actively encouraging their performance. It is a way to collaborate, learn from each

other and recognise those that are going above and beyond to live up to our service culture of always putting our customers first. Together we have the will, skill and scale to reach new heights. Congratulations to everyone who took part and to our winners."

The top ten winners were named as follows:

- Oscar Ochoa Jr, Alghanim Automotive, Kuwait
- Roel Padronia, National Motors Company, Bahrain
- Geoffrey Bavion, Alghanim Automotive, Kuwait
- Richard Compuesto, Al Ghandi Auto, UAE
- Jerome Egera, Al Ghandi Auto, UAE
- Mary Joseph Uy, Al Jomaih Automotive Company, KSA
- Joven Benito, Al Jomaih Automotive Company, KSA
- Aljhun Manalo, Mannai Trading Company, Qatar
- Efren Aaro, Al Ghandi Auto, UAE
- Eulito Sajonia, Alghanim Automotive, Kuwait

Ichiban Sushi opens restaurant in UAE

Ichiban Sushi's first brick-and-mortar location is being housed at the experimental food hall and bar venue, Social Distrikt. Open to the public from mid-January, the venue will be located at The Pointe on Palm Jumeirah.

Ichiban Sushi, which originated in Lebanon, launched in the UAE in 2019 on online delivery platforms and immediately gained popularity as one of the freshest, tastiest, yet affordable sushi restaurants in town.

Social Distrikt at the Pointe is unquestionably the place to be if you are looking for something new in the dining scene in Dubai! Those who love Ichiban Sushi are in for a real treat because, for the first time, they will get to dine in and savour the fresh rolls of sushi, as well as enjoy the cool weather and lively atmosphere at Social Distrikt.

Sushi lovers can head to Social Distrikt to get their sushi fix



from Ichiban Sushi's restaurant where they will find a wide variety

of menu items that are a must-try. From traditional

Sashimi and Hosu Maki to sushi with a more modern twist, Ichiban Sushi has got something to satiate everyone's different tastes and preferences.

The Japanese restaurant gives its guests an all-new dining experience to look forward to as they experience the taste of Japan in Dubai while also enjoying the stunning waterfront scenery as the venue overlooks The Palm Fountain.

Ichiban Sushi boasts an array of seafood dishes that offer true Japanese flavours, such as sashimi, sushi, and uramaki, among others. The quality and freshness of the ingredients that make up the sushi rolls speak for themselves.

Head to the coolest spot in town now to enjoy your favourite rolls of sushi, enjoy the chill vibes and views of the twinkling waters below and just let the good times roll!

talabat recaps what was ordered most in 2021

Throughout the entirety of 2021, talabat, the region's leading food and q-commerce delivery platform, has been there for its customers - anytime, anywhere. Here's a rundown of orders on talabat from around the region in 2021, and some fun facts that we don't want to forget in a hurry!

The numbers are in - and french fries has conquered all in 2021. Looking at the most popular food items ordered during the year, french fries conquered all - reigning supreme in the region over other delicious items like chicken shawarmas, potato wedges and even pizza (Yes, over pizza! We're as shocked as you are - believe us!).

Everyone did their best to stay a bit healthier this year, with fruits and vegetables taking the lead as the most ordered grocery items on talabat Mart across the region! Whether you want to admit it or not, we know you have been ordering more fruits and vegetables this year. So, bravo to you! With many of you choosing to place their last-minute grocery orders from tMart at around 6 pm in the evening, choosing to finish their day with a filled fridge!

Only morning coffee runs? Not really, you showed us that coffee is also popular in the evenings for that after-work kick! That's right! We discovered that many across the country tend to place their coffee orders



at around 9:00pm, indulging in their love of caffeine to end the work day.

Which city loves burgers the most in the country? Residents of the Omani capital, Muscat, ordered the most burgers. We now know who the country's burger experts are!

Mini pancakes and Oreo ice cream reign supreme as the most popular desserts in Oman. We found that customers in

Oman absolutely love mini pancakes, making it the most popular dessert ordered in the country, along with Oreo flavored ice cream! Who would've thought that mini pancakes are that popular!

The country's favourite sauce is in and the numbers don't lie - mayo for the win! When in doubt, add more mayo! That seems to be the motto for customers in Oman, with mayo

coming out on top as the country's favourite sauce, and barbecue sauce following not far behind.

Celebrating the New Year, here's how customers chose to ring in 2021 - will they welcome 2022 the same way? The most popular food item ordered on New Year's Eve last year by far was french fries, proving that the delicious fried potatoes are the most delectable treat to begin

the year with - along with favouring soft drinks as a celebratory beverage of choice.

Additionally, customers did not forget to order their fruits, and they rang in the 2021 New Year with what is probably the most surprising tMart order - bananas!

Consumers can now download talabat on the iOS App Store, Google Play Store and Huawei App Gallery.

Bank Muscat offers life insurance from AXA Insurance

Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, has invited its customers to take advantage of the valuable life insurance plan offered by the bank in partnership with AXA, a global leader in insurance.

The Life Protect Plus insurance plan can protect the insured family's future and offer the financial assistance required to confront life's unexpected challenges.

Customers can use Life Protect Plus to make up for lost income, secure their children's future education, care for an elderly family member or even settle outstanding financial obligations. Customers aged 18 to 65 can apply for the Life Protect Plus plan, which covers death from any cause, as well as permanent total disability caused by an accident or illness.

Customers can pay the premiums on a single or monthly basis, using the option that best matches their requirements.

Speaking about the special benefits available, Abdullah Tamman al Maashani, DGM - Institutional Sales and Product Development, Bank Muscat, said, "Through our strong partnership with AXA Insurance, which is recognised worldwide for its excellent products and services, the bank offers customers the perfect solution to protect their loved ones from unexpected events that can take away their financial security and lifestyle.

We are happy to offer this great coverage at very affordable and highly competitive premiums. Customers can choose the option that provides the best coverage for their unique needs and can rest assured that their loved ones will be protected against unexpected contingencies should anything unexpected



happen."

Mehdi Salim al Harthy, general manager and head of Partnerships for AXA in Oman, said, "We are delighted to continue strengthening our strategic partnership with Bank Muscat and continue offering highly competitive insurance plans for the bank's customers."

"As a trusted partner focused on protecting what matters, we help our customers find convenient solutions to their various insurance needs with innovative products like the Life Protect Plus insurance plan."

Since 2013, Bank Muscat has had a strategic partnership with AXA, a worldwide leader in insurance and asset management, offering a wide range of insurance products and services for corporates, SMEs and individual customers throughout the region.

Through this strategic tie-up, AXA Insurance, in partnership with Bank Muscat, offers its different customer segments best-in-class bancassurance products and services.

In particular, by offering plans with different riders, customers, especially family breadwinners, will be able to enjoy full peace of mind knowing that they have planned ahead to ensure the best future for their children and other family members.

Young talent Joel Suter joins UAE Team Emirates

UAE Team Emirates have finalised their roster for 2022 with 23-year-old rider Joel Suter linking up to complete the 30 rider line-up on a one-year deal.

Suter hails from Frutigen, Switzerland and turned professional in 2020, spending two years at the Pro Team level with the move to UAE seeing him step-up to the World Tour. He will join-up with his new teammates on the upcoming training camp in Alicante, Spain which



begins on the January 5.

Joxean Matxin Fernandez, team manager, said, "Joel is a proven team player who can support our big leaders in key moments."

"He's strong on the flat, in time-trials and has shown that he can also perform in the medium-mountains. He is still a young rider at 23 but already has a few years experience at the professional level under his belt and has shown some of what he

can do at many World Tour races already. I think he'll slot in very well with us."

Suter said, "I am very happy to be on the road next year with UAE Team Emirates. It was a dream to make this step and it's now becoming a reality so I am over the moon and ready to start this new chapter."

"Next week I'll link up with the team for the first training camp of the year so I'm already excited for that."

Maserati meets David Beckham: MC20 Fuoriserie Edition

A letter written to the magical city of Miami: This is how MC20 Fuoriserie Edition for David Beckham was born. The ambassador of the Italian automotive brand becomes a designer with the help of the Maserati Centro Stile. Thanks to this union, the passion of the British champion for his second home city takes shape in a customised car that exemplifies the concepts of performance and sportiness: The MC20.

This project is part of Maserati's Fuoriserie customisation programme, which in its various styles allows customers to create their tailor-made Maserati. The car, intended as a symbol of true luxury in the third millennium, shows the world its unique nature and personal character. Maserati Fuoriserie is a blank canvas and the House of the Trident truly offers an array of instruments to create with. The rest is left to the clients' taste and inspiration, giving them the opportunity to set their own trends and express their personality.

After a personalised and collaborative design process, Beckham and the designers of the Maserati Centro Stile created the MC20 Fuoriserie Edition for David Beckham. This car translates true passion into a carbon fiber monocoque, entirely Made



in Italy, and powered by a patented V6 petrol engine derived from Formula 1 technologies.

In this story, the starting point is Miami, the home of Beckham's US football club, while the end result is black and pink, a chromatic dichotomy, as well as the interplay between glossy and matt surfaces.

The team colors are, black

and pink, and the uniforms are characterised by contrasting glossy-matt treatments.

Starting from this as an inspiration, the bodywork features a glossy black tone which contrasts with the Trident logos on the grille and on the C-pillar, in black, but with an opaque finish. The Maserati lettering on the rear is also opaque, while the MC20 badge on the door is pastel pink, as are the Brembo brake calipers.

The interior, in leather and Alcantara, is black with contrast stitching in pink.

The backrests, in Alcantara, are worked with a tone-on-tone laser engraving method and the headrest features a three-dimensional pastel pink embroidery.

Finally, in the centre tunnel between the two seats, a personalised nameplate with a glossy-matte effect: At the top, next to the Trident, the Maserati Fuoriserie lettering is pastel pink, at the bottom the italics 'For David' appears with an aluminium effect.

Miami is a land of magical nights and delicate sunsets. MC20 Fuoriserie Edition for David Beckham seems designed to cross this subtle line between day and night, between pink, the

colour that greets and bids a farewell with each sunset, and black, that rocks us into the realm of dreams: A realm in which space and time become relative concepts, and you can express yourself through a completely customised car.

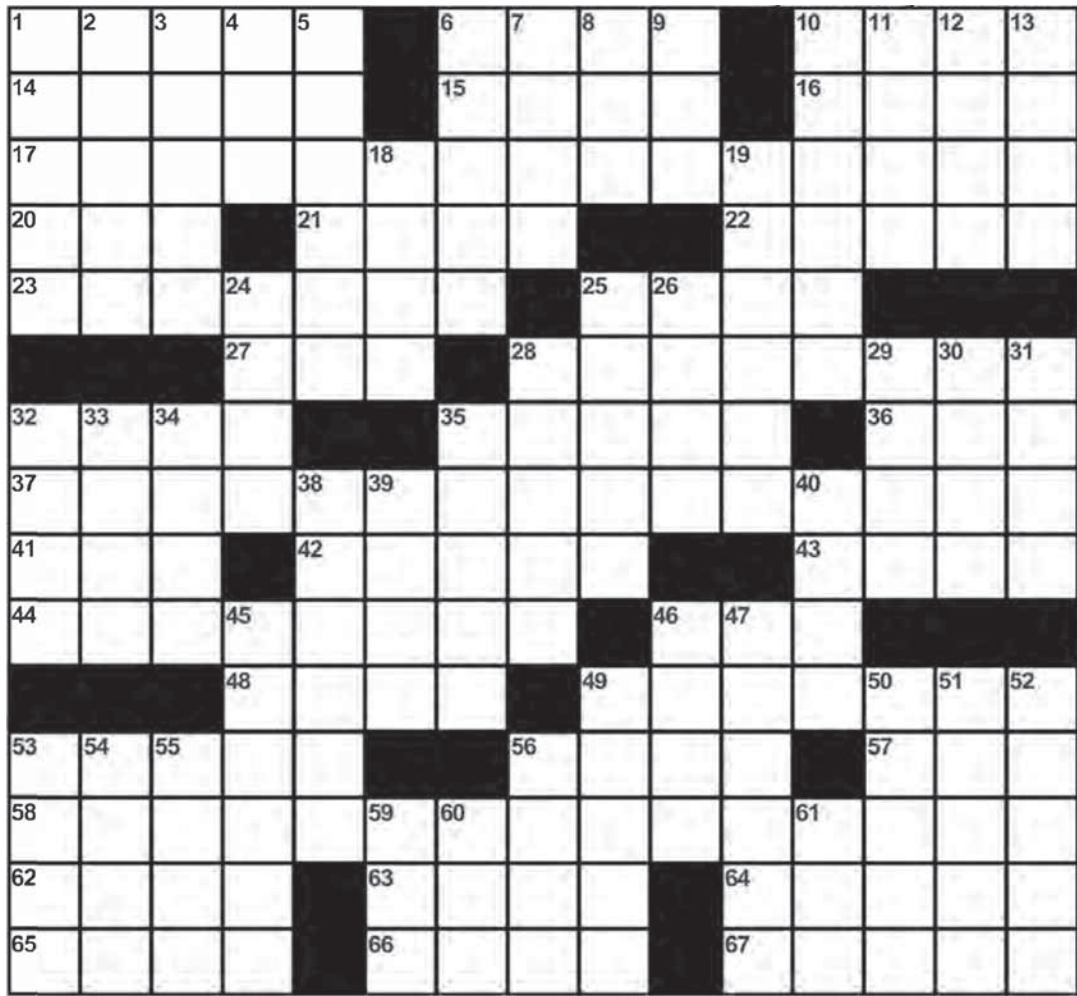
Klaus Busse, head of Maserati Design, commented, "As car designers, our mission is to offer a holistic experience. This value

guides our Brand's stylistic research, making each Maserati uniquely recognisable. Our customisation programme is another example of our brand's goal to create singular experiences for our customers: Maserati Fuoriserie is a blank canvas, on which Maserati clients can write their own stories and unleash their creativity, making their dreams come true. Designing this special edition MC20 with David, as with all our Fuoriserie projects, is also an ode to the Brand's past, taking us back to a time when every car was hand-built to the client's requests, giving life to a one-off, a true 'fuoriserie'.

David Beckham said, "I have always been a car enthusiast, so to be part of designing and creating my MC20 through the Fuoriserie customisation programme has been an amazing experience."

"Cars are about individual taste whether it's the model, colour or small personal details on the inside. It has been incredible to collaborate with the Maserati team and designers to create this one-off car that is inspired by my second home, Miami and my football club there. It is a joy to be behind the wheel," added Beckham.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS
- 1) Like a girl looking for a buoy?

6) Prefix for “bucks” or “bytes”

10) Hybrid citrus fruit

14) Tendencies

15) March 15, to Caesar

16) It may be out on a lime?

17) Winning big, real big

20) It’s over a king

21) Stodgy old-timer

22) Geeky types

23) Sunday deliveries

25) Tiny aquatic organism

27) Tax form addressee

28) Finishing off a tile job

32) Confessional admissions

35) Natural rope fiber

36) Bronx cheer

37) Five o’clock, for many

41) What clinks in drinks

42) Hunter among the stars

43) “ ... with 1,001_”

44) Put a curse on

46) Place for experiments

48) Underwriter’s concern

49) Prehistoric male

53) Sleeping problem

56) Dish with many ingredients

57) Palindromic Beatles figure

58) It’s drawn on

62) “Beetle Bailey” cartoonist

63) Having trouble deciding

64) Happen next

65) “The Dukes of Hazzard” spin-off

66) Small amount of residue

67) Overflows
- DOWN
- 1) Successor to Arafat

2) Canonical hour

3) Scoffing look

4) Forecast from the flight deck

5) Request, in negotiations

6) Valuable Chinese vases

7) Tense or irritable

8) Procure

9) Deciduous hardwood tree

10) Certainly cheery

11) Trucker’s choice

12) Circulate, as library books

13) Varieties or types

18) Electrically charged particles

19) Overwhelm, as flames

24) Category for odds and ends, briefly

25) Felon’s burning ambition?

26) Bread unit

28) Leg-of-mutton sleeve

29) Shorebird with a curved beak

30) Place for the Iditarod finish line

31) Leaves

32) Milk type

33) Andean civilisation

34) “Silent Night,” for one

35) Slight cut

38) Biggest brown bear

39) Eye piece

40) Bike tire’s innards

45) Puts up, as a skyscraper

46) Not part of the clergy

47) Another shorebird with a curved beak

49) Trolley bell sound

50) It makes a clicking noise

51) Per_ (yearly)

- 52) Staff additions?
- 53) Climber’s goal
- 54) Sound unit
- 55) Infamous fiddler
- 56) Monstrous villain
- 59) “_ be my pleasure!”
- 60) “Neither rain,_ sleet ... ”
- 61) Small integer

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Before you start any artistic projects, put together a plan. You'll get nowhere without it. Just because something is a creative expression doesn't mean that it lacks details that you need to clarify. Those tiny details have lives of their own, and if you don't watch them carefully they'll take you in the wrong direction. Timing may be an obstacle to overcome, so be aware that last-minute delays are possible, but these delays give you inspiration.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Definitely think before you speak today. Words have its own power. That ordinarily charming way you have with words will be even more lethal now, so you should definitely be careful where you fling those casual comments. The stuff you're putting out is easier to turn on than it is to shut off. Don't play games with someone's heart. It's difficult to mend a broken heart.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
There could be some unpredictable energy flying around your environment today. Nothing is certain, and nothing is written in stone. Not knowing what's going on or what motivates people is going to be too confusing for you to handle with grace today, so this energy could cause you to lose your temper. There's nothing wrong with anger per se; you just have to know how to release it in a way that doesn't make things worse for you.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Honing your courtship skills is an important task for you. The methods you use to get to know another person are an important factor in the quality of the relationship. And keep in mind that the idea of courtship applies to all relationships, not just romantic ones, so don't assume you need to pay attention only to your partner. Listening is probably the most important part of courting someone. If you hear what they want, you can give it to them.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
Did you wake up in the mood to spend some money? Whether you're redecorating, adding a room, or planning a surprise for a dear one, you'll want to do it up right. If it's a joint venture, definitely confer with your partner and make sure you don't spend what you can't afford. Remember that it's the quality that counts, not the price tag. You can make a place beautiful or a moment special without emptying your bank account.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Bet you want to take one entire day, ditch all electronic devices, and spend some quality time alone at your place, with maybe just one person for company. It's a nice dream, but it may not happen. When you least expect it, you'll get your second wind and a terrific invitation. So now what? Should you call everyone you turned down and say you changed your mind? Yes, you should. Your special companion won't mind one bit.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
It's in your best interests to get creative with how you get stuff done today, because you need to get your new plans launched as soon as possible! Swallow your pride and ask for help. Now is not the time for the luxury of pride. Flattery, jokes, and even intimidation are all useful tools for you to employ in your pursuit. Be open about what you want to do, and share your excitement. That's bound to be the most effective sales tool you have.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
You're so happy you're bubbling over. It's a wonderful feeling, but if it's because you're in love, go easy on the rest of the world. You know how irritating it is to hear about the love of someone's life over and over again? You know how you just want to stuff a sock in their mouth when they keep bringing the conversation back to their beloved over and over again? Right. That could be you if you're not careful.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
You've been meeting some really interesting people lately. And that roll you're on isn't going to end, not just yet. Someone who's recently been introduced to you by a friend may turn out to play a major part in your life, in fact, starting as soon as now. You might even end up travelling with them, taking a class together, or joining a group you've been curious about. Do something different. You'll feel energised!

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
You've had your suspicions for some time and now you've got more. What you're wondering about isn't a bad thing, however. You have the feeling that someone in a position of authority is planning something delightful for you, and you're probably right. Just don't do anything to ruin the surprise. This has probably been some time in the making, and it may not quite be ready for you. Sit tight and keep quiet. You'll be glad you did.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
It's not universally true that opposites attract, but you've been noticing some magnetic energy between two very different (single) people in your life. You are in a position to put them in the same room together. Are you up for the matchmaking task? Think about what it's like on the other end of things and subtly dig for some clues about how interested these two parties may be. If you're ready to connect the dots, do it!

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Making someone's day has always been one of your favourite things to do, and you'll have your chance to do it again now. A person who really needs a break and a great big hug could come your way with that look on their face, and you, of course, will know exactly what to do. Without them even having to mention it, those sensitive antennae of yours will guide you toward figuring out exactly what they need and how to provide it.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The prize given to individuals fighting for freedom, independence and dignity of people is

a. Simon Bolivai Prize

b. Golden Bear Award

c. David Cohen Award

d. Owen Global Award

2. The SI unit of ____ is named after Andre Marie Ampere.

a. power

b. potential difference

c. electric current

d. energy

3. The playground of baseball is known as

a. court

b. diamond

c. ring

d. pitch

Answers: 1. a 2. c 3. b

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

H	A	N	I
T	G	W	N
B	R	W	L
A	S	A	O

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

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

Armed drones target US-led coalition in Iraq

The incident comes two years after a United States drone strike killed Iran’s Quds Force chief Soleimani

Baghdad, Iraq - The US-led coalition against the Islamic State group in Iraq on Monday shot down two armed drones targeting a compound at Baghdad airport hosting its personnel, a coalition official said.

The incident, which was not claimed by any group, came two years after a US drone strike near the airport killed Iran’s revered General Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi lieutenant.

“Two fixed-wing suicide drones, or improvised cruise missiles, attempted to attack Baghdad Airport this morning at approximately 4.30am,” the official told AFP.

A counter-rocket, artillery and mortar, or C-RAM, system ‘at the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Centre engaged them and they were shot down without incident’, added the source.

The BDSC compound houses ‘a very small number of coalition troops who are not in a combat role,’ the source said, describing them as logistical troops, contractors and civilian personnel.

The January 3, 2020 US strike killed Soleimani - who headed the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards - and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy leader of the Hashed al-Shaabi coalition of armed groups.

Photos obtained by AFP from the coalition official show remains of one of the projectiles from Monday’s attempted strike, with the message ‘commanders’ revenge operations’ written on it.



A security personnel checks the remains of two armed drones shot down by the US-led coalition at the airport in Baghdad on Monday (AFP)

“The Iraqis have opened an investigation,” the coalition source said.

“There is no damage, but this is a civilian airport, it is very dangerous to launch this type of attack.”

Missile and drone attacks

The night-time strike two year ago, ordered by then-US president Donald Trump, hit a car in

which Soleimani and Muhandis were travelling on the edge of the airport.

The Hashed - a coalition of former paramilitary groups now integrated into the Iraqi state security apparatus - held a candlelit vigil on Sunday at the airport for the two men killed.

The US said at the time that Soleimani was planning imminent action against US personnel in Iraq, a country long torn be-

tween the competing demands of its principal allies Washington and Tehran.

Five days after his killing, Iran fired missiles at an air base in Iraq housing US troops and another near Arbil in the country’s north. Since then dozens of rockets and roadside bombs have targeted US security, military and diplomatic sites across Iraq.

Western officials have blamed hard-line pro-Iran fac-

tions for the attacks, which have never been claimed.

The Hashed has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of US troops deployed in Iraq as part of the coalition.

The US-led coalition on December 9 declared it had finished its combat mission in Iraq and that its around 2,500 troops would shift to a purely training and advisory role.

IS, which established a so-

Two Israeli media outlets hacked to mark anniversary

Jerusalem - Two major Israeli media outlets were hacked early on Monday with a threatening message that appeared linked to the killing of a top Iranian general two years ago.

The website of the English-language *The Jerusalem Post* and the Twitter account of Hebrew-language Maariv were taken over with a picture of a fist firing a shell out of a ring with a red stone on a finger toward an exploded dome.

‘We are close to you where you do not think about it’, read text in English and Hebrew below the fist.

The hacking came exactly two years after the January 3, 2020 US drone strike in Baghdad that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, who headed the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.

The US said at the time that Soleimani, who was often seen wearing a ring with a red stone, was planning imminent action against US personnel in Iraq. According to *The*



Palestinians commemorate the anniversary of the killings, in Gaza on Monday (AFP)

Jerusalem Post, the hack lasted a few hours. Maariv’s Twitter account had deleted the foreign tweet, and had not posted anything new by Monday noon.

It was not immediately clear who had hacked the Israeli news outlets.

Israel fears Iran’s nuclear programme could be used to acquire weapons to harm the Jewish state, and the two countries regularly issue hints of possible strikes on one another.

AFP

called caliphate across swathes of Syria and Iraq from 2014, was defeated in Iraq in 2017 by national forces and the coalition that has included more than 80

countries.

However, IS remnants still carry out attacks against security forces and civilians.

AFP

Two killed in floods in Iran’s south: Official

Tehran, Iran - At least two people were killed in flash flooding in Iran’s southern province of Fars, a local official said on Monday.

“Two people from this province were trapped by water and lost their lives,” Mehdi Khoobyar, deputy head of the Iranian Red Crescent in Fars, told the Young Journalists Club, a news agency affiliated with state television.

One of the victims died in the city of Darab, he added, without giving details on the second.

Relief teams ‘who were already on full alert, were dispatched to the flood-affected areas’ in at least five cities in the province, he said.

The Red Crescent had ‘provided relief aid or rescued’ hundreds of people, Khoobyar was quoted as saying by Tasnim

news agency.

Meteorological authorities had warned on Sunday of heavy rain and floods in southern provinces including Kerman and Hormozgan, local media reported.

Heavy rains caused damage to agricultural lands and blocked roads in Hormozgan province, and damaged some infrastructure in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan, state news agency IRNA said on Sunday.

A weather system causing heavy rain is covering Iran’s south and several neighbouring Arab countries of the Gulf.

Torrential rainfall has hit the United Arab Emirates, where its official news agency WAM said bad weather is expected to last until Thursday.

AFP

Detained ex-minister of Tunisia ‘refusing food’

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisia’s detained former justice minister Nouredine Bhiri is refusing food or medication after his transfer to hospital, a member of a delegation that visited him said on Monday.

Bhiri, deputy president of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, which President Kais Saied views as an enemy, was arrested by plainclothes officers on Friday and his whereabouts were initially unknown. Ennahdha had played a central role in Tunisia politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied last year.

Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago, but civil society groups and Saied’s opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism a decade after the revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.



This file photo shows Tunisian Justice Minister Nouredine Bhiri speaking at a press conference in Tunis on June 25, 2012 (AFP)

On Sunday activists and a former Ennahdha legislator said Bhiri was in a critical condition and

facing death.

But the source told AFP that Bhiri (63) is ‘not in critical condi-

tion for the time being’.

The source told AFP that a joint team from Tunisia’s independent anti-torture group INPT and the United Nations rights commission visited Bhiri at hospital in the northern town of Bizerte on Sunday.

He is ‘lively and lucid’, and being kept under close observation in a private room of the hospital’s cardiology ward.

But since Friday Bhiri has ‘refused to take any food or medication, prompting his transfer to hospital’, the source said.

Mondher Ounissi, a doctor and member of Ennahdha’s executive bureau, said on Sunday that Bhiri suffers from several chronic illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension.

He has been ‘deprived of his medication’ and ‘his life is threatened’, Ounissi told a news conference, adding that Bhiri usually

takes 16 pills a day.

The interior ministry on Friday said that two individuals had been ordered under house arrest, without identifying them. It said the move was a ‘preventive measure dictated by the need to preserve national security’.

The president ‘bears full responsibility for the life of Mr Bhiri’, the anti-Saied group ‘Citizens against the coup’ said on Sunday on Twitter.

It said he had been ‘rushed to the hospital in a very serious condition’. Saied on July 25 sacked the Ennahdha-supported government and suspended parliament, presenting himself as the ultimate interpreter of the constitution.

He later took steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms to the political system.

AFP

Yemeni rebels seize UAE vessel carrying ‘military equipment’

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Yemeni rebels have seized an Emirati-flagged vessel in the Red Sea, the insurgents and a Saudi-led coalition said on Monday, giving contrasting explanations for the latest escalation in a seven-year war.

The coalition, fighting in support of Yemen’s internationally recognised government, said the vessel was carrying medical supplies but the rebels said they seized ‘a military cargo ship with military equipment’.

The coalition has been fighting for nearly seven years in support of Yemen’s government against the Iran-backed Huthis, in a conflict that has displaced millions of people and created the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations.

“The militia must promptly release the ship, or the coalition forces will undertake all neces-

sary measures and procedures to handle this violation, including the use of force if necessary,” coalition spokesman Turki al Malki said.

In a statement cited by the official Saudi Press Agency, he said the vessel was travelling from Yemen’s Socotra island, off the country’s south coast.

It was returning to the Saudi city of Jazan carrying medical supplies after finishing a mission to set up a field hospital on the island, Malki said.

“The boat named Rawabi, bearing the flag of the United Arab Emirates, was pirated and kidnapped at 23:57 (2057 GMT) on Sunday while off Hodeida province,” he said.

Malki was unable to confirm the number of people on board when contacted by AFP.

There was no immediate comment from the United Arab Emirates.



Displaced Yemenis receive aid by a Kuwaiti charitable organisation on the outskirts of Ma’rib, on Saturday (AFP)

‘Hostile acts’

The Huthis confirmed they had seized an Emirati-flagged vessel in the Red Sea but their military spokesman Yahya Saree said it had ‘entered Yemeni waters without authorisation’ and was carrying out ‘hostile acts’.

Saree tweeted: ‘The successful and unprecedented operation is part of the fight against (coalition) aggression.’

Fighting has intensified over the past few weeks in Yemen, the Arabian peninsula’s poorest country.

The Huthis come from the minority Zaidi Shiite sect of Islam and fought six previous wars against Yemen’s then-government between 2004 and 2010.

But the current conflict is also a battleground for the wider feud between regional powers Saudi

Arabia and Iran.

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

Grundberg added: “The escalation in recent weeks is among the worst we have seen in Yemen for years and the threat to civilian lives is increasing.”

It is not the first time that ships have become caught up in the war.

In November 2019, for example, the Huthis acknowledged they had seized three ships - two South Korean vessels and a Saudi-flagged tug - in the Red Sea a few miles off Uqban island, north of Hodeida.

In July 2018 the kingdom accused the rebels of attacking two Saudi-operated oil tankers in the Red Sea. The pro-Huthi Al-Masirah television said that

the rebels had targeted a Saudi warship named Al-Dammam, without providing further details. Other ships have been seized in recent years in regional waters, with most incidents blamed on Iran. Tehran and Washington, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, regularly accuse each other of aggressive acts at sea.

On December 25 the coalition launched a ‘large-scale’ assault on Yemen after missiles fired by the rebels killed two people in the kingdom, the first such deaths in three years.

In November the rebels took control of a large area south of Hodeida, a key Red Sea port where the warring sides agreed on a ceasefire in 2018, after loyalist forces withdrew.

Efforts by the UN and United States to end the conflict have so far made little progress.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

India begins vaccinating teenagers amidst sudden rise in daily cases

New Delhi, India - India extended COVID-19 vaccinations to teens aged 15-18 on Monday, after officials tightened restrictions in big cities to avoid a repeat of last year's devastating outbreak.

More than 200,000 people across the country died in a huge spring virus wave that overwhelmed hospitals and crematoriums.

Health workers have since administered more than 1.4bn vaccine doses but less than half of India's population is fully inoculated, according to government data.

Hundreds of teenagers patiently queued with their parents on Monday morning outside a school turned into a makeshift medical centre in the capital New Delhi.

"It's really great to have your first vaccine," said 16-year-old Soumadeep, after receiving his first dose of the Indian-made Covaxin.

"It's like a new year gift for the children."

Officials have fretted over the arrival of the Omicron coronavirus variant and a sudden rise in daily infections, with some of India's biggest urban centres imposing fresh restrictions last week.

New Delhi and tech hub Bangalore are under overnight cur-



A health worker administers a dose of the Covaxin to a student in Ahmedabad, the main city in the western state of Gujarat on Monday (AFP)

few from 10.00pm each evening, with bars and restaurants in both cities ordered to operate at half capacity.

Mumbai, India's commercial capital, has barred public gatherings of more than four people from 9.00pm to 6.00am and re-

stricted wedding ceremonies to 50 guests.

'Safeguard the kids'

Last year's Delta variant wave in India struck after one of the world's biggest religious gatherings, the Kumbh Mela, which

attracted around 25mn Hindu pilgrims.

That festival, along with large state election rallies, was blamed by experts for fuelling the surge.

Despite a record rise in global infections, the Omicron out-

break has seen a less dramatic increase in hospital admissions, fuelling hopes the variant is less severe than Delta and other strains.

But the experience of last year's outbreak has left many worried for the weeks ahead.

It's a concern - the cases are on the rise. The (Omicron) variant is mild. But obviously to safeguard the kids, we need to have the vaccination

PUSHPA JAIN

"It's a concern - the cases are on the rise," said Pushpa Jain, whose son was queuing to receive his first dose in Delhi on Monday.

"The variant is mild. But obviously to safeguard the kids, we need to have the vaccination."

India has the world's second-highest number of cases, with nearly 35mn confirmed infections.

Its 481,000 known COVID-19 deaths are the third-highest, behind the tolls in the United States and Brazil.

But under-reporting is widespread and some studies have estimated India's true toll could be up to ten times higher.

India will begin rolling out booster vaccines for people aged over 60 years from next Monday.

AFP

Israel begins 4th jab drive

Tel Aviv, Israel - Israel began on Monday administering fourth COVID-19 vaccine shots to people over 60 years and health workers amid a surge driven by the Omicron variant.

Health workers at Ichilov hospital in Tel Aviv lined up for the shot and over-60s received it at the nearby branch of Clalit, Israel's largest health fund.

The shot was given to those who received their third inoculation at least four months ago.

The health ministry on Sunday approved the fourth shot for the over-60s and medical staff, two days after those with weakened immunity started to take the shot, making Israel one of the first countries to do so.

The health ministry on Monday reported 6,562 new COVID-19 infections over the previous day, nearly double the daily average of last week.

In an address late on Sunday, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned that cases could soon surge to around '50,000 cases per day'.

More than 4mn people out of Israel's population of 9.2mn have received three shots of coronavirus vaccine.

AFP



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks to people at a centre in London. UK is one of the hardest hit European countries (AFP)

Kuwaitis told to avoid European travel over Omicron surge

Kuwait City, Kuwait - Kuwait has called on its citizens to avoid travel to several European countries hit hard by the Omicron coronavirus variant.

In a series of statements overnight on Sunday, the oil-rich Gulf state also urged Kuwaitis already there to return home because of the surge in cases on the continent.

The foreign ministry said they should 'delay their trips' generally and, in particular, to France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy.

It also urged its citizens, often big spenders abroad, to leave those countries 'considering the significant and unprecedented rise in the number of new cases' of COVID-19.

Europe has in the past few months again become the pandemic's epicentre and is battling an upsurge of cases spurred on by the highly transmissible Omicron strain.

The countries with the highest ratio of infections per 100,000 inhabitants in the world were all in Europe, according to an AFP tally on

Saturday.

The count showed more than 4.9mn infections reported in Europe over the seven days to January 1, in the region between the Atlantic and Russia.

France alone recorded more than one million new cases during that one-week period.

The number of recorded cases in Kuwait remains relatively low.

But it jumped 20-fold in a month to reach around 600 cases on Sunday in the country of more than 4mn people. Elsewhere in the Gulf, cases have also surged.

In the United Arab Emirates, infections have risen almost 40-fold since the beginning of December.

Saudi Arabia on Sunday said that a booster shot will be required from February 1 for entry into public places.

The kingdom has reimposed social distancing measures at the Grand Mosque in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, after recording the highest number of infections in months.

AFP

China removes two officials in locked-down Xi'an

Beijing, China - New coronavirus cases in China's locked-down city of Xi'an edged down on Monday, official data showed, while local authorities removed two senior officials to 'strengthen' their fight against COVID-19.

Beijing has pursued a 'zero COVID' approach with tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns since the virus first emerged, but this strategy has come under pressure with recent local outbreaks.

The northern city of Xi'an, home to the world-famous Terracotta Warriors, has become the latest epicentre with authorities ordering all 13mn residents to stay home and several rounds of mass testing in recent weeks.

Xi'an reported 90 new virus cases on Monday, down from 122 a day before. Since December 9, there have been more than 1,600 infections reported in the city. "We have entered a general state of attack," said provincial official Liu Guozhong,



A health worker arranges samples to be tested for the COVID-19 coronavirus in Xi'an (AFP)

according to an official notice.

On Sunday, Xi'an announced that two senior Communist

Party officials from the Yanta district had been removed from their posts, according to local

media, in a bid to 'strengthen the work of epidemic prevention and control'. Last month,

China's disciplinary body announced that dozens of officials were punished for 'insufficient rigour in preventing and controlling the outbreak'.

Local residents told media in recent days that they were struggling to find enough food, despite Chinese authorities earlier insisting there were adequate supplies.

On Monday, Xi'an officials told reporters that resources had been urgently transported from neighbouring areas.

"Yanta district is an area with a large population, and there remains a gap between our work and the needs of the people," said local official Lu Dongguo.

Although China's reported coronavirus cases are low compared with elsewhere, new infections in recent days have reached a high not seen in the country since March 2020.

The spike comes as Beijing prepares to host the Winter Olympics next month.

AFP

NZ says no plan to prosecute British DJ over breach

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand's government said on Monday it would not ask for British DJ Dimension to be prosecuted for breaking COVID-19 isolation rules and creating an Omicron infection scare.

The electronic music artist, real name Robert Etheridge, said he had misunderstood the rules when he mixed with people before getting a final negative test result.

"The Ministry of Health does not plan to refer this case to the police at this stage," the ministry said in a statement.

"The ministry needs to balance the deterrence effect from any potential prosecution with enabling an environment that



Robert Etheridge

does not discourage future cases from assisting with the public health response to COVID-19," it said.

Etheridge said on Thursday he was 'devastated' to discover

that he had tested positive for Omicron after emerging from ten days of isolation including three days at his residence.

The DJ reportedly failed to

"To my shock and enormous concern, I unexpectedly received a positive test on day twelve, two days after my isolation period had ended," he said

I unexpectedly received a positive test on day twelve, two days after my isolation period had ended. I want to reiterate my apologies to those who I have inadvertently put at risk

ROBERT ETHERIDGE

wait for a negative result from his last test taken on day nine of isolation, as required, before going out into the community. He had landed in New Zealand on December 16.

on his Instagram page.

Etheridge said he had received 'many comments of hate and abuse' following media reports of the incident.

"I want to reiterate my apolo-

gies to those who I have inadvertently put at risk as a result of my misunderstandings."

There have been no reported Omicron cases related to Etheridge's outing, according to New Zealand media reports.

Etheridge withdrew from a planned appearance at a three-day music festival, Rhythm and Alps, which was held from December 29-31 on New Zealand's South Island.

New Zealand, which has strict quarantine rules for international arrivals, reported Monday 137 new COVID-19 infections for a total of 13,883 since the pandemic began, with the death toll unchanged at 51.

AFP

Sudan's PM quits; military in firm control

Khartoum, Sudan - Sudan's civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok resigned on Sunday, more than two months after a coup and following another deadly crackdown on protesters, with the military now firmly in control.

Sudan had been undergoing a fragile journey toward civilian rule since the 2019 ouster of autocrat Omar al Bashir, but was plunged into turmoil when military leader General Abdel Fattah al Burhan launched his coup on October 25 and detained Hamdok.

Hamdok was reinstated on November 21 under a deal promising elections for mid-2023, but local media had recently reported he had been absent from his office for days, with rumours swirling over his possible resignation.

"I have tried my best to stop the country from sliding towards disaster," Hamdok said on Sunday evening, addressing the nation on state television.

Sudan 'is crossing a dangerous turning point that threatens its whole survival', he said.

Hamdok was the civilian face of the country's fragile transition, while Burhan has been the country's de facto leader following Bashir's ouster.

Hamdok cited 'the fragmentation of the political forces and conflicts between the (military and civilian) components of the transition' and said that 'despite everything that has been done to reach a consensus... it has not happened'.



Abdallah Hamdok (AFP)

Mass protests against the coup have continued even after Hamdok was reinstated, as demonstrators have distrusted veteran general Burhan and his promise to guide the country toward full democracy.

Protesters have also charged that the deal to reinstate Hamdok simply aimed to give a cloak of legitimacy to the generals, whom they accuse of trying to continue the regime built by Bashir.

'No to military rule'

Thousands of demonstrators on Sunday braved tear gas, a heavy troop deployment and a telecommunications blackout to demand a civilian government.

They lambasted the coup, shouting 'power to the people' and demanding the military return to the barracks, at protests near the presidential palace in the capital Khartoum and in its twin city Omdurman.

The pro-democracy Doctors' Committee said security forces killed three protesters, including



Sudanese protesters gather during a demonstration against the October 25 coup, in the capital Khartoum, on Sunday (AFP)

I have tried my best to stop the country from sliding towards disaster. Sudan is crossing a dangerous turning point that threatens its whole survival

ABDALLA HAMDOK

one who was shot in the chest and another who suffered a 'severe head wound'.

As with previous demonstrations, which have become regular since the coup, the authorities had erected roadblocks, with

shipping containers blocking Nile River bridges between the capital and outlying areas.

But thousands still came out to demonstrate 'in memory of the martyrs', with at least 57 protesters now killed since the coup,

according to pro-democracy medics.

Young men on motorcycles were seen ferrying wounded protesters to hospitals as security forces blocked ambulances from reaching them.

Web monitoring group Net-Blocks said mobile Internet services were cut from mid-morning ahead of the protests, the first of the year. They were restored in the evening.

Activists use the Internet for organising demonstrations and broadcasting live footage of the

rallies.

Protests since the army's takeover have been repeatedly broken up by security forces firing rounds of tear gas, as well as charges by police wielding batons.

'Year of resistance'

Sudan has a long history of military takeovers, but Burhan has insisted the armed forces' move 'was not a coup' but a push to 'rectify the course of the transition'.

On Friday an official advisor

warned that the demonstrations are 'a waste of energy and time' which will not produce 'any political solution'.

Activists have said on social media that 2022 will be 'the year of the continuation of the resistance'.

They demand justice for those killed since the coup as well as the more than 250 who died during the months of mass protests that paved the way for the toppling of Bashir.

Activists have also condemned sexual attacks during December 19 protests, in which the UN said at least 13 women and girls were victims of rape or gang-rape.

The European Union and the United States issued a joint statement condemning the use of sexual violence 'as a weapon to drive women away from demonstrations and silence their voices'.

On Saturday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that Washington was 'prepared to respond to those who seek to block the aspirations of the Sudanese people for a civilian-led, democratic government and who would stand in the way of accountability, justice, and peace'.

Over 14mn people, one in three Sudanese, will need humanitarian aid during the coming year, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - the highest level for a decade.

AFP



CitizenNews chief editor Daisy Li (left) and chief writer Chris Yeung attend a press conference in Hong Kong on Monday (AFP)

Third Hong Kong news outlet shuts down as media fears grow

Hong Kong, China - Journalists from Hong Kong's CitizenNews decried plummeting press freedoms as they shut down on Monday, saying they no longer felt safe to publish after a rival outlet's staff were arrested for 'sedition'.

One of the most popular news websites in Hong Kong with more than 800,000 social media followers, CitizenNews is the third media company to stop publishing as Beijing oversees a sweeping crackdown on dissent.

The crowd-funded non-partisan platform, founded in 2017 by a group of veteran journalists, made its shock closure announcement on Sunday evening and said its website would stop updating from midnight on Tuesday.

On their final day, reporters made clear their decision was fuelled by fears caused by a national security police raid last week on *Stand News*.

"We have been trying our best not to violate any laws but we can no longer see clearly the lines of law enforcement and we can no longer feel safe to work," CitizenNews co-founder Chris Yeung, a former

president of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, told reporters.

"Journalists are also human beings with families and friends," he added.

Yeung said their newsroom had not been contacted by law enforcement but that they decided to close based on what they saw was happening to the media.

"Can we work on some 'safe news'? I don't even know what is 'safe news'," chief editor Daisy Li, also a former HKJA president, told reporters.

As they were speaking, lawmakers in Hong Kong's new 'patriots only' legislature were swearing oaths of allegiance following a new selection process that barred the traditional democracy opposition and saw most candidates chosen by pro-Beijing committees.

Last week 89 of the 90 new lawmakers issued a joint statement welcoming the *Stand News* raid and arrests.

China's state-affiliated *Global Times* welcomed the closure of CitizenNews on Monday.

AFP

S Africa parliament blaze under control

Cape Town, South Africa - A fire that ravaged part of South Africa's parliament, engulfing its chamber and threatening national treasures, has been brought under control, firefighters said on Monday, as police confirmed that a 49-year-old man had been charged with starting the blaze.

Flames broke out at around 5.00am (0300 GMT) on Sunday in the oldest wing of the Cape Town complex, triggering an inferno that crews battled throughout the day.

No casualties were reported, but the damage was catastrophic.

"The fire was brought under control during the night," spokesman Jermaine Carelse said, adding that around 20 firefighters were still on the site.

The blaze began in the wood-panelled older part of the building - a section that houses South Africa's first parliament and some of the nation's most cherished artefacts.

It then spread to the neighbouring new assembly, where legislators currently meet.



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (centre), addresses the media as a fire continues to burn in the South African Parliament buildings, in Cape Town on Sunday (AFP)

Parliament spokesman Moloto Mothapo said the roof of the National Assembly had collapsed.

"The entire chamber where the members sit... has burned down."

Suspected arson

President Cyril Ramaphosa told reporters at the scene on Sunday

that a man had been held and that the building's sprinkler systems had apparently failed.

The Hawks elite police unit said a 49-year-old man would appear in court on Tuesday, charged 'housebreaking, arson' and damaging state property.

The parliament's presiding officers were to meet with Public Works Minister Patricia de Lille

to take stock of the devastation.

Jean-Pierre Smith, Cape Town's mayoral committee member for safety and security, said the entire complex had suffered damage, both from the fire and the tonnes of water used to fight it.

As for the roof of the building's historic section, 'it's gone', he said.

Man who entered N Korea 'a former defector to South'

Seoul, South Korea - A man who entered North Korea on New Year's Day by breaching the heavily fortified border from the South is presumed to be a defector from the North, the defence ministry in Seoul said on Monday.

The man sparked a search operation by the South Korean military on Saturday when surveillance equipment spotted him crossing an eastern section of the border into the North. They failed to find him.

South Korean authorities are yet to identify him, but a defence ministry official said he is believed to be someone who came from North Korea in 2020 - also by breaching the border.

"We presume this to be the



People pay tribute to the statues of President Kim Il Sung and Chairman Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang to mark the New Year on Saturday (AFP)

same man who defected to the South by climbing over the barbed-wire fence in November

2020," the South Korean official told AFP.

The man is in his 30s, the offi-

cial added, without providing further details.

Separately, South Korea's Yonhap news agency quoted a Defence Ministry official as saying that the man 'was recognised to be the same as the defector'.

No evidence of spying has been discovered so far, the official told Yonhap.

The man is believed to have worked as a cleaner in South Korea after defecting, the agency added.

The South Korean military notified the North of the crossing at the weekend.

North Korea indicated it had received the message but did not respond further, the defence ministry official told AFP.

Rare crossing

Years of repression and poverty in North Korea have led more than 30,000 people to flee to the South in the decades since the Korean War, but crossings in the other direction are extremely rare.

In 2020, North Korean troops shot dead and burned the body of a South Korean fisheries official Pyongyang said had illegally crossed the maritime border.

In the same year, a North Korean who had defected to the South three years earlier sneaked back across the border. That breach prompted North Korea to put the border city of Kaesong under lockdown over fears he may have the coronavirus.

AFP

An year of space tourism, flights on Mars, China's rise

2021 was a huge year for space endeavours as billionaires battled to reach the final frontier first

Washington, US - From the Mars Ingenuity helicopter's first powered flight on another world to the launch of the James Webb telescope that will peer into the earliest epoch of the Universe, 2021 was a huge year for humanity's space endeavours.

Beyond the science milestones, billionaires battled to reach the final frontier first, an all-civilian crew went into orbit, and Star Trek's William Shatner waxed profound about what it meant to see the Earth from the cosmos, as space tourism finally came into its own.

Here are selected highlights.

Red Planet robot duo

NASA's Perseverance Rover survived its 'seven minutes of terror', a time when the craft relies on its automated systems for descent and landing, to touch down flawlessly on Mars' Jezero Crater in February.

Since then, the car-sized robot has been taking photos and drilling for samples for its mission: Determining whether the Red Planet might have hosted ancient microbial life forms. A rock sample return mission is planned for sometime in the 2030s.

With its state-of-the-art instruments, 'Percy', as the helicopter is affectionately known, can also zap Martian rock and chemically analyse the vapour.

Percy has a partner along for the ride: Ingenuity, a two kilogram rotorcraft that in April succeeded in the first powered flight on another celestial body, just over a century after the Wright brothers' achieved the same feat here on Earth, and has performed many more since.

"Perseverance is sort of the flagship mission, it's doing a long-term detailed investigation of this fascinating area of Mars," Jonathan McDowall, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, said. By contrast, "Ingenuity, is one of these cute, small, cheap little technology demos that NASA can do so well," he added.

The insights gained from Ingenuity could help scientists develop Dragonfly, a planned thousand-pound drone copter, to search for signs of life on Saturn's moon Titan in the mid-2030s.

Private spaceflight takes off

An American millionaire became the world's first space tourist in 2001, but it took 20 more years for the promise of private space flight to finally materialise.

In July, Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson faced off against Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos to complete a suborbital spaceflight.

While the British tycoon won that race by a few days, it was Blue Origin that surged ahead, launching three more flights with paying customers and celebrity guests. Elon Musk's SpaceX entered the fray in September with a three-day orbital mission around the Earth featuring an all-civilian crew on Inspiration 4.



This NASA photo shows the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket being launched with the Double Asteroid Redirection Test spacecraft onboard from California on November 23 (AFP)



Students watch a live image of a lesson by Chinese astronauts from Tiangong space station, at a school in Yantai in China's eastern Shandong province (AFP)



In February last year, Perseverance landed in Jezero crater where scientists suspected a long-gone river once fed a lake (AFP)

"It's really exciting that finally, after so long this stuff is finally happening," said space industry analyst Laura Seward Forczyk, author of the forthcoming book *Becoming Off-Worldly*, intended to prepare future space travellers.

But it was William Shatner, who played the swashbuckling Captain Kirk on the 1960s TV series *Star Trek*, who stole the show with a moving account of his experience.

"What you're looking down

on is Mother Earth, and it needs protecting," he told reporters.

A Russian crew shot the first feature film in space aboard the International Space Station (ISS) in 2021, and Japanese tourists made their own visit there on a Russian rocket.

For a few minutes on December 11, there were a record 19 humans in space when Blue Origin carried out its third crewed mission, the Japanese team were on the ISS along with its normal crew, and Chinese taikonauts

were in position on their station.

The sight of wealthy elites galivanting in the cosmos hasn't been to everyone's liking, however, and the nascent space tourism sector triggered a backlash from some who said there were more pressing issues to face, such as climate change, here on Earth.

Globalisation of space

During the Cold War, space was dominated by the United States



Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard lifts up from the launchpad, at the Europe's Spaceport in French Guiana, on December 25 (AFP)



In July last year, Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson faced off against Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos to complete a suborbital spaceflight

and the former Soviet Union.

Now, in addition to the explosion of the commercial sector, which is sending up satellites at a dizzying pace, China, India and others are increasingly flexing their space flight muscles.

China's Tiangong space station - its first long-term outpost - was launched in April, while its first Mars rover, Zhurong, landed in May, making it the only the second country to achieve such an exploit. "In the past 20 years since China finally decided to go

big on space, they've been in catch up mode," said McDowall. "And now they're kind of there, and they're starting to do things that the US hasn't done."

The UAE placed a probe into Martian orbit in February, becoming the first Arab nation and fifth overall to reach the planet.

Russia meanwhile launched a missile at one of its own satellites, becoming the fourth country to hit a spacecraft from the ground, in a move that reignited concerns about the growing



William Shatner waxed profound about seeing the Earth from cosmos

In the past 20 years, since China finally decided to go big on space, they've been in catch up mode. Now, they are doing things that the US hasn't done

JONATHAN MCDOWALL

space arms race.

Washington slammed Moscow for its 'reckless' test, which generated over 1,500 pieces of large orbital debris, dangerous for low Earth orbit missions such as the ISS.

Coming soon...

The year closed out with the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope, a US\$10bn marvel that will make use of infrared technology to peer back 13bn years in time.

"It's arguably the most expensive, single scientific platform ever created," said Casey Drier, chief advocate of the Planetary Society. "To push the boundaries of our knowledge about the cosmos, we had to build something capable of accessing that ancient past," he added.

It will reach Lagrange Point 2, a space landmark a million miles from Earth, in a matter of weeks, then gradually start up and calibrate its systems, coming online around June.

Also next year, the launch of Artemis 1 - when NASA's giant Space Launch System (SLS) will carry the Orion capsule to the Moon and back, in preparation for America's return with humans later this decade.

NASA plans to build lunar habitats and use lessons learned there for forward missions to Mars in the 2030s.

Observers are encouraged that the programme launched by former president Donald Trump has continued under Joe Biden - even if he hasn't been as vocal in his support. Finally, sometime next fall, NASA's DART probe will smash into an asteroid to kick it off course.

The proof-of-concept test is a dry run should humanity ever need to stop a giant space rock from wiping out life on Earth, as seen in Netflix's new hit film *Don't Look Up*.

AFP

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THE HUNT FOR SPACE

With hundreds of mountain gorillas in residence, the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda is a conservation triumph

A huge male silverback gorilla nibbles on a tasty bamboo shoot before farting loudly, oblivious to his neighbours - farmers working fertile fields a stone's throw away.

With hundreds of mountain gorillas in residence, the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda is a conservation triumph. But this resurgence is not without consequences, as the majestic creatures now struggle for space to grow and thrive.

Straddling Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Virunga range includes eight volcanoes in the heart of Africa's densely populated Great Lakes region and is, along with Uganda's Bwindi Forest, the world's only habitat for mountain gorillas.

Officials at the Rwandan park are proud of its success in regenerating the primate population.

"In the census we did in 2010, these mountain gorillas were 880; in 2015 we did another census that showed we have 1,063" in the Virunga massif and the Bwindi park, ranger Felicien Ntezimana told AFP, before leading a hike into the mist-covered forest where the animals live.

Thanks to this revival, the mountain gorilla, known for its thick, shiny fur, is now listed as 'endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, while other great apes remain 'critically endangered'.

The animal has come a long way since the 1980s when decades of poaching caused its population to plunge to just 250 across the Virunga range, and famed American primatologist Dian Fossey was murdered in the Rwandan park allegedly because of her anti-poaching efforts.

Stronger security measures and efforts to win over local villagers have helped turn the mountain gorilla's fortunes around.

Today, ten per cent of the cost of each US\$1,500 park ticket goes towards community projects while five percent is allocated to a compensation fund for villagers.

Far from being hated and feared as they were in the past, the gorillas are now seen as key to the community's financial future, says Jean-Baptiste Ndeze, an elderly inhabitant of Musanze, a town bordering the park.

"Tourists throw money at them, which... comes back to us in the form of food, shelter and good liveli-

hood," he told AFP.

Infanticide and disease

While the tourism sector contributed US\$25mn to Rwanda's economy pre-pandemic, the park's success in conservation has led to unforeseen consequences.

Twenty-five years ago, the Rwandan authorities were monitoring about 100 apes in the forest. Today, about 380 gorillas call it home, according to an official count.

As a result of tourism and interaction with researchers, the primates are accustomed to humans, and they are increasingly unafraid to venture into populated areas as their own habitat grows cramped.

"We have seen gorillas more frequently coming out of the park and looking for food outside... also they tend to move further away from the edge of the park," said Felix Ndagijimana, who heads the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund in Rwanda.

The results can be dire.

The powerfully built animal - an adult male can weigh up to 200kg - is vulnerable to human diseases such as influenza, pneumonia and Ebola.

Rising gorilla numbers have also raised the likelihood of fights between the primates which can often prove fatal for the species' youngest members.

After seeing population growth slow a decade ago, Ndagijimana and his colleagues carried out a study which showed a staggering five-fold increase in infanticides.



"Infanticides are a big problem because it can have a huge negative impact in the gorillas' population increase," he told AFP.

Displacement

The problem is much more pronounced in Rwanda than in neighbouring countries.

Only one gorilla family lives on the Ugandan side of the Virunga range, while the Congolese park is 'huge' compared with the Rwandan forest, says Benjamin Mugabukomeye from the International Gorilla Conservation Programme, a regional organisation.

In a bid to address the issue, Rwanda plans to extend its park, adding 23 per cent more surface area over the next decade.

The ambitious project is due to start next year and will displace around 4,000 farmer households.

"It's a process we are undertaking very, very carefully," park director Prosper Uwingeli told AFP, adding that officials were conducting feasibility studies and designing detailed relocation sites.

The authorities intend to compensate the displaced families and house them in newly constructed 'model villages' - with a prototype already visible in Musanze.

In addition to a huge school and a poultry farm, the village includes immaculate, fully furnished brick apartments - with the government insisting that the move will benefit displaced farmers.

AFP

Rwanda plans to extend its park, adding 23 per cent more surface area over the next decade. It's a process we are undertaking very, very carefully

Prosper Uwingeli



A local man displays souvenirs for sale at the entrance of Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda (AFP)

Tsitsipas crashes as Argentina beat Greece at ATP Cup

Sydney, Australia - World number four Stefanos Tsitsipas crashed to defeat in his first singles match since elbow surgery Monday, losing an epic battle with feisty Argentinian Diego Schwartzman 6-7 (5/7) 6-3, 6-3 at the ATP Cup.

The Greek star went under the knife in late November after pulling out of the ATP Finals in Turin, hoping to be at full fitness for the Australian Open later this month.

He was scheduled to return against world number nine Hubert Hurkacz at the teams event on Saturday, but withdrew before the match, opting instead to ease himself back in a doubles rubber.

He showed up to play 11th-ranked Schwartzman and looked at his battling best in winning the first set tiebreak, moving freely with little sign of his right elbow causing problems.

But the 23-year-old lost his focus, and with it, five games in a row.

After being broken in the second set, there was no way back on a humid Sydney evening.

It's his first match after surgery and I was just thinking if the match was going to go long I had a chance

DIEGO SCHWARTZMAN



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas between the sets during his match against Argentina's Diego Schwartzman at the 2022 ATP Cup in Sydney on Monday (AFP)

"It's his first match for two months after surgery and I was just thinking if the match was going to go long I had a chance," said Schwartzman after the 2hr 42min battle that helped Argentina win their second ATP tie after beating Georgia on day one.

"I was ready for that and I think everything is going very well, playing Stefanos is not easy."

Federico Delbonis had earlier continued his perfect start to the season by overcoming Greek number two Michail Pervolarakis 7-6 (7/5), 6-1 to give Argentina a 1-0 lead.

In morning action, Hurkacz ensured Poland also went 2-0.

But the world number nine was forced to dig deep against Georgian Aleksandre Metreveli, ranked just 570, who stepped in after Nikoloz Basilashvili was a no-show.

Once he found his groove, though, last year's Miami Open champion raced to a 6-7 (5-7), 6-3, 6-1 victory.

"He played well in the first set and things were not going my way. But I got better with each set and am happy to get the win,"



Diego Schwartzman celebrates his victory against Tsitsipas (AFP)

Hurkacz said.

Kamil Majchrzak gave Poland a strong start when he dropped just two games against Aleksandre Bakshi, winning 6-1, 6-1 in 53 minutes.

Whoever wins between Poland and Argentina on

Wednesday will make the semi-finals, with only the top nation from each of the four groups progressing to the knockouts.

Feeling good

Veteran Roberto Bautista Agut, meanwhile, upset Norwegian

world number eight Casper Ruud to give Spain their second straight win.

The 33-year-old Bautista Agut is the lead singles player for his country in the absence of 20-time Grand Slam champion Rafael Nadal and has stepped up in style.

After crushing Chile's world number 17 Cristian Garin in Sydney on Saturday, he backed it up with a battling 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) victory over Ruud, the first Norwegian to win an ATP Tour title.

"I played very good with very few unforced errors," said 19th-ranked Bautista Agut. "It's a good start (to the season) and I'm feeling good."

It ensured Spain won the tie with an unassailable 2-0 after Pablo Carreno Busta made a quick start when he dismissed Norway's 345th-ranked Viktor Durasovic 6-3, 6-3 in just 69 minutes.

Former top-10 star Carreno Busta is now 4-1 in singles in his ATP Cup career, having beaten Chile's Alejandro Tabilo on Saturday. "It's always important to win the first match," he said.

AFP

Sakkari battles past Zidansek in WTA

Adelaide, Australia - World number six Maria Sakkari battled past Slovenia's Tamara Zidansek in three sets to reach the second round of the Adelaide International on Monday and kick off the new WTA season.

The 26-year-old Greek was kept on court for just over two hours before seeing off Zidansek 6-2, 0-6, 6-4.

Third seed Sakkari, who broke into the top 10 in November, admitted she had been well below her best as she warms up for the Australian Open later this month.

"I didn't feel great to be perfectly honest," she said.

"It wasn't a good match from my side but I found a way through it, which sometimes is enough, and I'm excited to be in the second round."

Sakkari looked to be in complete control when she won the first set, only for Zidansek to storm back and win the second to love.

The Slovenian looked the likely winner in a tough third set but at 4-5, the world number 30 made a number of unforced errors to hand the match to Sakkari.

Sakkari will now play either American Shelby Rogers or a qualifier.

Australian wildcard Priscilla Hon claimed the biggest win of her career when she beat two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova in three sets.



Greece's Maria Sakkari serves against Slovenia's Tamara Zidansek during the first round of 2022 WTA women's singles, in Adelaide on Monday (AFP)

Hon, the world number 263, came back from a set and a break down to oust Kvitova 6-7 (4/7), 7-5, 6-2, her first win over a player inside the top 20. The 23-year-old from Brisbane missed most of 2021 with a hip injury but showed no signs of nerves to win in two hours, 20 minutes.

US Open runner up Leylah Fernandez of Canada eased into the second round with a straight sets win over Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova. Fernandez (19) was too strong for Alexandrova,

winning 6-3, 6-4.

Other winners on Monday included seventh seeded Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan, a 6-4, 1-6, 6-1 winner over Australian Storm Sanders, Slovenia's Kaja Juvan, who beat Frenchwoman Chloe Paquet 6-4, 6-2, and Australian Ajla Tomljanovic, who downed Britain's Heather Watson 6-4, 7-6 (7/5).

World number one Ashleigh Barty and second-ranked Aryna Sabalenka have first-round byes. AFP

Barty says patience needed on return from 4-month hiatus

Adelaide, Australia - World number one Ashleigh Barty said on Monday that she will need to be patient as she returns to competitive action this week for the first time since the US Open in September.

Barty is celebrating 102 consecutive weeks at the top of the women's game but after falling in the third round at Flushing Meadows she ended her season because of the pandemic and returned to Australia.

The 25-year-old two-time Grand Slam champion said she spent the time with family and worked on her game in a bid to win her first Australian Open later this month.

The newly engaged Barty, who will open her season at the Adelaide International this week, said, "I love to try to get better each and every day."

"I'm excited now to try and bring it all together as best that I can and understand in the next couple of weeks I'll have to be patient with myself."

"It has been a while since I've played a competitive match, but

I feel good, I feel ready."

Barty, who has a first-round bye in Adelaide, said results last year showed that there was now enormous depth in the women's game - and with that come challenges to her top ranking.

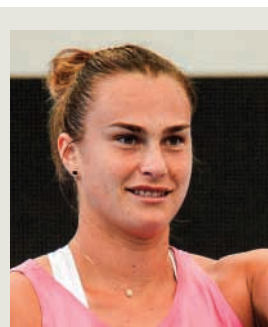
British teenager Emma Raducanu won the US Open, beating fellow 19-year-old Leylah Fernandez in the final, while 24-year-old Spaniard Paula Badosa broke through in 2021.

"There's fresh challenges every year regardless of who is what spot on the ranking list," said Barty, who last year became the first Australian woman to win Wimbledon since Evonne Goolagong Cawley in 1980.

"Girls really stepped up, were able to play really consistent seasons which is exciting to see for the women's game. It feels like it's just good competition."

"Genuinely there is really good depth and you have to bring your best time and time again to be able to compete with everyone and give yourself a chance to win the big titles."

AFP

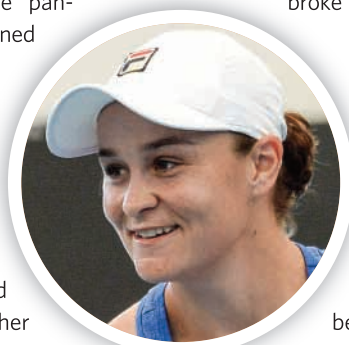


Second-ranked Sabalenka targets maiden Slam in 2022

Adelaide, Australia - World number two Aryna Sabalenka said on Monday that she will only consider 2022 a successful year if she can break through and win a maiden Grand Slam singles title.

The Belarusian, who has won 10 WTA singles titles, will open her season at this week's Adelaide International, where she is the second seed behind top-ranked Ashleigh Barty. She had never gone past the round of 16 in a Slam until last year, when she reached the semi-finals at Wimbledon and the US Open, losing tough three-setters each time. "I think those two matches which I lost in the semi-finals was that little step to make this dream come true," she said in Adelaide.

AFP



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Marcelo Bielsa

Injuries threaten Leeds' recovery

London, UK - Marcelo Bielsa has been left counting the cost off Leeds United's win over Premier League relegation rivals on Sunday Burnley.

Bielsa's men enjoyed a 3-1 victory over the Clarets to move eight points clear of the bottom three but the match at Elland Road saw Tyler Roberts join a lengthy injury list when he limped off shortly before the hour mark with what appeared to be a calf problem.

Both Wales forward Roberts and defender Diego Llorente also face one-match bans after they each received a fifth booking of the campaign.

Leeds secured just their fourth league win of the season without club record signing Rodrigo, captain Liam Cooper, fans' favourite Calvin Phillips, Patrick Bamford and defenders Jamie Shackleton and Pascal Struijk. Nevertheless, Jack Harrison and Stuart Dallas scored before Daniel James' header in stoppage time made sure of victory.

AFP



It was a real match. I managed to claw back the difference little by little, without doubt because he (Attiyah) had cleared the track

SEBASTIEN LOEB

Loeb wins stage to reduce Attiyah's lead

French driver Sebastien Loeb and co-driver Fabian Lurquin of Belgium compete during the Stage 1A of the Dakar Rally 2022 between Jeddah and Hail, in Saudi Arabia (AFP)

Qaisumah, Saudi Arabia - France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb won the second stage of the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia on Monday, a 338km drive from Ha'il to Qaisumah.

The 47-year-old timed 3min 28sec faster than Qatar's three-time Dakar victor Nasser al Attiyah.

Loeb remains in second spot overall after his 15th career stage win but having reduced the over-

all gap between himself and Attiyah to just over nine minutes.

"It was a real match," said Loeb. "At the end it became a World Rally Championship (WRC) special between two WRC drivers.

"I managed to claw back the difference little by little, without doubt because he (Attiyah) had cleared the track.

"It's easier when you are behind, so if I follow him, then I can follow easily; if he follows me if I

overtake, he can follow easily. So I prefer for him to take the risks rather than me."

Spain's Joan Barreda Bort won the motorbike special with a 5min 33sec advantage over Britain's Sam Sunderland. It was

the Spaniard's 28th career special stage win.

It was the perfect pick-me-up for Bort, who, had lost a lot of time in Sunday's special.

"Today the only option was to push after the big mistake yesterday, but we are only on the second day," he told the official race website. 'For sure, we will have lots of long days with difficult navigation.'

'So, for me today was good to recover a good feeling. Riding on the dunes is always fun, so I tried to enjoy riding all the stage.'

Sunderland had the consolation of taking the overall lead ahead of Adrien Van Beveren of France with overnight leader

Australian Daniel Sanders dropping to third overall.

'It's always nice to lead the rally, but we've got a long way to go,' Sunderland told the race website.

The Dubai-based 32-year-old is bidding for a second win in the gruelling rally having become the first Briton to be crowned champion in either category in 2017, when it was raced in South America. Sunderland says experience tells him an early overall lead counts for little.

"It doesn't mean so much because we know this race," he said. "The navigation is so tricky and it looks like every day when the guys are opening they are losing a lot of time.

"There are so many long difficult days to come, I'm sure, so I'm sure there will be a lot more switching around, but of course it's still good to lead and it shows that we are on point and on pace."

AFP

Everton's Benitez looks to Calvert-Lewin for revival

London, UK - Everton manager Rafael Benitez has put his faith in Dominic Calvert-Lewin and new signings in January as the Merseysiders look to turn their season around.

The England striker made his comeback after over four months out with a thigh injury in a 3-2 home defeat by Brighton on Sunday where he missed a penalty.

Prior to the game at Goodison Park, new £17mn left-back Vitaliy Mykolenko was introduced to fans. British newspaper reports have also linked Benitez with a move for Glasgow Rangers right-back Nathan Patterson as he looks to shore up the defence of an Everton side languishing in 15th place in the 20-strong Premier League.

Monday's match was only the eighth time this season that have Everton scored more than once in a league fixture, with five of those occasions coming in their opening six games and the 24-year-old Calvert-Lewin scoring in the first three before his injury.

"Hopefully Dominic coming back will give a little bit more



Everton manager Rafael Benitez

hope to everyone," said Spanish boss Benitez after Everton's eighth defeat in 12 league games.

"And if we are bringing players back, and signing new players, it will bring this desire that everyone is expecting."

Prior to kick-off, Brighton had won just once in 13 matches but victory saw the Seagulls soar into eighth place.

Goals have been hard to come by for the south coast side, but a double from midfielder Alexis Mac Allister at Goodison Park was an encouraging sign.

AFP

Brown scores 50 points as Celtics rally to beat Magic

Los Angeles, US - Jaylen Brown scored a career-high 50 points and the Boston Celtics needed all of them in a 116-111 NBA overtime victory over the Orlando Magic on Sunday.

Brown scored 21 points in the fourth quarter, helping the Celtics rally from 14 down with 4:20 left in regulation.

He opened overtime with his fifth three-pointer of the contest, adding 11 rebounds, four assists and a blocked shot.

"I was just trying to be aggressive the entire time," said Brown, whose previous career-high was 46 against the New York Knicks on October 20. "My teammates encouraged me to take the shots. I feel like I took some good looks and they went down tonight."

Brown's layup with 38 seconds left in regulation knotted the score at 98-98. He scored again to put Boston up 100-98 with 30 seconds left, but Tim Frazier scored for Orlando to force overtime. Boston had led 45-42 at halftime after leading by as many



Jaylen Brown #7 of the Boston Celtics shoots a free throw during the game against the Orlando Magic at the TD Garden, in Boston on Sunday

as 14 before the break.

But the Magic surged in the second half, outscoring Boston 35-20 in the third quarter to take a 77-65 lead into the final frame.

Marcus Smart added 17

points, seven assists and seven rebounds for Boston and Dennis Schroder scored 21.

Both teams were missing their leading scorers.

AFP

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Jansen grabs four as India struggle against South Africa in second Test

Johannesburg, South Africa - Four years after impressing Indian captain Virat Kohli as a teenage net bowler, Marco Jansen produced a destructive spell of bowling for South Africa on the first day of the second Test at the Wanderers Stadium on Monday.

Jansen (21) took four for 31 as India were bowled out for 202 after winning the toss.

South Africa were 35 for one at the close.

"He's an amazing bowler," said Kagiso Rabada, South Africa's senior bowler, of the newcomer to the fast bowling pack. "He's like 38 metres tall (he's actually 2.03 metres) which helps, especially at the Wanderers with the extra bounce. He's a magnificent bowling all-rounder," said Rabada.

Kohli was one of Jansen's five wickets in the first Test in Centurion, which India won by 113 runs, but was absent on Monday because of an upper back spasm.

Stand-in captain K L Rahul top-scored with a patient 50, while Ravichandran Ashwin made a hard-hit 46 on a pitch which Rabada said had 'some bounce, some pace and some nip with the grass coverage'.

Ashwin said batting first at the Wanderers was a challenge. "You want to bat first. You want to come out and post a good



South Africa's Dean Elgar (left) and Keegan Petersen walk off the field at the conclusion of play on the first day of the second Test against India, at The Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Monday (AFP)

score of 260 or 270. South Africa have posted scores of 250 at the Wanderers and dominated. Maybe we are a bit short but I am confident that with our full bowling arsenal available tomorrow, fingers crossed, we can definitely make something of this score."

Ashwin was referring to a scare for India when fast bowler Mohammed Siraj left the field clutching his right hamstring after pulling up in the penultimate over of the day.

"The medical staff are assessing him overnight and I am hopeful that with the history that Siraj has he will come out tomorrow and give his best," said Ashwin.

Jansen, who towers above his teammates, made the most of the steep bounce, troubling most of the batsmen.

When he dismissed Rahul, Jansen had the remarkable figures of two for nine in 9.5 overs. His figures were spoilt slightly by Ashwin, who, almost alone of the Indian batsmen, decided attack was the best form of defence. But he played one shot too many to be Jansen's fourth victim.

Jansen and his twin brother Duan, who has also gone on to play first-class cricket, bowled to the Indians on their 2017/18 tour and attracted the attention of Kohli.

Jansen made his Indian Pre-

SCOREBOARD

INDIA 1ST INNINGS

KL Rahul

c Rabada b Jansen

50

M Agarwal

c Verreynne b Jansen

26

C Pujara

c Bavuma b Olivier

3

A Rahane

c Petersen b Olivier

0

H Vihari

c van der Dussen

20

R Pant

c Verreynne b Jansen

17

R Ashwin

c Petersen b Jansen

46

S Thakur

c Petersen b Olivier

0

M Shami

c & b Rabada

9

J Bumrah

not out

14

M Siraj

c Verreynne b Rabada

1

Extras:

(b 8, lb 3, nb 5)

16

TOTAL:

202 all out in 63.1 overs

Fall of wickets:

1-36, 2-49, 3-49, 4-91, 5-116, 6-156, 7-157, 8-185, 9-187, 10-202

Bowling:

K Rabada 17.1-2-64-3, D Olivier 17.1-64-3, L Ngidi 11-4-26-0, M Jansen 17.5-31-4, K Maharaj 1-0-0-0

SOUTH AFRICA 1ST INNINGS

Dean Elgar

not out

11

A Markram

lbw b M Shami

7

K Petersen

not out

14

Extras:

(lb 2, w 1)

3

TOTAL:

(18 Ov, RR: 1.94)

35/1

Fall of wickets:

1-14

Bowling:

J Bumrah 8-3-14-0, M Shami 6-2-15-1, M Siraj 3.5-2-4-0, S Thakur 0.1-0-0-0



England captain Joe Root

England look to salvage Ashes pride

Sydney, Australia - A demoralised England have vowed to salvage some pride when their shambolic and COVID-hit Ashes tour resumes in the fourth Test at Sydney on Wednesday.

Joe Root's men face another difficult clash against a rampant Australia, who crushed them by an innings and 14 runs inside three days in the third Test at Melbourne to retain the Ashes with an unassailable 3-0 lead.

It followed heavy defeats in Brisbane and Adelaide, where batting collapses, poor fielding and questionable selections cost the tourists dearly.

They are facing a 5-0 white-wash, although rain forecast for Sydney could come to England's rescue.

Veteran seamer Jimmy Anderson admitted that 'the lads are pretty flat at the minute if I'm being brutally honest'.

"It can be difficult, especially for guys experiencing the Ashes for the first time," he said.

"That's where the more senior players come in. We have to rally round, make sure everyone is in a good place and a good head-space to compete. We've just not been at the races. We've now got two games to do something about that," he added.

Both sides have been hit by the coronavirus, which is surging in Sydney, with more than 20,000 cases being reported daily in New South Wales state.

Australia will be missing number five Travis Head after he tested positive in Melbourne.

England's under-pressure coach Chris Silverwood - whose job is on the line - is also out of the Sydney clash after he reportedly tested positive too, the seventh to do so among the touring party. They include three support staff - fast-bowling coach Jon Lewis, spin coach Jeetan Patel and strength and conditioning boss Darren Veness.

Batting coach Graham Thorpe is expected to take charge in the interim, and faces selection headaches.

AFP

Mominul, Das build Bangladesh lead; Boult fights back

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - Mominul Haque and Liton Das led Bangladesh to a historic first innings lead over New Zealand in the first Test on Monday before both fell to Trent Boult in a dramatic final session at Mount Maunganui.

At stumps on day three Bangladesh were 401 for six in reply to New Zealand's 328, a lead of 73 with four wickets in hand.

They had reached 361 for four before Boult ended a 158-run stand with the wicket of Mominul for 88, followed 11 deliveries later by Das for 86.

"It looks like it might go down to the wire," Boult said as the Bangladesh players left the field talking of extending their innings towards 500.

"The game's pretty well poised. Test matches which have been played here have gone late into day five ... and probably we'll

be bowling last," Boult said.

"I presume Bangladesh want to bat once and bat big and put a lot of pressure on us."

It is the first time Bangladesh have taken a first-innings lead batting second outside of Asia.

They led New Zealand at Wellington four years ago when batting first, although a disastrous second innings saw them lose that Test by seven wickets.

It has been an exceptional Test for Mominul, a part-time spinning option who dismissed New Zealand's top two run-scorers Devon Conway and Henry Nicholls and then batted through 244 deliveries as he notched his 15th Test half-century.

Mominul rode his luck with the bat, surviving multiple chances as he put his side in a strong position before being trapped lbw by Boult.

He had the decision reviewed but there was no doubting the



Bangladesh's batsmen Mominul Haque (left) and Liton Das bump the gloves during the match, in Mount Maunganui on Monday (AFP)

SCOREBOARD		
New Zealand 1 st Innings 328		
BANGLADESH 1 st INNINGS		
S Islam	c & b Wagner	22
M Hasan Joy	c Nicholls b Wagner	78
N H Shanto	c Young b Wagner	64
M Haque	lbw b Boult	88
M Rahim	b Boult	12
L Das	c Blundell b Boult	86
Y Ali	not out	11
M H Miraz	not out	20
Extras:	(lb 7, nb 3, w 5, pen 5)	20
TOTAL:	401 for six in 156 overs	
Fall of wickets:	1-43, 2-147, 3-184, 4-203, 5-361, 6-370	
Bowling:	T Southee 32-4-94-0, T Boult 30-11-61-3, K Jamieson 30-9-72-0, N Wagner 38-9-98-3, R Ravindra 26-4-64-0	

outcome as Boult's inswinger crashed into the back pad in front of off stump.

Mominul's innings included 12 boundaries to all corners of the ground and his partnership with Das kept New Zealand wicketless for more than 52 overs.

Das, like Mominul, also struck boundaries on both sides of the

wicket, as well as straight down the ground and he had 10 fours to his credit before edging Boult to wicketkeeper Tom Blundell.

Boult had switched to around the wicket and with the ball heading outside off stump Das could not resist an attempted cut and sent a thick edge the keeper.

Bangladesh batted cautiously in the morning session, only scoring 45 runs for the loss of classy opener Mahmudul Hasan Joy for 78 and Mushfiqur Rahim for 12.

Joy added eight to his overnight 70 before Neil Wagner had him caught at gully while Boult bowled Mushfiqur.

Mominul and Das added 87 in the middle session and Bangladesh put on 94 between tea and stumps.

The not out batsmen at the close were Mehidy Hasan on 20 and Yasir Ali on 11.

AFP

LOCAL CRICKET ROUND-UP

Jatinder helps Qurum to victory, Hussnain hero of Ghubrah win

Muscat - Oman opener Jatinder Singh struck an elegant 55 off 39 including 4 sixes, steering Qurum Thunders to a 7-wicket win over Bousher Busters in a D20 Cricket League game at Oman Cricket Turf 1 in Amerat on Sunday.

Bousher's total of 159 for 8 saw 59 by Abdul Rauf and 37 by Asif Khan. Munis Ansari and Sandeep Goud took two wickets each.

Qurum openers Jatinder and Kashyap Kumar Prajapati (51 off 38) dominated the chase with an entertaining 94-run partnership in less than 11 overs.

Shoaib Khan came on to complete the formalities with a solid 37 off 21 as Qurum sealed the win in the 19th over, scoring 163 for 3. Asif Khan bagged 2 for 23.



Jatinder Singh

Brief scores: Bousher Busters 159 for 8 in 20 overs (Abdul Rauf 59 - 3x4, 3x6, Asif Khan 37 - 1x4, 4x6, Munis Ansari 2-19, Sandeep Goud 2-23) lost to Qurum Thunders 163 for 3 in 18.4 overs (Jatinder Singh 55 - 3x4, 4x6, Kashyap Kumar Pra-

japati 51 - 5x4, 2x6, Shoaib Khan 37 - 3x4, 2x6. Asif Khan 2-23) by 7 wickets.

Hussnain bowls Ghubrah to victory

In the day's other game, Hussnain Ali's brilliant spell with the new ball in which he claimed 4 for 21 was the highlight of Ruwi Rangers' thumping 6-wicket victory against Ghubrah Giants.

Ghubrah failed to post a fighting total on the board, folding up for a dismal 96 in 16.5 overs due largely to Hussnain's heroics and Sanuth Ebrahim's 2 for 2 in 2 overs.

Azmat Ullah was the only Ghubrah batsman to bat well, scoring a defiant 50 off 35.

Ruwi raced to the target in only 12.4 overs, scoring 100 for 4 thanks to 37 off 20 by Khalid



Hussnain Ali

Kail and 25 off 20 by Zohaib Amanat. Aqil Khan took 2 for 12.

Brief scores: Ghubrah Giants 96 all out in 16.5 overs (Azmat Ullah 50 - 5x4, 3x6, Hussnain Ali 4-21, Sanuth Ebrahim 2-2) lost to Ruwi Rangers 100 for 4 in

12.4 overs (Khalid Kail 37 - 5x4, 2x6, Zohaib Amanat 25 - 3x4, 2x6, Aqil Khan 2-12) by 6 wickets.

Munthir stars in OCT Muscat win

Excellent all-round performance by Munthir al Balushi helped OCT Muscat to an easy 34-run win over OCT Al Seeb in a 30-over B Division League match at Muscat Municipality ground 1 in Amerat on Friday.

Muscat scored 175 all out in 29.3 overs thanks to top knocks from Rashad al Balushi (44) and Munthir (40). Issa al Balushi was the pick of Seeb bowlers, taking 4 for 28 whereas Younis al Balushi claimed 3 for 22.

Struggling at 27 for 4 in 7 overs, OCT Seeb never really recovered despite Samir Oth-

man's unbeaten 76 off 86, getting bowled out for 141 in the 27th over. Munthir excelled with the ball too, taking 3 for 20 while Khalid al Balushi and Shaed Ali bagged two wickets each.

Brief scores: OCT Muscat 175 all out in 29.3 overs (Rashad al Balushi 44 - 8x4, Munthir al Balushi 40 - 5x4, Issa al Balushi 4-28, Younis AB 3-22, Samir Othman 2-31) beat OCT Seeb 141 all out in 26.5 overs (Samir Othman 76 - 10x4, Munthir al Balushi 3-20, Khalid al Balushi 2-26, Shaed Ali 2-22) by 34 runs.

Rafique steers Khalsa to big win

Mohammed Rafique's magnificent batting and bowling saw Khalsa United to a solid 49-run

victory against Nibrass Tech in a C Division T20 League game at Muscat Municipality ground 2.

Khalsa's 201 for 4 was powered by Rafique's 75 not out off 44 and Majid Rafique's 32 off 16. Waqas Khalid claimed 2 for 28.

Rafique bowled brilliantly too, taking 3 for 22 whereas Muhammed Asif picked up 3 for 24 as Khalsa was bundled out for 152 in 20 overs, Tarun Bhaskaran topscoring with 46.

Brief scores: Khalsa United CT 201 for 4 in 20 overs (Muhammed Rafiq 75 - 8x4, 1x6, Majid Rafique 32 - 5x4, 1x6, Waqas Khalid 2-28) beat Nibrass Tech 152 all out in 20 overs (Tarun Bhaskaran 46 - 6x4, 1x6, Muhammed Rafiq 3-22, Muhammed Asif 3-24, Harinder Singh 2-25) by 49 runs.